



# How does travel affect emotional well-being and life satisfaction?



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has investigated satisfaction with work commutes. We extend this research by investigating whether satisfaction with all daily travel (including work commutes, school, leisure, and shopping trips) is related to life satisfaction and emotional well-being. A random sample of 367 participants was recruited from three urban areas in Sweden (Karlstad, Göteborg, and Stockholm) varying from a small (appr. 90,000 residents) through a medium (appr. 550,000 residents) to a large population size (appr. 925,000 residents). In a questionnaire the participants reported retrospectively their satisfaction with all daily travel, life satisfaction, and emotional well-being. Direct and indirect effects of travel satisfaction on life satisfaction and emotional well-being were analysed with PLS-SEM. Results showed that satisfaction with daily travel directly influences emotional well-being and both directly and indirectly life satisfaction. It is also found that driving and active modes have more positive effects than public transport.

## 1. Introduction

Subjective well-being has been investigated by a plethora of research in several different disciplines (Diener et al., 1999; Dolan et al., 2008). Evidence is accumulating that subjective well-being has important consequences for health, longevity, and success in life (Diener and Chan, 2011; Lyubomirski et al., 2005). It is therefore argued (Diener et al., 2009) that public health policies should be informed by research showing what factors influence subjective well-being.

In current research subjective well-being is measured both as an evaluation of satisfaction with life (referred to as a cognitive judgment of life satisfaction) and as emotional well-being (experienced positive versus negative moods or emotions). Although these measures are positively correlated, they partly assess independent aspects (Busseri and Sadava, 2011). Both satisfaction with life and emotional well-being are furthermore related to domain-specific satisfaction (Schimmack, 2008), including satisfaction with work, family life, and leisure (Pinquart and Silbereisen, 2010). Travel has been identified as potentially another domain-specific satisfaction which may affect subjective well-being (Ettema et al., 2010).

Previous research has theoretically and empirically aimed at explaining how everyday travel contributes to subjective well-being. Theoretically, it is assumed that travel enables activity participation that is instrumental for people to achieve important goals in their lives which increases life satisfaction (Ettema et al., 2010). Travel to work, school, and leisure activities are examples of journeys with different characteristics (e.g., travel mode, travel time, and cost) that in varying degrees facilitate activity participation. Some current research (see reviews in De Vos et al., 2013; Ettema et al., 2016) has empirically investigated and verified the relationship between satisfaction with travel and life satisfaction. But travel has also affective components (e.g., anger, stress, tension) (Ettema et al., 2010) which impact on emotional well-being. It is essential then that the influences of travel are jointly evaluated with respect to

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satisfaction with life and emotional well-being.

Our aim in the present study is to investigate the degree to which satisfaction with daily travel contributes to life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Previous research has predominantly focused on commutes to/from work (e.g., Hansson et al., 2011; Olsson et al., 2013; Stutzer and Frey, 2008). The work commute is also the most common type of travel. In Sweden where the present research is conducted, 48% of all trips are work commutes (RVU, 2015). Yet, if the aim is to study the effects of daily travel, other trips should also be included, as they will likewise impact on satisfaction with life and emotional well-being. For instance, in Sweden 32% of all daily travel are recreational trips (including visiting friends, participating in community activities, and patronizing cultural activities), 14% are service trips (e.g., medical care) or shopping trips, and 6% are unspecified trips (RVU, 2015).

Previous research has mainly investigated one of the subjective well-being dimensions at a time. In the present study we investigate the relation of satisfaction with daily travel to both life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Furthermore, we include not only work commutes but daily travel for all other purposes.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. After a conceptual analysis of satisfaction with travel, we review in two separate sections findings of studies of the influences of satisfaction with travel on life satisfaction and emotional well-being, respectively. We then report the empirical study that we conducted.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1. Satisfaction with travel

Domain-specific satisfaction is defined as an evaluation of a particular life domain (Delhey, 2014). Similarly to subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999; Diener and Suh, 1997; Kahneman, 1999) satisfaction with travel (which may be a domain-specific satisfaction) includes a cognitive evaluation as well affective evaluations. Consistent with Oliver's (2010) theory of consumer satisfaction, Friman et al. (2013) showed empirically that while a cognitive and two affective evaluations are distinguishable, they are correlated such that they form an overall construct of satisfaction with travel.

