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Citation: Jones, A. (2013). Conceptualising business mobilities: towards an analytical framework. Review in Transportation Business and Management, 9, pp. 58-66. doi: 10.1016/j.rtbm.2013.08.003

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rtbm.2013.08.003>

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Conceptualising Business Mobilities: Towards an analytical framework

Andrew Jones

School of Arts and Social Sciences,
City University London
Northampton Square
LONDON EC1V 0HB

email.: andrew.jones@city.ac.uk

tel. +44 (0) 207 040 3940

Abstract

Existing research into business travel and mobility within the social sciences has largely focused on measurement and the identification of patterns to this phenomenon. However, a growing body of research has also identified the complex nature of and reasons behind business mobility. It is clear that business travel fulfils many different functions and the drivers behind it vary considerably between industry, job role and organizational context. This contributes to a lack of clarity in definition of the concept and a blurring with non-economic forms of mobility. In this respect, theories of business mobility provide limited assistance for transportation management practice. This paper seeks to address this, arguing for a much more nuanced analytical framework through which to understand the differential nature of business travel and mobility in the contemporary globalizing economy. It engages critically with the existing literature, arguing that existing typologies of business mobility are insufficient to fully understand how mobility is related to economic success at both the firm and regional economy levels. It goes on to propose a reformulated typology and furthermore argue for the utility of a practice-centred and outcome-oriented theoretical approach that will enable better understanding and management of business mobility.

1) Introduction

Debates about the nature of travel and mobility in relation to economic (business) activity in today's increasingly globalized economy have become more developed in recent years (Sassen 1999; Beaverstock *et al* 2010), but there is both ambiguity and diversity in what business travel or mobility is understood to be, why it occurs and its nature and significance to the success of economic activity. The importance of business travel and a variety of forms of mobility have been established in relation to both economic actors such as firms, and also to economic entities such as urban or regional economies (Taylor *et al* 2007; Wickham & Vecchi 2009). On the one hand, as firms and industries have internationalized in recent decades, the significance of mobile workers and mobile working practices has been identified around a substantial range of essential elements to this process (Merten *et al* 2010). Business mobility relates to a wide range of corporate functions including managerial control, the acquisition, retention and development of business activity, employee training and the maintenance of organizational coherence – to name just a few dimensions to this activity (Morrison *et al* 1994; Jones 2003; 2010; Davidson & Cope 2003). The question of understanding the nature and significance of business mobility to firms in all sectors of the global economy is thus increasingly pressing.

Developing more coherent conceptualisations of business mobility is also important in furthering understanding of a wider range of trajectories in global economic development. From the perspective of understanding the prospects for global city economies or leading regions in the global economy, it is quite clear that accessibility and integration into global transportation systems has been essential. Business mobility is more than just a question of the socio-cultural and organizational dimensions that surround employee movement; it is intrinsically bound up in material and informational technologies, transport systems and a vast array of infrastructure (Bender & Stephensen 1998; Beaverstock *et al* 2010). Governments frequently cite business mobility as a key factor in planning and investment decisions around transport infrastructure – airports, high speed rail, road networks and mass transit systems (Banister & Bereckman 1999; Hovhannisyan & Keller 2011). Clearly the overall drivers behind the development of these material investments in urban and regional infrastructure are multi-faceted and complex, relating to multiple dimensions to global connectivity beyond the direct needs of globalizing firms and industries. Personal mobility is increasingly caught up in wider globalization processes that exist in an increasingly connected global society – whether that is cultural diasporas, kinship

networks, tourism and leisure (Urry 2007). However, in current social scientific debates, there is a lack of clarity as to what constitutes business as opposed to leisure (or indeed other forms) of mobility, and evidence that personal mobility often encapsulates both economic and non-economic functions during a period of travel (Hankinson 2005; Kellerman 2010). The existing literature also reveals an enormous diversity of different forms and functions to business mobility, both within and between firms, which presents an ongoing challenge in trying to develop a more generalised conceptual approach to the phenomenon.

The purpose of this paper is to seek to address this challenge, and in so doing argue that existing theoretical approaches to business mobility - whilst valuable – have important limitations in their capacity to better understand both the nature and significance of mobility practices for firms and economies. At the heart of this is the proposition that whilst the existing literature has done an excellent job of developing categorical typologies of mobility practices, it has not invested enough attention in analysing the differential importance of different types of mobility practices and – just as crucially – has tended to under-theorise the interrelationships and overlap between different mobility practices. This contention is not intended as a strong critique of the growing body of work - based on well-grounded empirical research - which has informed these typological frameworks, but rather as a constructive engagement aimed at building on their insights and augmenting their typological approaches with a greater theoretical capacity to understand the complexity of the increasing importance of business mobility in today's global economy. In this respect, the paper draws together and develops the existing conceptual literature to propose a reformulated typology of business mobility that overcomes some of the existing inconsistencies and absences in current frameworks. It then argues that this reformulated typology needs to be supplemented with a new theoretical approach that seeks to identify and analyse the nature of the outcomes associated with different mobility practices – as well as how practices are interrelated. By doing this, more effective and nuanced theories of business mobility can be developed.

