



Travel-to-work and subjective well-being: A study of UK dual career households



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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to our understanding of the interaction between travel-to-work, time-use, and subjective well-being among full-time men and women in dual career households. Findings from empirical investigation of the *British Household Panel Survey* (1993–2009) identify comparable overall time-use (combined commutes, working hours/overtime, housework, and (ill/elderly) care) between genders, however the distributions are distinct. Women report shorter commutes and working hours/overtime, but lengthy housework. Among men lengthier commutes generate dissatisfaction, while the presence of dependent children reduces satisfaction with leisure indicative of the impact of chauffeuring. Women's relationship with travel-to-work appears more complex. Women remain car dependent. Meanwhile, both short and long commutes generate dissatisfaction. Findings indicate short commutes among mothers which reduce satisfaction with leisure time, reflecting multi-activity journeys including the school run. The evidence is indicative of inequality in the household division of labour limiting women's temporal and spatial flexibility and reducing satisfaction with leisure time.

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1. Introduction

This article contributes to our understanding of the interaction between travel-to-work, time-use, and subjective well-being among full-time men and women in UK dual career households. Previous research into travel-to-work among dual career households (Wheatley, 2012) and the subjective well-being effects of travel-to-work (De Vos et al., 2013; Ettema et al., 2010, 2012; Roberts et al., 2011; Stutzer and Frey, 2008) is extended by considering gender differences in time-use, travel-to-work and reported satisfaction with hours, job, and amount and use of leisure time. Empirical analysis is conducted using panel data extracted from 17 waves of the *British Household Panel Survey*, 1993–2009.¹ Dual career households are defined in this article as men and women in 'managerial', 'professional' or 'associate professional and technical' occupations who report their household as comprising either a: (1) couple with no children; (2) couple with dependent children, or; (3) couple with non-dependent children.² These households

provide an interesting case as both partners within these households pursue careers in highly skilled occupations which require high levels of commitment (Hardill, 2002; Philp and Wheatley, 2011). These households differ from 'dual earner households' which refers more broadly to households where both partners are engaged in paid work. Empirical research has indicated that managers and professionals continue to work the longest hours of all occupation groups in the UK (Philp and Wheatley, 2011). Full-time members of dual career households are considered in this article as this implies that a significant portion of their time is devoted to work and necessary work-related activity (i.e. commuting). Moreover, since both partners are full-time career workers the distribution of other elements of time-use – travel-to-work, housework, care – becomes especially relevant as time is particularly constrained.

Travel-to-work routines and the household division of labour may have important impacts in respect to the subjective well-being – referring to self-assessment of an individual's overall well-being (Diener et al., 1999) – of men and women pursuing full-time careers. Subjective well-being has been the focus of an expanding range of research in psychology, economics, and the broader social sciences (see Kahneman et al., 2004; Frey and Stutzer, 2002). The focus of the extant literature has been increasing understanding of: (1) what individuals value and (2) the factors affecting well-being including links with life satisfaction and happiness (see Diener et al., 1999; Dolan et al., 2008). A stated preference measure, subjective well-being is usually derived from

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¹ The data (and tabulations) used in this (publication) were made available through the ESDS Data Archive. The data were originally collected by the ESDS Research Centre on Micro-Social Change at the University of Essex (now incorporated within the Institute for Social and Economic Research). Neither the original collectors of the data, nor the Archive, bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

² These responses are contained within the BHPS derived variable 'household type' (HHTYPE).

survey questions of the form 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your job as a whole these days', where responses are provided on an ordered Likert scale following the seven 'delighted to terrible' categories outlined by Andrews and Withey (1976). This article aims to contribute to understanding of the interaction between travel-to-work and subjective well-being by considering the case of full-time men and women in highly skilled occupations. Research is evident of women, in most cases, continuing to experience shorter commutes than men (Hjorthol and Vågane, 2014, 82) effectively limiting their access to labour markets (Frändberg and Vilhelmson, 2011). Household constraints, including the provision of care, result in reduced temporal and spatial flexibility among women, the latter potentially resulting in spatial entrapment (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Wheatley, 2013). This may have severe career implications for women, especially as employers increasingly demand high levels of flexibility from their workforce (Wheatley, 2012). This article thus attempts to answer the following two research questions:

- (1) Are distinctions evident in time-use and travel-to-work between men and women in UK dual career households?
- (2) What implications do travel-to-work and the household division of labour have in respect to subjective well-being?

