



The conceptual mismatch: A qualitative analysis of transportation costs and stressors for low-income adults



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ABSTRACT

Research on transportation and low-income groups has often focused on job accessibility and modeled travel times. Such models disconnect transportation from the more comprehensive social goal of enhancing well-being and fail to account for the full stress and time costs that low-income populations may face. To examine the actual, lived experiences of low-income adults, we conducted 52 interviews in two medium-sized metropolitan areas. Results show that low-income travelers have time costs beyond what is modeled, that low-income populations face stressors, like uncertain and unstable transportation, and that the dynamics of ride giving may strain social relations. In conclusion, we argue that placing transportation within the life experiences of low-income adults is critical for understanding how transportation could support or undermine health and well-being.

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1. Introduction

Research on transportation and low-income populations has often focused on job accessibility and modeled travel times. Such studies have responded to the supposed spatial mismatch between urban low-income residents and suburban entry-level jobs (Kain, 1968). More recently, researchers have identified an automobile-ownership/modal mismatch for reaching jobs (e.g., Grengs, 2010). Meanwhile, policy-makers and researchers looking at the affordable housing and transportation nexus have typically considered access to opportunity, relying on quantitative measures and secondary data.

Awash in the metrics made possible through Big Data and building on narrowly focused models of travel time, transportation research on low-income populations could fail to uncover the complex role of transportation stressors and costs for low-income adults, costs that may have impacts for health and well-being. Thus, temporal models of access may suffer at least a partial conceptual mismatch. Instead of considering access to opportunity sites—be they employment, education, or healthy food stores—as the goal of transportation, we conceive of transportation playing a role in overall health and well-being, drawing on recent work in well-being and transportation. With this broader notion of how transportation fits into health and well-being, we examine the actual, lived experiences of adults in two medium-sized

metropolitan areas to understand how transportation can levy additional time costs and function as a stressor in the lives of low-income populations. Results show that low-income travelers may face time costs beyond what is modeled, that low-income populations face challenges due to uncertain and unstable transportation, and that the dynamics of ride giving may strain social relations. We propose how these transportation challenges could have health and well-being implications and argue that placing transportation within the life experiences of low-income households is critical for understanding when and how transportation supports or stresses well-being.

2. Moving beyond the spatial mismatch to well-being

Much of the research about low-income individuals and transportation has focused on access to employment. Decades ago, Kain (1968) used spatial mismatch to describe the distance between the central city residential location of black urbanities and the growing number of entry-level suburban jobs. Contemporary studies typically consider not simply linear distance, but estimated travel times between concentrations of low-income populations and entry-level employment (e.g., Hess, 2005), and some research has shown that job accessibility is actually higher for central city locations (Hess, 2005; Hu, 2015). Transportation agencies sometimes model the number of jobs accessible, via automobile or mass transit, using regional travel models (e.g., CTPS, 2009; MTC, 2009). Web-based interactive mapping tools (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Location Database) now provide

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internet users with similar job access data by geographic units.

More recently, researchers have pointed to a modal, not merely spatial, mismatch for low-income individuals trying to reach job sites. Studies show that access to a personal vehicle, typically more than location within a metropolitan area, greatly expands the number of jobs sites reachable within a specified travel time window (Grengs, 2010; Kawabata and Shen, 2007). Still, these studies treat accessibility as something primarily determined by mode availability and travel time, but not tied to workplace scheduling demands or the life circumstances of low-income populations.

These studies may face several conceptual mismatches with the social ends of transportation; they may not accurately capture travel time costs nor connect transportation to higher order social goals like well-being. First, standard models likely underestimate travel time costs, as they indicate one abstracted travel cost–time–under ideal conditions without uncovering the other costs and stressors experienced by low-income individuals who may face challenges along multiple dimensions—in housing, employment, public safety, physical health, built environment, social engagement, and economic self-sufficiency. Standard models fail to reflect coupling constraints, work schedule requirements, and personal and family obligations. There also may be extensive coordination time required for *planning* travel for low-income populations, as Clifton (2004) found in a study on grocery shopping and transportation among low-income populations. Some disaggregated models of individualized potential path areas do demonstrate that given individual constraints, spatial accessibility as lived is more complex and limited than travel-time-based counts of potential jobs from a particular geographic unit indicate (see Kwan and Weber (2008), Weber and Kwan (2002)).