The remainder of this paper develops these arguments in a series of sections. In the next part of the paper, existing (interdisciplinary) social scientific approaches to business travel and mobility are examined. This includes an evaluation of the theories that have been developed to account for the rise in business mobility in the global economy, including both the complex nexus of processes driving this rising mobility as the global economy has become increasingly

integrated, and the technological and material developments that have facilitated it. The question of how business mobility might be defined is also addressed, giving consideration to the challenges this presents. The third part of the paper then moves on to consider in depth the typology-based approaches that have been developed in the social scientific literatures, and explores their limitations. Using this analysis, it goes on to propose a reformulated set of criteria for defining business mobility as a set of practices which is used in the fourth part of the paper to develop an alternative practice-oriented theoretical approach that seeks to foreground the outcomes of business mobility practices as a conceptual tool. The fifth part of the paper then considers the utility that this approach may have for business managers, corporate strategists and policy makers. The paper concludes by outlining the potential wider benefits of a practice-centred and outcome-oriented future direction for research into business mobility.

2) Existing theories of business travel and mobility

The overarching context for increasing contemporary business mobility and travel are the wider processes of economic globalization of recent decades. These processes have a range of dimensions discussed by social scientists which includes - but is not limited to - the internationalization of industries, firms and markets (Scholte 2005). Much of the existing social science literature that has specifically engaged with business travel and mobility frames its analysis with respect to these broader debates about the nature of global economic integration. However, the literature falls across several disciplines and schools of work, many of which are grounded in specific approaches to empirical research. Broadly, research into business travel and mobility can be found across sociology, economics, management studies, human geography, transport planning, tourism and urban studies (Mason & Gray 1995; Doyle & Nathan 2001; McDowell 2007; Abdelgany & Abdelgany 2007; Beaverstock *et al* 2010). However, the body of research is not uniformly extensive within these disciplinary areas, with business travel being the subject of considerable literature in transport and planning and (to a lesser extent) management studies, but relatively small literature in economics, sociology or human geography. Business mobility is also often analysed as part of a wider set of research questions within different disciplines concerned variously with, for example, strategies for global human resource management (Jenkins 1993; Dowling & Welch 2004), urban transport planning policy

(Kulendran & Witt 2003 ; Lian & Denstadli 2004), transnational corporate form (Jones 2010; Wickham & Vechhi 2008) or the nature of increasing human mobility (Urry 2007; Salt 2010). In that respect, rather than approach the existing work through a disciplinary lens, this section seeks to group together different bodies of literature that address business travel and mobility around broader theoretical debates that straddle many of the social sciences disciplines discussed. This reflects the way that questions of business travel and mobility have often become investigated as subsidiary aspects of wider debates around economic development, global city networks, transport and planning policy or global organizational management. The remainder of this section thus identifies three aspects to existing approaches: research into the patterns of growth in business mobility; how the drivers and facilitators of increasing business mobility in the contemporary world have been identified and theorised, and the wider definitional and conceptual challenges that emerge from the literature in developing a more comprehensive theorisation of the phenomenon.

2.1. *The growth of business mobility*

Across the social sciences, there is a range of work that establishes significant growth in business travel and mobility in recent decades, and particularly in the phase of globalization of the last forty years or so. The primary empirical data sources which establish this are air, rail and road travel passenger datasets which many governments collect in one form or another, along with a smaller body of research that has examined travel practices within industries and firms (Dowling & Welch 2004; Welch & Worm 2007; Salt 2010). Mobility in terms of journeys worldwide has increased dramatically both within and between countries, and a range of international, national, industry and firm level research provides evidence that a significant fraction of this is related to economic activity (as opposed to travel for other reasons including tourism and leisure) (c.f. Swarbrooke & Horner 2001; Brons 2002). However, beyond these broad trends, specific patterns of business mobility within regions and national economies are much less well understood.

Existing research has thus tended to focus on specific geographical areas or modes of transport, largely because of the nature of available datasets. Several strands in the literature are notable in informing current understanding of increased business mobility. Firstly, air travel passengers across the globe have been on an upward trend, the effects of economic downturns notwithstanding. In 2011, EU air travel numbers had reached 777 million (Eurostat 2012) and

just over 800 million journeys in North America, an increase of around 100 million passenger from a decade previously (RITA 2012). However, such aggregate data reveals only a limited insight into the component of such travel that qualifies as business air travel. Research has established growth in business air travel at both the European and north American scales, as well as changing patterns of business mobility in these regions (Mason & Gray 1995; Bender & Stephenson 1998; Derudder *et al* 2010)

Secondly, in the transportation studies literature, there is evidence for increasing business mobility in a range of shorter distance modes of transport (Millard-Bell & Schipper 2011). In terms of both rail and automobile business travel, research in Europe demonstrates growing activity in recent decades (OECD Transport 2010). Finally, at the level of the firm, research within management studies, human resource management and economic geography has found increasing mobility amongst employees. Much of the work in this area has been concerned with business mobility as only one aspect of the study, but it is clear that not only transnational corporations but also an increasingly number of smaller or more nationally and regionally firms are making greater use of employee mobility as an operational practices (Andersen *et al* 1999) A notable example here is Millar and Salt's study of how the working practices of business managers in transnational firms in two industries correspond to greatly increased mobility compared to those kinds of roles in earlier decades (Millar & Salt 2008).

2.2. Drivers and Facilitators

A second body of interdisciplinary work has in various ways examined and theorised the drivers and facilitators of this growth in business mobility. Whilst there remains considerable debate around the relative significance of different drivers and the role of facilitating factors, it is useful to divide this work into two areas concerned with the macro-level context of global economic integration, and the more micro-level of the firm.

