# "I Will Go with You": Partners of Graduate Students as "Tied-Movers"

Orly Clerge
Gabriela Sanchez-Soto
Jing Song
Nancy Luke

Department of Sociology
and
Population Studies and Training Center
Brown University
Box 1916
Providence, Rhode Island 02912

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## Abstract

The Graduate Student Partners Project (GSPP) presents results from interviews with men and women who are the tied-movers of graduate students in a Northeastern private university. Our main interest is to understand the dynamics of tied migration, specifically the process of decision making. According to our findings, the partners of graduate students have to deal with a variety of issues as they negotiate their joint move along with their educational and career trajectories. Studying graduate student partners provides the opportunity to observe an interesting but understudied group of individuals. This project also contributes to the study of tied migration and work trajectories in a way that is not widely covered in the migration or relationship literature. Moreover, this study contributes to the understanding of couples' interactions and their individual and collective coordination in the context of migration for professional and personal advancement.

## 1. Introduction

The tied mover in the migration literature has been routinely conceptualized as a passive follower—most likely a woman—of a more economically prosperous partner. This model simplifies the heterogeneous nature of tied migration streams and limits our ability to explain why couples decide to migrate together, how they negotiate the move, and what the terms of their agreement are. In an age of global capitalism, the forces fueling migration are varied and complex. A recent shift is that many individuals find it critical to acquire advanced degrees and are willing to relocate long distances to realize these educational aspirations. Because an increasing number of young people are staying in school longer and entering graduate school at later ages, this advanced education often coincides with other life course events, such as the formation of long-term relationships and marriage. The experience of individuals who relocate for graduate education, and, in particular, the circumstances of their intimate partners as "tied movers," provides an interesting context in which to reexamine the dominant theoretical model of tied migration.

The extant literature on graduate students and their relationships focuses on the graduate students' perspective and how moving for graduate education affects the partnership. This study takes the viewpoint of the partner and focuses on the graduate student's move and the process surrounding the partner's decision to become a tied mover. The experiences of this unique sample help highlight not only the traditional economic grounds for family migration in an increasingly competitive landscape but also crucial non-economic motivations that factor into the decision-making process.

## 2. Literature Review

A large body of theoretical and empirical research on migration seeks to explain why individuals and groups decide to move. It is assumed that the determinants of migration are tied to individual economic interests in maximizing one's labor market characteristics (Borjas, 1989). Selection effects also characterize the decision to move both internationally and internally, where individuals in one place select themselves into migration because the income returns on their skills are greater in the place of destination than in the origin. The assumption that income maximization is a necessary condition for migration oversimplifies the phenomenon and overlooks its social and political dimensions.

Family migration and the tied move have been increasingly important topics in the migration literature (Cooke, 2008), and since the 1970s, sociologists have focused on understanding the decision-making and adaptation processes associated with family migration. As in the traditional migration literature, research on family migration treats economic outcomes as the primary consideration in the decision-making process. The neoclassical model of family migration assumes that spouses cooperate to maximize family well-being (Smits et al, 2003). The human capital of each spouse is seen to have equal weight in the family's decision-making process (Bielby and Bielby, 1992), in which gains and losses are measured in terms of joint income and career development. The partner who initiates the move is considered the primary

migrant and the "tied mover" is the spouse who follows the partner with a higher level of human capital. The tied mover may need to make sacrifices and redefine his or her personal role in terms of employment and family responsibilities because of the move (Chen, 2009; De Verthelyi, 1995), which is seen as a benefit to the family unit as a whole (Halfacree, 2004). Given the historical context of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, the tied move has traditionally been gendered, with women usually following men (Lichter 1980, Duncan and Perucci 1976). In addition, most prior literature on tied moves examines the adaptation and marital satisfaction of the spouse who leads the move, without focusing on the trade-offs on the follower's side.