While transportation's role in access to employment or other activities remains an important subject of study, a nascent body of literature places transportation in a larger context by examining transportation and transportation disadvantage as related to social exclusion and well-being. Such studies illuminate a second conceptual mismatch of travel time accessibility studies—they can remain disconnected from ultimate social goals like social inclusion and well-being, even as access to employment can be a *means* to addressing social goals.

Over the last decade, several studies have focused on the relationship between transportation and social exclusion. While transportation studies do not reflect a consensus definition (Delbosc and Currie, 2011; Lucas, 2012b; Preston and Rajé, 2007), social exclusion generally refers to deprivation and a decreased ability to participate in society, across multiple spheres from the economic to the social and political. Lucas (2012b, 106) describes social exclusion as “a more multidimensional, multilayered and dynamic concept of deprivation” than poverty, even as living in relative poverty can be one type of social exclusion. Conceptualizations of social exclusion identify how factors related to individuals, institutions, and broader structures can all contribute to an individual's experience of exclusion and also that exclusion is defined relative to normal social inclusion. Based on a United Kingdom Department of Transportation's Social Exclusion Unit study, transport is linked to social exclusion, with negative impacts on health, education, employment, and neighborhood conditions (Lucas, 2012b, p. 105). Indeed, travel that would support social inclusion may be suppressed due to transportation challenges. For example, Rajé (2007) studied the lived experiences of transit use and identified multiple barrier types that result in suppression of travel or that make travel difficult. Even as transportation accessibility thus shows a link to social exclusion, it is only one piece of the puzzle that leads to the exclusion of groups and individuals from social activities (Lucas, 2012a).

Potentially even more comprehensive than social exclusion,

some transportation researchers have identified well-being as the higher order goal for transportation systems. Not surprisingly, measurements and definitions of well-being are contested across researchers and disciplines. For example, economists would typically define well-being as maximizing preference satisfaction, while the World Health Organization would turn to its concept “of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being” (Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2014, 114). Thus, Nordbakke and Schwanen (2014) classify well-being concepts along three dimensions: subjective or objective, hedonic or eudaimonic, and universalist or contextualist.

First, “The subjective stance holds that an individual's perceptions and experiences are the foundation for how well s/he lives. In contrast, in the objective perspective, well-being is established from the evaluation of the ‘objective’ circumstances in which people live, given (inherently normative) criteria based on values, goals or objectives” (Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2014, 107). Individual reporting of one's subjective experiences and perceptions are thus the basis for subjective evaluation of well-being, while empirically based indicators—e.g., living above the poverty level, adequate housing, access to health care, etc.—are used to evaluate objective well-being. Second, hedonic notions of well-being focus on preference satisfaction and positive (e.g., happiness) and negative affect in the short and long-term. On the other hand, eudaimonic notions of well-being are more tied to meaning, purpose, and human flourishing. Third, universalist notions of well-being would assume that the same criteria (the same self-reported measurements even if for subjectively reported perceptions) would apply across time and cultural milieus, whereas contextualist notions posit “that well-being cannot be understood as independent of geographical context and culture” (Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2014, 108). For example, describing a contextualist notion of well-being, Raerino and co-authors (2013) argue that standard measures may not capture all of the interplay between well-being and transportation for indigenous population:

While the evidence about social, health and environmental inequities for indigenous populations suggest that generic concepts of transport disadvantage or exclusion have relevance for indigenous well-being, such concepts may be inadequate for describing the relationship between transport and indigenous well-being. Disenfranchisement from traditional lands, language and culture through colonization is likely to add a particular dimension to transport and well-being (Raerino et al., 2013, 54).

While Nordbakke and Schwanen (2014) discuss at least 10 conceptualizations of well-being that differ along these three dimensions, Reardon and Abdallah (2013) focus on four main concepts of well-being: preference satisfaction, an objective list, subjective well-being, and eudaimonic well-being. They propose a synthetic framework “with the psychological experience of well-being at its heart” (Reardon and Abdallah, 2013, 637). Their framework combines subjective elements from the hedonic approach—feeling good—and the eudaimonic approach—flourishing—and shows interactions with “external conditions such as employment, family life, and physical health” (637). Using their framework, they identify how transportation could have positive or negative well-being impacts via the economy, environment, social relationships and individual responses to travel (considering the journey of travel, not just travel as a derived demand that gets the traveler to her activity site). For example, transportation may impact well-being directly by fostering subjective flourishing—a sense of autonomy and freedom to travel—or indirectly by facilitating access to key activities that in turn are critical for enhancing subjective well-being.

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