2.2.1 Global economic integration

At the macro-scale, global business travel can be understood as being embedded in economic globalization (Beaverstock *et al* 2010). There is an enormous literature on this topic, but the focus here is on the factors facilitating increasing business mobility. In that respect, at least four interrelated factors can be identified. The first of these is the growing importance of transnational

corporations in all industries, the ongoing development of globalized production and the integration of markets. Most global industries are dominated by a relatively small number of large transnational corporations that operate worldwide, and in both mature and emerging markets. Many manufactured products are produced through increasingly complex global production networks (GPNs) (Dicken 2011), and conversely service industries have also become globalized as the global economic becomes increasingly reliant on knowledge-intensive business services (Harrington & Daniels 2006) and consumer services become embedded in global brands and standards (McDonald *et al* 2001). In the last couple of decades, this process has also accelerated as a growing number of emerging economies have become more developed and integrated into the rest of the global economy in Asia and Latin America. All of these developments have been underpinned and continue to drive increasing levels of business mobility as employees move between different locations to provide a range of different job functions.

Second, the integration of global economic activity has not occurred in an even topography across the globe, but rather has been highly uneven and in particular focused in locational terms around an increasingly interconnected network of cities and urban regions (Sassen 2001; Castells 2009). What the sociologist Manuel Castells has termed the ‘space of flows’ has been concentrated through a network of increasingly globalized cities. Importantly, mobility is channelled through these networks and in terms of business mobility, the literature suggests that much business travel and mobility is between locations within global city regions as concentrated centres of economic activity. The integration of global city networks across the global space economy thus acts as a key facilitator of increased business mobility as travel become more efficient and effective in terms of time and money as a means to undertake business at the global scale (Beaverstock *et al* 2010; Yao & Takakuchi 2008;). Much transcontinental business travel is concentrated between specific urban agglomerations rather than in a more diffuse patterns across whole national economies. Whilst not all business travel occurs exclusively between connected global city regions, the concentration of key command and control functions in urban CBDs (i.e. more and more cities become global city nodes) therefore has been important in making business mobility worthwhile in terms of travel costs and employee time.

Related and following from this, the growing importance of knowledge inputs into products and production processes (Bryson *et al* 2004; Castells 2009) has driven a need for increasing business travel because of the importance of face-to-face interaction in knowledge-intensive work processes in all industries. Transnational corporations and globalized production systems represent more complex and sophisticated phenomenon which require employees in a growing number of job functions in many industries to be co-present. As firms operate in more and more locations around the globe, so the need for employees to be mobile has grown dramatically. Management theorists, economic geographers and organizational sociologists have demonstrated that whilst the need for increased mobility has occurred at the same time information and communications technologies (ICT) have become more advanced, these technologies are not a substitute for face-to-face communication (Roy & Filiatrault 1998; Storper & Venables 2004). The increasingly complexity of many business practices, processes and activities means in fact that the kinds of knowledge and information most required for successful business operation and innovation (often ‘tacit knowledge’) - along with the need for trust between actors – means that face-to-face communication has become potentially even more significant (Anderson *et al* 2000; Gertler 2003). In that sense the complexity of a distributed and increasingly integrated global economy is a key factor in driving business mobility growth.

Finally, but no less important, business mobility has been facilitated by the advancement of transportation technologies and the development of a global network of transportation infrastructure and mobility support systems. These global transportation systems have greatly increased the capacity to move more people between more places more quickly and at lower cost in recent decades (Castells 2009). This is a composite outcome from improved technologies, greatly increased levels of infrastructure and fewer regulatory restrictions on travel (*ibid.*). Governments around the globe invest money in infrastructure projects (railways, road or airports) on the basis of a wider policy agendas around economic growth which includes (but is not restricted to) the need for business travel. Improvements in transportation systems of course have facilitated wider global mobility (Larsen *et al* 2006; Urry 2007), but much of the investment of economic resource has been related to business mobility. It is hard to unpack the historical causality relationship between infrastructure and system development, and increased business mobility, but the literature clearly identifies a symbiotic relationship (Welch & Worm 2005). Greater capacity to travel, combined with falling costs of travel due to transportation

system improvements (e.g. budget airlines and larger, faster and more efficient commercial aircraft), have in part been a consequence of demand from transnational firms but also simultaneously have also enabled firms and industries to become more internationalised (c.f. Lian & Denstadli 2004; Salt 2010).

2.2.2 Corporate Globalization

Much of the existing literature that has engaged in specific empirical analyses of the drivers behind increased business mobility has done so at the more micro-level of industries or firms (e.g. Nowicka 2006; Millar & Salt 2007; Welch *et al* 2007; Jones 2010). Within management studies and economic geography, this work has examined the way in business mobility is entwined with the globalization of firms themselves (termed ‘corporate globalization’). I argue here that this body of literature is broadly concerned with business travel at the firm level that falls into two usefully distinguished (but overlapping) categories: internal and external corporate mobility. The former refers to business travel by employees within a firm as they move between places across the firms’ physical network of operational locations. The latter in contrast is concerned with firm-level mobility between firms (which are generally clients, suppliers or subsidiaries). However, it is important to point out that the existing social science literature does often elide these forms of travel at times (Beaverstock *et al* 2010), not least because in many cases the functions of mobility overlap between internal and external requirements of firms.