Recent sociological literature has begun to challenge this basic family migration model. Social exchange theorists have introduced the concept of power into family decision-making. Spouses negotiate moves according to their personal and occupational interests, and their influence in the decision-making process depends on their relative social and economic resources (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). This work recognizes that migration decisions are not made unilaterally and that conflict and negotiation between partners takes place. Nevertheless, models of power dynamics within couples continue to privilege socioeconomic resources as determinants of family migration. Gender role theory adds another dimension to the tied mover phenomenon, suggesting that relatively fixed beliefs about gender roles contribute to mover-follower patterns (De Verthelyi, 1995; Maclean and Peters, 1995; Smits et al. 2003; Cooke, 2008). Traditional beliefs about roles for men and women in the family provide a context where women are expected to comply with husbands' decisions about migrating for personal or economic reasons and to follow them dutifully. Husbands and wives with more progressive gender beliefs have been found to participate in more democratic decision-making processes, taking both spouses' interests into account (Bielby and Bielby1992). Given that large proportions of women have attained higher levels of education and have entered the labor force in recent decades, these theories suggest that men may increasingly be designated as the "tied mover" within the family.

There is a clear need for further research on the complexities behind the family migration decision making process, and our understanding of the role that non-economic factors play in the decision to move is still limited. The maximization of household utility as the primary motivator for a move has overshadowed the importance of reciprocity in family life and the crucial negotiation process between household members. Moreover, gains and losses cannot always be reduced to material calculations, and other, non-material aspects, such as emotional attachment and relationship dynamics, need to be considered in models of family migration .

A final factor in the consideration of models of family migration is the evolving definition of family and households. With an increase in the number of non-traditional families, it no longer makes sense to use the cohabitating, marital union as the starting point for analyses of migration. In contrast, this study views relationships and families as continuous processes. Discussions about the decision to move may occur among couples who reside in separate households or are at different stages of relationship maturities. Furthermore, the decision to move may change the status of a relationship itself, perhaps increasing its seriousness or resulting in its dissolution. Given the wide variety of types of couples and families, there is a need to evaluate how the relationship maturity and level of commitment of each partner

influences patterns of negotiation as well as goals for the individual, couple, and family. With a broadened definition of family ties, we challenge the assumption of in the existing migration literature that discussions concerning migration center around the (usually male) breadwinner and suggest that each partner may have complementary or competing, non-economic priorities that influence the decision to move as graduate students and as "tied" partners.

*Graduate School Related Family Migration*

The structure of most graduate programs requires students to live in the vicinity of the university; therefore, many individuals migrate to engage in graduate education. Because many are also involved in pre-existing relationships, the students' partner may accompany or follow him or her to graduate school. In contrast to the traditional pattern of male migrant/female tied mover in much of the previous literature, women make up an increasingly larger proportion of graduate students in the U.S., and many tied movers in this case are likely to be male.

Existing research has acknowledged the intersection between relationships and graduate school but has focused primarily on the process of adapting to graduate school, including how couple dynamics impact graduate student success and how stress and financial strain linked to graduate school impact households (Brannock, Litten, & Smith, 2000; Gold, 2006; Legako & Sorenson, 2000; Maclean & Peters, 1995; McRoy and Fischer, 1982). Graduate student relationships are treated as stable and fixed and are almost exclusively marital. The focus on married couples overlooks the variation in the processes of relationship formation and development that are especially relevant for many graduate students. For those in pre-existing relationships, the point at which a relationship solidifies, relative to the decision to migrate, has important implications for the decision-making process surrounding the move.

Other research relates to the experience of international graduate students, and these tied movers are constructed as passive followers who support spouses' pursuit of advanced degrees in the United States (De Verthelyi, 1995; Chen, 2009). There is surprisingly minimal research that investigates how couples negotiate each individual's economic, educational, and personal interests among international or domestic students. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of research from the partners' perspective. Our examination of a highly educated population in pursuit of advanced degrees provides a context in which there are critical trade-offs for the followers in the decision to move.