The cognitive evaluation is operationalized as a general evaluation of daily travel, independent of travel mode, focusing on quality, that is whether daily travel in general is the best possible, if it works well, and if it has a low or high standard (Friman et al., 2013). For travel by bicycle, factors influencing the cognitive evaluation include, for instance, urban form and travel distance (Heinen et al., 2010), road infrastructure (e.g., availability and quality of bicycle paths or bicycle lanes) (Hunt and Abraham, 2007), safety aspects and travel time (Wardman et al., 2007). For travel by car, cost is an important factor that can be decomposed into the costs of buying, owning, and driving a car (Steg, 2005). Also the functional quality of the car is important for many users. Important factors in public transport are related to ticketing, frequency, and reliability of the service (Redman et al., 2013). Satisfaction with travel time and distance to bus stops are often crucial for continued use of public transport services (Eriksson et al., 2008). With respect to socio-demographic factors, St-Louis et al. (2014) reported that older people experience higher satisfaction with travel in general (see also Böcker et al., 2015; Ettema et al., 2013). Furthermore, men experience higher satisfaction with active travel modes than women (Böcker et al., 2015; St-Louis et al., 2014).

Satisfaction with travel also depends on affective evaluations related to context-specific factors including various episodes or events that give rise to momentary affects (Friman, 2004; Kahneman et al., 2004). During bicycling feelings of relaxation and a sense of freedom are reported (Anable and Gatersleben, 2005). For travel by car, positive feelings like experiencing thrill, pleasure, and prestige have been observed but also negative feelings such as stress and aggressiveness (Steg et al., 2001). Feelings of excitement/enthusiasm, joy/happiness, stress/tension, fear, sadness, and anger have been reported among public transport users (Carreira et al., 2013). In agreement with the spectrum of feelings reported in previous research, Friman et al. (2013) posited that satisfaction with travel has two affective components ranging from positive activation (e.g. enthusiastic) to negative deactivation (e.g. bored) and from positive deactivation (e.g. calm) to negative activation (e.g. stressed). Several empirical studies confirm that these two dimensions satisfactorily capture the affect experienced during travel as reported retrospectively (e.g., De Vos et al., 2015; Ettema et al., 2013; Friman et al., 2013).

### 2.2. Satisfaction with travel and life satisfaction

The bulk of previous research has focused on life satisfaction related to work commuting. The results show that those who regularly travel to work are on average less satisfied with their lives compared to those who work from home in their main job (Office for National Statistics, 2014). These results have been explained differently. One explanation is that people spend too much time on travel. For instance, Stutzer and Frey (2008) showed that people with long commutes to and from work are systematically worse off and report significantly lower life satisfaction (also recently confirmed in a Swedish study by Hansson et al., 2011). The worst effects of commuting were associated with travel times lasting between 60 and 90 min. Another explanation is how people choose to travel. Several studies have shown that people who choose an active commute mode (walking and cycling) evaluate their life as more satisfactory than those who choose to travel by car (e.g. Gatersleben and Uzzell, 2007). A recent longitudinal study (Martin et al., 2014) showed that public transport users report higher life satisfaction over time than car users do. One explanation is that public transport use includes active elements, for instance walking back and forth to the bus stop.

Travel time does not need to be negative but can be filled with meaningful activities or involve social interactions contributing to positive and satisfying experiences (Mokhtarian, 2005). Also other components of the transportation system such as the number of departures or a fair price affect life satisfaction. Access is still another factor. Not being able to travel to attractive places leads to a

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