Regarding internal firm mobility, corporate globalization has produced a range of drivers for business travel as employee move for internal reasons. At least three are evident in various empirical studies in the literature. First, business travel is driven by the need for effective managerial control in physically dispersed corporate organizations. Business managers at senior and mid levels travel to engage in face-to-face meetings within other employees in order that the firm operates effectively, to implement strategies and to fulfil a range of managerial work processes (Jones 2003; 2007). In terms of longer duration mobility however, firms in many sectors have developed employee mobility systems involving secondments and placements of employees in different physical corporate locations around the firms’ global operations (Beaverstock 1996; Faulconbridge 2006; Jones 2007). In internationalizing firms, having senior staff familiar with the home country or head office managerial strategy running geographic divisions of the firm in different national markets has been evidence since the late 1960s.

However, with the advent of many more increasingly transnational firms (Dicken 2011), the circulation of managers has become far greater in extent and more complex in form. The literature has considered how firms in a range of industries have developed human resource management strategies and mechanism involving internal business mobility systems. Many of the world's largest firms have a career expectation for managers to work in different countries, using their location there as the basis to be involved in the management or operation of these firms across global regions (c.f. Dowling & Welch 2004; Lowendahl 2005). The secondment and circulation of expatriate workers has thus become much more prevalent and complex within firms, involving 'nested mobility' with expatriates on overseas secondments involved in a great degree of subsidiary business travel to further subsidiary corporation locations (Jones 2008).

A second internal driver is the need for staff recruitment, organizational coherence and training. Transnational firms increasingly require employees with local knowledge in different national markets and locations around the globe, as well in many industries as highly-specialised workers who are recruited in global rather than national labour markets (Ock Park 2006). This drives a need for individuals involved in recruitment to travel since recruitment processes commonly involve face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, in complex dispersed transnational organizations, there is a growing need for employees scattered in various locations across the globe to come together for training purposes. In many industries, shared knowledge and consistency of work practices or processes is only achievable to a sufficient level of quality by bringing groups of individuals together for training in co-presence. This is evident especially in knowledge-intensive professional services where the embodied nature of professional service work in industries such as finance, law or management consultancy require employees to share consistent behaviours, practices and attitudes (Empson 2002; Bryson 2002; Faulconbridge & Beaverstock 2008).

Finally, a third driver of internal business mobility within firms worth highlighting is activity bound into knowledge management and especially product or process innovation. A considerable body of work has established the significance of industrial clusters and regional innovation systems as facilitating innovation (c.f. Breschi & Malerba 2007). This work suggests that for transnational firms business mobility is caught up in innovation processes with key employees travelling to engage in rich and/ or creative face-to-face interaction with colleagues or clients located in other industrial clusters or regions around the globe. An example would be the

clustering of ICT and pharmaceutical firms' research and development activities in key regions such as around Boston, USA and Cambridge, UK; there is very considerable movement of key knowledge workers within firms between these locations across a spectrum of durations from short trips of days to secondments of months or years (Huber 2012).

Regarding external corporate mobility, the literature identifies a range of different functions with at least two key ones being seen as the most important. The first is business mobility related to the acquisition and retention of business (i.e. sales), along with the delivery of many complex products. Employees travel to sell firm's products, whether those are material goods or services provided to customers. In the latter case, the increasingly significance of knowledge intensive producer services to the global economy is a particular driver since the delivery of business services (e.g. financial or legal advice, marketing or advertising service) involves much inter-personal communication and the exchange of tacit information (c.f. Gluckler & Armbruster 2003; Faulconbridge 2006). For many knowledge intensive services, 'selling' the product to a client organization often involves travel to make a 'face-to-face' pitch, and also repeated travel to maintain contact with past client organizations with the aim of retaining existing business relationships and gaining repeat business (Grabher 2002; Jones 2007; Faulconbridge 2008). Mobility is also bound into the processes of some complex material goods such as sophisticated production equipment or high technology. An example would be significant employee mobility related to the process of selling complex robotic production machinery by European firms to customers in North America. Business mobility is required both through a lengthy installation process in the client firms' factories, as well as to troubleshoot commissioning and the training of client firm staff in the operation of the product (Gertler 2004)

Second, existing research has also identified the importance of business mobility in a whole range of activities around suppliers or other external inputs into the business. This again varies enormously between different industries, but many supplier inputs for firms in the contemporary global economy require in one way or another that employees travel to meet with a supplier. For example, in manufacturing firms where many firms form part of complex global production networks, employees are involved in mobility related to the sourcing of components for products or production equipment. In contrast, in transnational retail firms there are enormously complex sourcing networks for the products sold that involve mobility for goods 'buyers' and other employees of retail firms (c.f. Tokatli *et al* 2008).

Overall, there is a considerable, if disparate, body of work in management and transportation studies, economic geography and (to a lesser extent) economics that identifies a broad range of drivers to corporate mobility at the level of firms. However, it is also clear that these analyses are often uneven, and lack clarity around the purpose and nature of business mobility in business processes. Research also often identifies mobility as a secondary aspect that is caught up in corporate operations without distinguishing sufficiently between the corporate process and the role that travel or mobility is playing in shaping that process. One of the key difficulties here is the lack of common definition around the concept of business mobility itself (Beaverstock *et al* 2009). Thus, before moving on to propose a more useful theoretical framework to navigate through some of these complexities, it is important first to consider the issues that surround effective definition of business mobility.