## 3. Data and Sample Characteristics

Data for this study come from 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between November of 2008 and November of 2009 with the romantic partners or spouses of graduate students who are attending a private university in the northeast of the United States. This private university serves as a promising research site, as it contains a graduate student body and community with diverse backgrounds, places of origin, and interests. Our study focuses on partners of graduate students, not graduate students themselves, because they have a set of unique experiences that go unrecognized by social science literature on gender, migration,

education, work, and family. All stages of the project have been carried out using a qualitative research team approach. All four researchers have been involved in the design of the study, interviewing respondents, coding transcripts using Nvivo, and interpreting the results.

We had several criteria for selecting our interviewees. To be included in the study, they 1) must have moved to town because their partners are presently attending graduate school at the university, 2) are presently cohabitating or married, and 3) are over 18 years of age. This lower age limit was chosen to ensure that all respondents are adults who are likely to be facing the work and family issues pertinent to this study. There was no upper age limit.

Our participants were recruited through several strategies, including distribution of messages in graduate students' email lists, flyers in public places around town, and by recruiting messages to professors and graduate students throughout the university. After a round of five preliminary interviews, a revised set of open-ended questions were assembled into an interview guide that served as the primary data collection tool. The interview guide consisted of several sections, each representing the sub-themes of our area of interests (decision to move, relationship dynamics, post-graduation plans, etc.). Interviews between one member of the research team and the participant were conducted face-to-face in a private place and lasted about one hour. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then coded using Nvivo 8 (see below).

The sample contains a select group of participants who were highly educated and most of whom were in the stage of their life cycle that was closely associated with the establishment of a career and a family. The respondents in this study were between the ages of 23 and 32. Approximately half were male (45%), all had at least a Bachelor's degree, and a few held advance graduate degrees. In addition, seven of the 20 participants came from countries other than the U.S. Eight of our respondents where in non-marital unions with their respective graduate students, although one of our them had already separated from his partner at the time of the interview.

We should acknowledge that the sample we have selected is not meant to be representative of any particular group, and is not representative of all the partners of graduate students attending any American university. Among graduate student partners, we only included those who decided to move, excluding those who chose to remain in long-distance relationships and those who broke up due to their separation. This may actually have implications for the experiences we observe, which may be biased toward a more positive view of the relationships and tied moving. In addition, we did not interview partners who broke up after the move occurred. In this case, the sample is biased toward couples in continuing, more stable unions.

## 4. Analytical Approach

Research team members, including the authors and an undergraduate research assistant, carefully read the interview transcripts in order to identify emerging themes and narratives with regard to the circumstances in which the decision to move occurred. The major topics became "open" codes that were used to generate a set of key concepts and categories to interpret our interviewees' experiences. We used six codes for the analyses contained in this paper: partner

education aspirations, partner work/career goals, relationship dynamics, social networks in origin and destination, importance of place of move, and timing of move. Partners indicated that a combination of these factors created apprehensions and/or openness to being a tied mover. Examination of the ways in which these factors interacted to create a complex decision-making process demonstrates the dynamism and cost-benefit analysis that takes place before choosing to migrate. Each of these codes was discussed by the research team and an agreed-upon definition of each was formulated.

The next step involved coding the interview data in Nvivo. To accomplish this, several research team members first coded a set of three interviews, and then entire team discussed discrepancies that were found across coders. Overall, there was high overlap in this first coding test, and the main discrepancies occurred when team members included additional lead-in or follow-on sentences to a coded piece of text. The entire team agreed upon a final method to ensure inter-coder reliability. Next, two team members coded each interview, and the union of each coders' results was used as the final coding scheme for each interview.

After coding was completed in Nvivo, team members constructed grid sheets where the columns represented each code and the rows represented the respondents. Each cell contained notes from each code for each interview, and a master set of grid sheets was prepared using an Excel spreadsheet. Team members compared their findings across codes and individuals to determine emerging patterns trends that were both typical and unusual. The grid sheets also helped us identify specific relationships and interactions that were not evident from reading the interviews separately.

