



On the subjective quality of social Interactions: Influence of neighborhood walkability, social cohesion and mobility choices



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ABSTRACT

Contemporary research in the field of transportation is paying due attention to the geography and composition of personal social networks. However, still little is known about the quality of social interactions, although arguably the subjective quality of social interaction is more important for individuals' quality of social life than the quantity of it. It is, therefore, important to gain insight in the subjective aspects of social activities in addition to the objective aspects. To that end, this study summarizes empirical evidence of factors that make a particular social interaction valuable. Value or the quality of social interactions is measured by individual's subjective evaluation of the importance of social interactions. Based on social interaction diary data collected in 2014, two analyses were conducted - a negative binomial regression model to predict the number of (very) important face-to-face interactions per individual, and a two-level ordinal logit model to predict the importance of each interaction. Explanatory variables were individuals' personal, neighborhood and mobility characteristics. Results suggest that neighborhood and mobility characteristics are important in explaining the quality of social interactions. Frequency of important social interactions is positively associated with frequency of walking or cycling. The frequency of important social interactions was also found to be higher for people living in neighborhoods with higher levels of perceived social cohesion and walkability, and lower for people living in rural areas, in neighborhoods with higher percentages of older residents and in neighborhoods with higher percentages of ethnic minorities. Policymakers, urban planners and decision makers should therefore aim to increase walkability and neighborhood social cohesion, with due attention to neighborhoods with high percentages of elderly and immigrant population.

1. Introduction

Significant attention to understand social networks and social interactions has been given in recent years by the travel behavior society. The motivation stemmed from finding ways away from the mere aggregated data to forecast discretionary travel in the face of growing leisure activity and travel demand. Social activities have, therefore, been increasingly studied by transportation researchers in recent years. New data collection methodologies have been explored to document geography of social networks and social activity planning (Carrasco and Miller, 2006; van den Berg et al., 2009), which has been further extended to incorporate changes in network compositions (and activity planning) due to life cycle events (Sharmeen, 2015; Sharmeen et al., 2014a). However, thus far, studies have mainly focused on the more objective measures of social activity-travel behavior, such as, social network size and social activity-

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travel frequency, mode choice, location type, duration and distance (Carrasco and Miller, 2009; Carrasco et al., 2008; Sharmeen and Timmermans, 2014; van den Berg et al., 2010; van den Berg et al., 2009). Studies into the subjective aspects of social activities are scarce in transportation research, and the relationship between objective and subjective measures has been rarely addressed.

On the other hand, debating the patterns of urbanization, urban planners and policy makers increasingly aim to improve the quality of life in urban as well as in shrinking rural areas. Social activities are an important aspect of individuals' quality of life and well-being (e.g. Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). Social support and social integration have been repeatedly found to be closely associated with psychological health (Umberson et al., 1996). In response to that debate, subjective well-being and quality of life have recently gained attention in transportation literature as well. Studies have focused on questions like how pleasant or safe is the journey and how does it influence or define the overall satisfaction of individuals (Abou Zeid, 2009; Bergstad et al., 2011; Ettema et al., 2010; Morris and Guerra, 2014)? The primary focus of these studies was on travel mode choice and activity affecting individuals' satisfaction and subjective well-being. Studies have also investigated indirect effects of the judgement of social status on commute mode choice as a measure of comparative happiness (Abou-Zeid and Ben-Akiva, 2011). Empirical evidence showed that talking to people increases the pleasantness and satisfaction of travel in general (Ettema et al., 2012; Mokhtarian et al., 2014). This finding holds regardless of the mode of social interaction (face to face or ICT) and of the mode of transportation (public transport or else). Empirical evidence also shows that increased trip making in general reduces the risk of social exclusion and indirectly increases individuals' well-being (Stanley et al., 2011).

Thus far, the two emerging themes in travel behavior research, social activities and subjective well-being, have hardly been combined. This study brings both themes together. We argue that social activities and especially the subjective evaluation of the importance of these social interactions influence people's overall quality of life. Individual's involvement in social interactions that are perceived as important would reinsure his/her sense of belongingness. A thorough review of the theories of sociology by McMillan and Chavis, has identified quality of social interactions as one of the critical factors to establishing shared emotional connection and the sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Moreover, how the built environment facilitates social interactions, e.g. by ensuring neighborhood walkability, influence social belongingness (Leyden, 2003) and quality of life (Rogers et al., 2011). While the benefits of neighborhood walkability on human physiology and health have been studied in detail, the benefits on social quality of life have been rather underrepresented. To that end, this study presents empirical evidence of factors that influence the quality and frequency of (quality) social interactions. Quality of social interactions is measured by individual's subjective evaluation of social interactions. Further to that, indices of perceived social cohesion and neighborhood walkability have been incorporated into the estimation.

For this study social interaction diary data were collected in 2014 in the Netherlands among 178 respondents. Based on these data, two models are estimated. The first one is a negative binomial regression model to predict the number of (very) important face-to-face interactions per individual as an outcome of personal, neighborhood and mobility characteristics. The second model is a two-level ordinal logit model to predict the importance of each interaction. Explanatory variables are characteristics of the interaction, as well as the respondents' personal, neighborhood and mobility characteristics.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next Section reviews the literature on the factors influencing people's quality of (social) life. Section 3 presents the data collection and a description of the sample. The results are discussed in Sections 4 and 5 concludes this article.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

Social networks, making ties and social interaction are crucial to overall well-being and happiness of individuals (Delmelle et al., 2013; Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). A large social network and a large number of social interactions is not a sole indicator of a high quality of social life. Studies in the field of psychology have reported that the quality of social contacts influence subjective well-being more than the quantity of it (Pinquart and Sörensen, 2000). Early sociological theoretical review studies suggest that high quality of social interactions lead to shared emotional connection and sense of community, which in turns contributes in promoting safe, inclusive and higher quality of social life (Keyes, 1998; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Conceivably quality of social well-being responds to the quintessential human nature to belong somewhere sometime.

A multidisciplinary literature review revealed that the quality of social life is influenced by a number of factors summarized in the sections below.

2.1. Personal and household characteristics

Firstly, personal and household characteristics are important indicators for the perceived importance of the quality of social life. Previous research showed, for example, that age, education level, work status, living with a partner, club membership, and the presence of children influences the number of social interactions (e.g. van den Berg et al., 2009; Carrasco and Miller 2009) and social network size (Kowald and Axhausen, 2010; Molin et al., 2008). Although it is recognized that the quality of social contacts is more important than the quantity, still little is known about the influences of personal and household characteristics on the importance of specific social interactions. Moreover, previous research also showed that personal and household characteristics, such as age, gender, income, health conditions, household composition, could influence the satisfaction with social life (e.g. Delmelle et al., 2013; Weijs-Perrée et al., 2015). However, these studies look into the total satisfaction of individual's social life, instead of the quality (importance) of specific social interactions.

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