2.2 *The difficulty in defining business mobility*

It should be already clear from the review of the diverse social scientific literature that has in one way or another engaged with business mobility that there is a considerably degree of diversity and, more importantly, complexity in the business practices captured by this concept. As Graham (2010) points out in prefacing interdisciplinary work on ‘the ostensibly straightforward term, ‘business travel’, the concept in fact immediately opens up a window into the complexities of understanding mobility in global economy. This is no simple task. The reason is that in many respects business travel or mobility is a deceptively simple idea that business managers or corporate practitioners intuitively feel can be defined. The concept of a ‘business trip’ is enshrined in contemporary societies and economies, and has widespread resonance across the globe. Yet in the contemporary world, the analyses discussed thus far in this section demonstrate that business travel in fact elides into wider and much more complex questions of mobility. I want to argue that the difficulty in defining business travel rests around three interrelated conceptual problems in isolating this activity or phenomenon in the global economy. Understanding these problematic parameters by which an activity or practice might be defined as business mobility is crucial as a first step in developing a more rigorous and useful conceptual framework.

First, a central definitional question that is evident in much of the existing literature is what are the boundaries between business mobility and more general forms of mobility. Existing

research has established that this boundary is blurred insofar as much travel is multi-purpose, and those undertaking it do so for a number of reasons. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the substantial global conference and convention industry which permeates commerce, education, research and policy. Workers travel to conferences or conventions for work-related reasons (whether that is a trade fair, industry conference, professional association or academic disciplinary conference), but much of this mobility is also premised on a mixture of this business component with leisure (Davidson & Cope 2003). Large cities develop convention infrastructure in part as tourist destination on the assumption that those travelling to attend for business reasons will also engage in leisure or tourist activities. In this sense, defining when business mobility is 'pure' is highly problematic in that much mobility in today's world combines several functions and motivations.

The second definitional problem relates to the duration of business travel or mobility. In the way the concept has been variously deployed by the academic and practitioner literature to date, the parameters of how long a business mobility practice lasts is far from clearly specified or agreed upon. Some work on business travel defines it in terms of duration purely around the familiar concept of a business trip which might last from a few hours during a day, to a number of days or indeed weeks (normally related to the distance travelled by the employee). This indeed fits common conceptions of business travel but the difficulty is the time-frame in this way covers a wide range of very different business travel activities and also elides as a category at both ends of the temporal spectrum. Senior managers moving a few blocks to attend a meeting at another firms' office for a couple of hours in the City of London or Manhattan island would not be generally regarded as a business trip, but it clearly represents some form of business mobility in terms of employee movement. Yet at what point does the duration shift this into a business trip? If the meeting is in New Jersey or outer London, the duration of the time travelled may push this into the concept of a business trip (in terms of employee understanding and organizational policy). It is also often difficult (at least in dataset terms) to distinguish commuting (travel to work) from business mobility (travel for work reasons) (Beaverstock & Faulconbridge 2010). Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, when does a business trip of several weeks or months become something else – an overseas project assignment or 'long term' secondment?

Third, and perhaps subtler but no less of a definitional problem, is the issue of what might be termed 'nested business mobilities'. Whilst it is not clear if overseas secondments by

employees are a different form of business mobility to the shorter term business trip, both may contain within their temporality travel within travel. Overseas business travellers on a business trip may make many further journeys or ‘trips within a trip’. These are clearly further business mobility practices, but should they be conceptualised as separate mobility practices or part of a wider longer duration practice?

These difficulties of definition are not insurmountable, and indeed as with defining many social phenomena, the way in which the concept is defined is about relatively arbitrary choices related to the purpose of using the concept in a theoretical framework. This leads us neatly to the next task of this paper: to consider in more depth the conceptual frameworks that have been proposed in the literature around business mobility.

3) Typologies of business mobility, their limitations and an alternative approach

In the case of business mobility, much of the existing conceptualization in the literature has focused on developing categorisations and typologies of business mobility which are constrained by the goal of capturing all the different practices covered by existing broad definitions. Whilst useful to some extent, this section argues that this has produced a narrowness to the theoretical questions being asked about business mobility, and also to the consequent understanding of all the aspects to this practice. Before outlining this argument further, it is however first necessary to consider the main theoretical frameworks proposed so far.

3.1 Existing Typologies of Business Mobility

Over the last decade, a number of empirically-grounded contributions have sought to develop conceptual frameworks for understanding business mobility (Laarsen *et al* 2006; Jones 2007; 2010; Millar & Salt 2008; Salt 2010). This work has not sought to provide a comprehensive conceptual typology spanning all forms of business mobility, rather tending to focus on specific types of mobility (e.g. business meetings) or industry sectors (e.g. professional services). A particular feature has been to seek to grapple with the diversity of business mobility, and provide a more systematic conceptualization of the function played by business travel. Here I want to argue that, whilst differing on some specifics, these different typologies agree on at least four overlapping categorizations for understanding business mobility in the contemporary global

economy. The vast majority of business mobility practices evident in existing research fall into one of these groups (although of course there are certain to be some exceptions).

The first broad type of business mobility practices are those concerned with management and control of economic agents (normally firms) (Laarsen *et al* 2006; Jones 2007; 2010). This is primarily business mobility related to the internal needs of firms and economic actors. A considerable proportion of business mobility involves managers from mid-management to senior levels moving to engage in activities of control in co-presence (i.e. face-to-face). This commonly involves movement from a head or regional office / corporate location to other production of business operation facilities. It is worth distinguishing different sub-categories that are not so well differentiated: routine management practices in dispersed corporate organization, mobility related to managerial practices around corporate strategy (development or implementation), mobility driven by the management of corporate expansion, merger or restructuring and also that related to problem-solving and crisis or failure management (c.f. Aguilera 2008; Jones 2007; 2010).