Through this exercise it became increasingly apparent that the primary motivation for the partner to become a tied mover was maintenance of the relationship with the graduate student. While this motivation pervaded each respondent's account, we recognized that the level of maturity of the relationship defined the partner's perspective and motivations regarding the move. Our three-category typology of tied movers includes "leapers," "steppers," and the "pathers." Below are brief descriptions of these categories.

1. *Those who made a leap of faith:* While these individuals decide to migrate with their graduate student partners, there is still much uncertainty about whether the relationship will work out on the part of the graduate student and/or partner. These couples are not sure they would like to spend their lives together, and, in many cases, the move marks their first time living together.

2. *Those who take a step forward:* These individuals see the move as a step toward relationship consolidation, which may or may not include marriage.

3. *Those who are on a life path together:* Couples in this category are in a well established relationship and the move does not represent a disruption but rather an additional step on their journey as a couple or family.

Relationship maturity is a meaningful categorization tool because it recognizes the dynamic nature of romantic relationships and how relationship maintenance plays a large role in

the migration decision-making process for both individuals and couples. Following or accompanying a student partner to graduate school involves changing location, which can result in the disruption to a respondent's job/career and can distance a respondent from an established network of family and social ties. What is at stake for our respondents is often a consideration when the respondents or couples contemplate the tied move. The stakes involved influence how respondents approach negotiations about a move to follow a student partner and these differ by relationship maturity. In each relationship category below, we present respondents' descriptions of the costs and benefits associated with tied migration. We include select quotations from the interviews to represent these views.

## 5. Findings

*The "Leapers"*

There are six interviewees who took a "'leap" when deciding to become a tied mover, three males and three females. Though they were in very different situations at the time of deciding to move, they share some similar patterns with respect to which factors were at stake in the move. By definition, leapers were in more unstable relationships with their graduate student partners compared with the other two categories of tied movers. Many of these couples had been in long-distance relationships before the move, and it was the first time living in the same household for some. None were married.

In most cases, the decision-making process surrounding the move was made in two steps that involved little joint decision-making. First, the graduate students had either moved or decided to move for school independently of discussion with the partner. The followers' decision was made subsequently and was strongly motivated by a concern to eliminate uncertainty in the relationship due to the fact of the couple would continue to live apart. For example, Karen, a 30 year-old white-American female, said that the major reason to move where her partner was in graduate school was because of the difficulties involved in the couple's previous long-distance relationship. She explained that her student partner needed her to be physically close to "feel secure about the relationship." Thus, the move becomes a tool to illustrate the leaper's commitment given the shaky nature of the relationship.

There was also hesitation by both partners about whether the follower should make the move, because the returns of the move were less concrete for him or her, and the student partner would be at fault for unrealized expectations, which would strain the relationship. Frank, a white-American man, who moved from the west coast to the east coast, recalled that his partner "was really concerned that it would develop into some sort of uncomfortable relationship dynamic," because "the only reason that I moved was her." Alli, a 24 year-old American female, who moved from a nearby big city, noticed that her move felt "a little weird" to her partner at the beginning because "he didn't want to make me change my life or try to force me to move or do anything." Not only were the leapers and their student partners apprehensive about the move due to the uncertain course of the relationship, but many in their social networks, particularly family and friends, expressed reservations regarding the move. Some in these networks voiced that they

did not know the graduate student partner well or had not developed a feeling of trust toward him or her. These feelings added to the risky nature of the move for the respondents.

The leapers also recognized that they might need to sacrifice their own job or education trajectories on account of a move to a location not determined by them. Nevertheless, because most were relatively young, right out of college, and without a clear career trajectory in mind, most perceived that they did not have a lot to lose. Phrases like "try it out," "give it a shot," or "it seemed like an adventure" were often used to describe their view of the move. For example, Alli did not have specific plans for a job and was thinking of applying for graduate school as well, so there "wasn't really a career as such to put on hold." As Karen mentioned, she was still discovering what she was going to do next with her life and was therefore "really open" to defining her future through the move. Other leapers did have aspirations for future schooling or specific job opportunities in the place of destination. This was particularly true for the international tied mover Herve, who came thinking of the "American dream" and hoped to further his education and experiences once he reached the U.S.