2. Travel-to-work, household labour and subjective well-being

Patterns in travel-to-work among dual career households, and the complex time-use found among managers and professionals, should be considered in the context of the changing policy environment in the UK. With respect to work-time, after being initially refused implementation in the UK the 1993 *European Working Time Directive* (EWTD) (Council Directive 93/104/EC) was introduced as the *Working Time Regulations* (WTR) in 1998. It imposes a maximum working week of 48 h (averaged over 17 weeks) and annual paid leave of at least 4 weeks, to protect the health and safety of employees. However, in contrast to other European economies the WTR utilised, from inception, a voluntary opt-out for employees allowing working hours to exceed the 48 h limit (BIS, 2011). Further policy has focused on increasing the flexibility of paid work. The 2003 *Flexible Working Regulations* (FWR), extended in 2007, 2009 and 2014, offer workers a range of leave options and the legal right to request flexible working albeit these requests can be rejected by employers on grounds of 'business need' (see Deakin and Morris, 2012, 750–2). During the same period in the UK, a range of targeted transport policy has been implemented with a focus on reducing car dependency and improving public transport provision (see HM Treasury, 2006; DfT, 2006, 2007). Concerns continue to surround gaps between the aims and implementation of policy, however, and due to the lack of a holistic approach incorporating time-use, flexible working, and travel-to-work (Wheatley, 2012).

2.1. Travel-to-work

In households where individuals work in managerial and professional occupations difficulties are encountered in combining complex patterns of time-use including the commute. The commute acts as a bridge between home and work. It is considered as a "fluid experience equally blended into home life and workplace and points in between" (Basmajian, 2010, 77). The commute varies in distance and complexity throughout an individual's life, including at certain stages activities such as the 'school run'. It is a product of past experience, present routines, and gender norms, and is considered both 'productive' and a 'waste of time' (Basmajian, 2010, 76). In many post-industrial economies, including the UK and US, the car remains the dominant method of

transport to work as it continues to be perceived the most flexible and convenient (Eriksson et al., 2013; Anable and Gatersleben, 2005). Specific difficulties are encountered by dual career households with respect travel-to-work and residential location. Indeed, it has been suggested that residential location choices can affect well-being through impacts on travel (De Vos et al., 2013). Households may locate close to transport hubs or nodes (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001, 625). However, this may necessitate lengthier journeys. Long distance weekly commuting strategies are, alternatively, adopted to avoid migration (Sandow and Westin, 2010). Commutes, though, for the majority of workers remain in the form of frequent, often daily, journeys over relatively short distances (Green and Owen, 2006). Partners unable to find two jobs in a preferred locale will compromise. Where compromise is present, though, it is often greater on the part of women (Green, 2004, 636). Research from the Netherlands identified that in households where both partners engage in full-time work it is more likely both will exhibit comparable commuting patterns, potentially evident of more egalitarian attitudes towards task division between partners (de Meester and van Ham, 2009). However, dependent children continue to increase the likelihood of women moving to a part-time working arrangement, and performing a shorter commute. Women remain constrained in their working routines by the presence of children (Philp and Wheatley, 2011). Moreover, gender norms continue to limit women's spatial mobility, even among highly skilled individuals, resulting in both temporal and spatial constraint (see Wheatley, 2013).

There has been significant debate regarding whether household responsibilities, including housework and care, impact travel-to-work among highly skilled working women. In dual career households there may in principle be no lead career, but the implications this has for gender norms, travel-to-work routines, and the household division of labour remain unclear. The economic lives of men and women have converged in the past 50 years, however important divisions persist within the household (Lundberg and Pollak, 2007, 6–7). Moreover, convergence between men and women may not have been realised with respect to commuting. For example, using data from Sweden (1978–2006) it has been shown that men continue to travel longer distances to work, and thus have access to wider labour markets than women (Frändberg and Vilhelmson, 2011).

2.2. Temporal and spatial mobility

Evidence is indicative of many women remaining less mobile. Women unable to achieve the level of mobility required by employers, though, may be considered less committed (Sirianni and Negrey, 2000, 72). The presence of dependent children reduces work-time among women, but increases it among men, with potentially important career implications for working mothers (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001, 57). Research is indicative of some improvement in the gendered distribution of household labour (see Sullivan, 2010). Men in some cases do perform a substantial proportion of the chauffeuring of children (Schwanen, 2007). However, many women continue to endure the 'double-shift' (Jones, 2003, 7). This constrains women's travel-to-work in respect to both time and distance (McDowell et al., 2005). Hjorthol and Vågane (2014) consider the case of men and women in Norway. They find that women are limited in regard to labour market opportunities as they tend not to travel as far on average as men (when considering comparable groups). Gender norms are also important in respect to access to a car for travel-to-work. Scheiner and Holz-Rau (2012, 258–9), for example find that while patterns in car use among women are borne out of preference, these preferences are themselves a product of gender norms. Women using a car will do so, often, as they are combining the commute with household

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