Second is business mobility concerned with operational processes in firms (Millar & Salt 2008). This includes employees in a wide range of different functions in firms, and in transnational firms is likely to involve some employees in almost all divisions of the firms' organizational structure. For many firms and industries, this kind of mobility will relate to some kind of project management (*ibid.*). Clearly the particular operational function a business mobility practice relates to varies enormously between industries but specific sub-categories include mobility practises related to supplier inputs into a firms' production (whether that be manufactured components or business service inputs), mobility related to project based working practices (which covers a huge range of industries from construction to professional services like advertising or marketing) and that related to recruitment and training practices (both those employees conducting training and those being trained) (cf. Hall 2007).

Third are knowledge-driven forms of business mobility. Two broader sub-categories distinguished: mobility related to information or knowledge management (c.f. Bryson 2002; Empson 2002) and that related to research or innovation (Hovhannisyan & Keller, 2011). Internal mobility practices in firm operating in multiple locations remain crucial for the effective dissemination of certain forms of knowledge (particularly where tacit knowledge is important), and where employees need to learn. Examples include those discussed earlier where employees

are engaged in mobility practices around the geographical dissemination of technical knowledge through a physically dispersed firms (e.g. Gertler's (2003) work on the commissioning of a EU-made manufacturing machinery in the US). Mobility practices are also similarly (and more extensively) caught up in knowledge creation (i.e. around both product and process innovation). Innovation is heavily dependent on tacit knowledge and rich face-to-face communication and hence employees within dispersed firms need to travel

Fourth and finally are mobility practices caught up in firms markets' for goods and services. In broad terms, this is employee mobility concerned with 'sales' whether that be manufactured goods being sold to customers located elsewhere, or services. Clearly only some products require employee mobility to enable them to be effectively sold to customers if, for example, it requires employees to deliver the 'product' or clients are convinced to make purchases through face-to-face interaction. In terms of sub-categories of this form of business mobility, it is worth distinguishing between mobility practices aimed at new sales and the acquisition of business from those concerned with business retention and firm/ customer relationship maintenance (Faulconbridge 2006; Jones 2007).

3.2 The limitations of typology-based frameworks

Whilst the function or purpose of mobility provide undoubted insight into the nature of business mobility, as Millar and Salt (2008) highlight here is a great deal of diversity between industry sectors, let alone between firms and divisions within those industries. In this respect, mapping and specifying types of business mobility in order to categorise this mobility by its contextual purpose has significant limitations both for theorists and practitioners managing these practices either within firms (or also planning for supporting infrastructure in policy terms). Categorical typologies have their uses in understanding the diversity and multiple functions of business mobility. However, as with all such conceptualisations, there is a risk of descriptive emphasis on the details around which typologies are formed distracting from a theoretical approach that seeks to understand the wider context of the major drivers behind business mobility identified in the previous section. A further risk is that a focus on typologies limits theoretical capacity to understand likely future trends and trajectories because categories do not capture the dynamism of corporate activity or the way in which mobility practices will change as context shifts (often rapidly).

The next step in this paper is therefore to argue that categorising business mobilities on the basis of present function, the nature of the supporting infrastructure or different industries work process needs take us only so far. To develop more sophisticated theories, there is a need for a theoretical approach that develops greater capacity to understand the relative significance of the different factors that facilitate and constrain business mobility as well as framing the need for it to be undertaken. The suggestion therefore is that the existing theoretical literature has focused on offering empirically-grounded mapping of current business mobility practices in a number of industries, but that because of the rapidly changing parameters that shape business mobility along *both* the nature of facilitating infrastructure (information technology and transportation) *and* the nature of many industries themselves (e.g. products, markets, competitors), existing typologies are not sufficient. There is a need to develop concepts and theories of business mobility that, for example, provide scope to understand the role that different categories of mobility practice play in activities that are core as opposed to peripheral to a firms' ultimate success. Equally, there is also a need to understand how mobility practices relate to trends in the nature of products or markets, or the complexity of how mobility and ICT-mediated communication practices interact with each other in producing certain outcomes for firms or sectors. This entails moving beyond conceptual typologies that often (albeit implicitly) provide a level playing field of 'equally important' mobility practices and isolate specific forms of mobility (in time and space) without framing their wider context. To do this, the final task in this section is to return to the question of how business mobility might be more tightly defined, and in so doing suggest an alternative (although supplementary) conceptual approach based around the outcomes of mobility practices.

3.3 Criteria for Conceptualising Business Mobility

Business mobility can be defined in broad terms as 'a socio-economic practice that involves individuals or groups moving for the purposes of economic activity'. This is what the phenomenon corresponds to in the broadest sociological sense. Such a broad definition is useful insofar as it does not specify whether those moving are employees of a commercial organization or not, how they move, how far they go or how long they stay. However, whilst helpful in capturing the breadth of potential forms of mobility, this definition is clearly insufficient on its own to develop a very sophisticated understanding of the different forms of business mobility

that exist. In order to do that, it is necessary to conceptualise the different dimensions to this economic practice (c.f. Jones & Murphy 2011). In that respect, business mobility can be more tightly defined around three interrelated dimensions that are constitutive of any of the forms that existing social scientific work has studied.