Because the leapers generally had undefined plans for their futures in terms of advanced education or a career or where they saw themselves settling, these factors did not weigh as heavily in the decision to move as the importance of being with their student partners. Although not previously strongly "tied" to the partner, these individuals undertook a leap of faith in assuming that both their relationships and their life trajectories would benefit by following their graduate student partner.

*Taking a Step Forward*

Four of our respondents are designated as "steppers," three males and one female. For these individuals, the decision revolved around the couples' desire to nurture the progression of the relationship through close proximity and the sharing of daily tasks and experiences. Steppers rationalized the move in distinctly different ways than leapers. Steppers were in more stable, promising relationships that included higher emotional returns and longer-term happiness compared to the potential risks of making the move. Adam, a 30 year-old British man, stated, "Our relationship became closer [before moving] and we decided that we wanted to be together…. We wanted to be together."

In the narratives of most steppers, it is clear that the decision to migrate was made jointly. Both members of the couple supported the student's desire to attend graduate school and both members wished to carry on with the relationship. A cost-benefit analysis took place in order to create a beneficial situation for both partners, which often included considering the partner's preferences in the student's decision of where to apply to and accept graduate education offers. For example, the student partner of Anna, a 28 year-old American female, deliberately sent applications to places that would also be beneficial to Anna's job prospects. Anna states, "When he was applying to grad schools he decided not to apply to one—I think [there were] a couple of places where there wouldn't really be opportunities for me...." In this case, the decision-making process began long before Anna seriously committed to moving, and knowing that her student

partner considered her circumstances in deciding where to apply to school was a signal of his dedication to their relationship.

Steppers were also flexible in their educational and career situations. They were either at educational transition points (leaving graduate school, for example) or uncommitted to their current job or location positions. They gave meaning to their decisions to move by positing that their skills were transferable or they were willing to take retail or sales side jobs at coffee shops for temporary stability while searching for work that was more in line with their training and/or interests. Overall, the decision to migrate was primarily focused on nurturing growing relationships, while labor market considerations took a secondary position.

Steppers also believed that the temporary nature of the move for graduate education facilitated their decision to be a tied mover. Specifically, the steppers knew that their time in the new place as well as their educational and occupational sacrifices would only last a brief period. More importantly, these sacrifices were small in comparison to having the opportunity to be together with their student partner. Adam states:

> What was at stake was just… asking about… trying to see whether my, sort of, longer-term happiness goals were sort of pointing in that direction. And being with her very much was. So, so in that way… for me in the short term, I could live anywhere for a couple of years. You know, we could, we could live... somewhere in the desert in New Mexico for a couple of years. It's just a couple of years.

*The Life Path Couples*

The life path couples are in relationships that are well established. The move does not represent a disruption in their life together nor a step towards a more serious relationship as it does for the leapers and the steppers. Instead, for the "pathers" the move is an additional step on their journey as a couple or as a family. Ten of our interviewees fall into this category of relationship maturity, three of them are male and the rest female.

An important characteristic of respondents in this category is that they discussed the move extensively with their student partners. Two types of decision-making arose, however. For some, the move was conceived as a joint decision where both partners' needs were considered, while in others, the respondents were willing to follow the graduate student even if they were not sure about what they would do in the destination.

Among those who saw the move as a joint decision, the couple considered how moving would be beneficial to both of them. Mike, a 29-year-old white American man, was also thinking about pursuing graduate school, and therefore he and his student partner chose schools they would apply to together. He explains:

> [My wife] and I both knew that we wanted to pursue our respective fields, um, and so, and she had entered all of her schooling a year ahead of me. … When it was time for her to make decisions about applications, we looked at a lot of options, we made a list of

schools that we really wanted to attend, and a list of schools that would be good. Fortunately for us, [this University] came up in both of those lists.

The other set of respondents articulated their decision within the classic "tied mover" framework, where the student pursued his or her career goals and the partner's role was that of a "follower." For multiple respondents, graduate school had always been part of the trajectory of their partner's professional life and, as a result, had been a part of their plans for a life together. For example, Kat, a 30-year-old white American woman explained, "When I first met my husband, he was planning to go to grad school and I had an idea of what I was getting into. We ended up going to where [he wanted to be]."

For both types of respondents in the life path category, maintaining their life together was paramount, and therefore moving with their student partner was more of given than a choice for them. Several respondents express this feeling:

> For me, moving didn't seem like such a big deal ... If you're with your partner it's easier to meet people I think, it's easier to, even if, you're never going to feel so lonely and be totally alone because you will always have each other. So for me it was fine to move for his career. (Angela, 32 year-old white American female)

> [We] put the relationship first. In the sense that, if the relationship is put [in front] everything else gets easier. … She happens to agree with me, we happen to be on the same [page]. (Mike)

Unlike the leaper and stepper couples, who decide to move with less concrete plans for their own trajectories, for the "pathers," being a follower does not come out of having no plans for their future. Many of the life path couples were able to balance the best school against a place where the partner could find a job or go to school, or where they could be closer to family. For example, Mali, a 30-year-old international partner, and her student husband decided on the right program for him but also with her preferences in mind:

> He basically was left with two schools. One was in Indiana and the other was [here]. We visited both. [The university in Indiana] is completely in the middle of nowhere. It's a beautiful college town, but the nearest place is like an airport which is an hour away. It's very much in the middle of nothing. … And we're both not countryside people, especially me, because I need to work and I'm not in school, so we opted for [here].

The family and friends of the couple also play an important role in the decision making process of those on a life path. Compared to the families and friends of "leapers," who have reservations about the move, the families and friends of the "pathers" welcome the move because they already trust the relationship is established and are happy to see the student pursue his or her education. Even for those coming from abroad, the idea of moving to the U.S. was well received by their families, who saw the move as a good opportunity for both the respondents and the students.

Similar to the steppers, time is an important factor in the decision-making process; in particular, these more established couples were likely to see their life with their partners as a long journey, of which graduate school only represented one chapter. For instance, Peter describes how he views the move as just temporary: "I kind of view [this city] as a kind of a stepping stone, like, we're not gonna live here forever."

In sum, couples in the life path category face the decision-making process surrounding the move in a different manner than those in the other two categories. Because these couples have already decided to be together and to be a family, the decision to move for the partner becomes a choice that is not really a choice. Not being with their student partners is not considered an option.

## 6. Conclusion

Partners involved in a migration decision weigh various economic and non-economic priorities, which is a theme that emerged from this study. Migration for graduate student education is also particularly interesting due to the temporary nature of the move and this period often coincides with other important life events, including relationship formation. The choice to be a follower of a graduate student may be perceived as a temporary task rather than a fixed role. Furthermore, the follower may have significant input into the terms of the move, such as where and when to go. With the understanding that both partners are negotiating their personal and professional interests in the relationship context, we must reassess the traditional concepts of the initiator and follower.

Admittedly, the sample has limited representativeness for tied movers who migrated for their partners' graduate education. The respondents who volunteered for interviews are likely to have made successful adaptations in the place of destination and viewed the move in a more positive way. They are also likely to be in a relationship that worked out after the move, thus perceiving that potentially conflicting life goals can be achieved at the same time with compromise and time.

Finally, our study applies a relationship-centered approach to a particular group of tied movers and contributes to the literature on family migration. First, instead of treating the household as a static unit of analysis, the intimate relationship is seen as a process that is constructed by the orientations and actions of the partners. Accordingly, the study approaches the notions of "initiator" and "follower" as flexible family tasks rather than fixed roles. Second, this research highlights how not only economic but also non-economic factors play an important role in the decision to migrate following a partner. In particular, relationship maintenance emerges as the primary motivation for tied migration in this setting, while labor market considerations took a secondary position.

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