The first is perhaps the most obvious in terms of interlinked criteria of *temporality and spatiality* (described hereafter as spatio-temporality). As a form economic practice, business mobility can be demarcated around certain parameters in time and space. Travel (mobility) needs to be both a sufficient distance and for a sufficient duration to qualify; short trips by employees meetings within an urban CBD will meet many of the other criteria discussed in this paper, but are neither generally understood as business mobility nor usefully defined as such in terms of most business practitioner or policy applications. Equally, long-term secondments of staff overseas for years elide in temporal terms into something other than conventional or commonly useful understandings of business mobility; here there is too little movement to qualify as a form of business travel that can identified within the time-frame. In that sense, a set of spatio-temporal criteria provide parameters in both dimensions that demarcate business mobility as a discreet practice that frames a given movement as being of appropriate distance and duration.

A second criteria for defining business mobility needs to be its *function*. The existing literature provides for a substantial list of potential functions but the argument of this paper is a clear functional relationship to economic outcomes is necessary for a mobility practice to be conceptualised as business mobility. The functions of business mobility discussed in the last section provide a basis for categorising different types of function but rather than perpetuate existing ambiguities between the wider role of business mobility to urban, regional or national economic systems, the argument here is that business mobility is best grounded around functional criteria that relate directly to economic actors (usually firms). At the firm-level, the function of business mobility is more effectively identified and measured, as opposed to more macro-scale assertions about its function in promoting urban or regional competitiveness. It is not that business mobility does not contribute to these processes, but in terms of a more useful and rigorous conceptualisation, specificity around functionality at the level of key economic agents (firms) provides more potential for insight.

Finally, and third, this paper proposes a third criteria – the *significance* of a given mobility practice to economic activity. This is a necessary further definitional criteria to add to

spatio-temporality and function because much business mobility as discussed earlier elides with other functions or motivations for mobility. Notably a considerable proportion of business travel is mixed in with leisure of tourism, as the global industry in conferences and trade-shows bears witness to (Swarbrooke & Horner 2001). The point is that a given mobility practice requires analytical clarity about whether it contributes to economic outcomes, corporate success or is less clearly aligned to those goals. It is likely in defining a given ‘mixed’ practice as business mobility that the degree to which it qualifies will need to be evaluated around several aspects – the proportion of time during a ‘trip’ engaged in business-related practice and the significance or impact of the travel on economic outcomes.

3.4 Developing outcome-oriented theories of business mobility

The dimensions outlined above provide tighter criteria by which to assess whether a given practice in the global economy should be understood as business mobility and also provide the basis for better understanding why mobility is necessary or not to achieve economic outcomes (i.e. normally successful business activity). However, they do not represent a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of business mobility *per se*. Rather, what is needed to develop a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of business mobility are theories that capture how a range of different forms of mobility and other non-mobile working practices intersect in producing certain business outcomes. In other words, typologies of mobility function do not provide enough insight into how different mobilities are related to each other, and how those relationships and intersections produce economic success or failure.

The development of outcome focused theories of business mobility shifts the emphasis from description and classification, towards better understanding the role of mobility practices in key firm outcomes. Whether or not a project is successful, a new national market is entered into or a product is developed is what matters to firms, and existing approaches to business mobility are limited by their classificatory focus around the individual worker and the function of specific movement. More useful theories of mobility need to understand how the different functions of mobility occur in concert around particular business processes or firm goals and objectives.

I want to propose two methodological steps that will enable the typologies thus far in this paper to be deployed to generate new theoretical understandings of how business mobility is caught up in the outcomes of firm activity. The first of these is to map the multiple mobility

practices surrounding a given firm goal or outcome. This provides the basis to theorise how different types of mobility are important and intersect to produce economic activity. For example, in pitching a product to a client firm, an advertising or media firm relies on a range of different mobility practices involving senior and mid-level managers which occur at different stages and in relation to different elements of selling their services. Rather than categorising these as isolated mobility occurrences, these can be mapped as a collective set of mobility practices all related to a given outcome.

Second, having mapped the set of mobilities involved in producing a given outcome (selling a product to a client), the next step is to identify which mobility practices have most impact on shaping economic outcomes. This entails ranking different mobility practices related to a given outcome (e.g. the lifecycle of a project) according to their importance overall. Such a task presents methodological challenges but is essential in order to differentiate more and less significant mobility practices. For example, routine business travel in order to maintain a client relationship by mid-level managers may be less significant to the value of sales a professional service firm makes than infrequent but key pitch meetings involving senior staff. Conversely, for the types of after-sales technical and installation support that Gertler (2004) describes for a firms selling complex production equipment and plant, the periodic travel of engineers and project managers may be far more significant in shaping whether a large contract is successfully undertaken and delivered than initial ‘pitch’ related travel to meetings. Whilst the number of business trips undertaken and their frequency may be greater for other functions, some of these may be more readily substituted with ICT-mediated interactions without impacting on the overall successful outcome for the firm.

Overall, this methodological approach provides the basis to begin to make sense of how specific yet functionally-different mobility practices are interrelated and differentially important in shaping economic outcomes for firms. Such an approach in a sense develops a more nuanced understanding of both sets of mobility practices that surround firm activities (be that sales, research and development or operational needs) and the individual portfolios of mobility that Millar and Salt (2008) discuss. In both cases, it provides scope to more systematically understand which mobility practices are more or less important by incorporating a conceptual prioritization of which practices have most significance in relation to outcomes. This represents a further development beyond the typology-based frameworks present in the existing literature.

4) Implications for transportation managerial practice

The final part of this paper sets out a series of arguments around current business practices in the management of business travel that the approach outlined above will inform.

The first of these areas concerns one of the central debates in corporate management and policy analyses of business travel and mobility: namely the relationship of new forms of information and communications technology (ICT) to present and future needs for employees to travel. A considerable literature continues to debate whether or not ICT technologies will act as a substitute for business mobility (Salomon 1986; Roy & Filiatrault 1998; Denstadli 2004; Denstadli & Gripsrud 2010), and the forms of business mobility that can be displaced by advances in ICT. This debate remains complex both because of the enormous variety of functions that business travel fulfils and the variable scope of different forms of ICT communication to act as a substitute. Whilst the social science literature has established that ICT cannot (yet) act as a substitute for face-to-face interaction in many instances, it is equally evident that some specific forms of business travel within firms have been diminished by the use of ICT. The existing typological approach has gone some way to enabling a clearer understanding of the multiple functions of business mobility, but I would argue that adding an outcome-based conceptualisation offers the scope to begin to better understand which how certain mobility practices are important and how co-presence is implicated in business outcomes. A clearer conception of the relative significance of different mobility practices – combined with the nature of their function captured by existing typologies - then generates the capacity to better evaluate whether or not a given practice is suitable for substitution, as well as the possible implications of that substitution for the business. In that sense the approach informs questions about corporate strategies of mobility vis-a-vis ICT in a more nuanced way than the categorical approaches that currently dominate the literature.

The second major area of implications for business travel management practices concerns decision-making around the physical location of different corporate operations in relation to mobility management practices. The typology-based approaches to date have contributed to some understanding of the way in which different kinds of corporate functions are driving employee mobility along with the implication that the geographical expansions of a firm's

activities will have (Mason 2002). However, both the social science and management practitioners' literature often treat employee mobility as a necessary (and potentially unavoidable) response to corporate internationalization, expansion or restructuring (Gustafson 2012). Moving beyond a typology-based approach to understand which of the array of mobility practices associated with these different corporate processes are more significant again should better enable practitioner debate and input into corporate managerial strategies around locational decisions (e.g. decentralization of certain function from urban cores or off-shoring / in-shoring). At present, existing approaches do assist in increasing understanding of where such decisions will increase (or decrease) employee mobility, but a more sophisticated disaggregation and prioritization of the different mobility practices associated with these processes will enable practitioners to also better advise on the merits of different location decisions on the basis of the mobility practices that will have most impact on business outcomes.

Third, the approach developed in this paper provides strategic insight for business practitioners into questions of the need for better mobile working and how business travel activities are managed as a form of employee practice. This amounts to more than questions of whether mobility is required or not, and whether ICT acts simply as a substitute. A small literature within the wider sociological work on 'mobility' has begun to investigate mobile working practices and the way in which employees in, for example, many professional or business services and other knowledge-intensive industries increasingly work whilst either travelling or in temporary locations (e.g. hot-desks in client firms or business facilities in hotels etc; and see McNeill 2009). From a practitioner perspective, there are a range of issues such working practices create that need careful assessment in relation to corporate business mobility strategies: these include whether or not mobile working is as effective as conventional office-based working; whether it is suited to certain employee functions as opposed to others and what impact such demands have on employees in terms of human resource management (e.g. staff satisfaction and retention). The outcome-oriented methodology outlined in this paper provides scope for business managers to identify what kinds of employee mobility lend themselves to mobile working and also where mobile working may produce less beneficial outcomes for firms. It also will enable practitioners to manage corporate strategic expectation about what can realistically be achieved employees involved in mobile working and an evaluation of the risks of undertaking this activity.

5) **Conclusion: foregrounding outcomes in future research in business mobility**

Social scientific research into business mobility needs to move beyond mapping the patterns of business travel or mobility and treating these practices as a relatively discreet or equally-significant activities that can be easily isolated from the wider operational work that firms and businesses undertake. The existing theoretical literature has made valuable contributions in developing typology-based frameworks which are useful for better understanding the diversity of practices captured in the concept of business mobility. However, the key argument of this paper is that these typologies need to be supplemented by a conceptual approach that better captures the differential importance of mobility practices (within and between categories), and which can prioritize different mobility practices according to their significance for business outcomes.

This is crucial if better theories of business mobility are to be developed. In an increasingly globalized world economy, which continues to be increasingly dominated by knowledge intensive forms of work, business mobility practices are becoming both increasingly commonplace and increasingly important. Yet not all practices are as important as others, and the challenge for business travel managers and corporate strategists is to better understand how the multitude of diverse mobility practices are related to each other and how they are more or less significant to the success or failure of business activity. It is clear from some of the empirical research on business travel that practitioners face a difficult task in disaggregating mobility practices that may be substitutable or less important from wider corporate imperatives and narratives about the need for employee mobility to support processes such as internationalization. In fact, there are likely to be mobility practices which are unnecessary or undesirable for both firms and employees which are subsumed in wider policies and corporate norms. Equally there are likely to be corporate functions not being supported sufficiently by employee mobility. Both issues have important consequence for firms and employees.

Hopefully, therefore, the combination of a more sophisticated and consistent typology with a methodological approach designed to analyse the nature of the outcomes of various mobility practices will enable both social scientists and business practitioners to engage with research into - and the management of - business mobility through a more consistent and comprehensive approach. In so doing, it provides a basis for developing a more effective

theoretical understanding of how different business mobility practices are more or less significant in wider corporate globalization, and also for business practitioners to develop clearer strategies within firms for how business mobility should be prioritised and managed in relation to different aspects of corporate operation. In this respect, the framework outlined in this paper should facilitate a clearer research agenda into business mobility that is also more closely aligned with the strategic concerns of business travel managers and other practitioners.

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