



Urban commuting – A threat to the work-family balance?



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1. Introduction

Commuting distances in most western countries are increasing – employed people travel further and use more time to get to work (Frändberg and Vilhelmson, 2011; Lyons and Chatterjee, 2012; Viry et al., 2015). This development is to some degree a result of promoted policies. People's willingness to undertake longer commuting journeys is believed to strengthen the labour markets and the development of competitive industrial regions (Green et al., 1999; Sandow, 2008), and investments in transportation infrastructure and services are often motivated by the potential for creating larger regional labour markets and enhancing opportunities for commuting. As commuting distances increases there is growing concern for the potential implications for employees. Various health-related studies report that extensive commuting may have negative effects for the individual, such as increased stress and reduced well-being (Evans et al., 2002; Rissel et al., 2014). Moreover, studies have documented that commuting decreases the amount of time spent with spouses and children (Christian, 2012), as well as engagement in social activities and political participation (Mattisson et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2014). Thus, commuting may have wide-ranging consequences and negatively impact family life and social commitments in general.

Work-family balance refers to the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his/her work role and family role (Greenhaus et al., 2003p. 513). The significance of work-family balance for predicting job satisfaction, organizational commitment, family satisfaction and life satisfaction is documented several studies, where individuals' satisfaction with work-family balance has been explained by work-, individual-, and family-related factors (Marks and McDermid, 1996). Still, the potential bearings of commuting on work-family balance has received limited attention. Klis and Karsten (2009) used a qualitative approach to examine work-family balance in families where one parent worked on the local scale and the other on the (inter)national scale, but apparently no attempt has been made to quantify these effects. In view of the recent developments described above, it is reasonable to believe that commuting represents an increasing and significant threat to peoples' feelings of how they cope with work and family responsibilities. On a more general level, Olsson et al. (2013 p. 256) state that “*Work commutes are...a neglected aspect of*

everyday life”, which signifies the need for more research on the causes and consequences of commute satisfaction.

The aim of the present study is to expand previous research by focusing on commute satisfaction as a primary determinant for individuals' satisfaction with work-family balance. Commute satisfaction is analyzed together with “general” predictors of work-family balance to determine the relative impact of commuting. While the major focus of previous studies on commuting and family related issues have been on business travel and/or long distance commuting (e.g. Gustafson, 2013; Jensen, 2013) the current work look at the daily commute, i.e., the routine and repeated journey between home and work. The great majority of workers are not involved in long-distance commuting, but rather have commuting times between 20 and 30 min. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average travel time to work in the United States is 25.4 min. Still, there are good reasons to believe that the work commute impact peoples' ability to cope with work- and family responsibilities. Results from the present study of a sample of Norwegian knowledge workers support this assumption. It is shown that commute satisfaction in fact is more influential for their satisfaction with work-family balance than “general” predictors such as the number of hours worked per week and work flexibility. Findings suggest that employees commuting strains should be highly emphasised in and human resource management practices.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a set of hypotheses are developed based on a review of relevant literature (2). In the subsequent sections, we present the data and the methodological approach taken (3) and the results (4). Finally, results are discussed and implications for transport research and policy makers on different levels are put forward (6).

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Commute satisfaction and work-family balance

The primary objective of this study is to estimate the impact of work commute satisfaction on individuals' satisfaction with work-family balance. In the context of work-family balance, to be balanced is to approach each role – work and family – with an approximately equally high level of attention, involvement or commitment. An important

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point for many studies in this area is that roles related to work and home can affect each other in negative as well as positive ways, and both inter-role conflicts and inter-role facilitation are key elements in the concept of work-family balance. Thus, it has been assumed that high role enhancement/facilitation combined with low role conflicts represents a work-family balance, while low enhancement and many conflicts represent an imbalance (Carlson et al., 2009; Frone, 2003). Yet, research has argued that inter-role balance is something unique and quite different from both conflict and enrichment. Evidence from psychometric studies has supported the view that conflict, enrichment and balance are distinct constructs (Carlson et al., 2009). Although varying uses and definitions of the term work-family balance exist, we define work-family balance as an overall appraisal regarding the individual's satisfaction with his/her work and family life (Allen, 2012; Greenhaus and Allen, 2010).

Previous studies have identified various determinants of individuals' satisfaction with work-family balance. For instance, long working hours is negatively related to perceptions of work-family balance, while time spent with children is reported to improve satisfaction (Valcour, 2007; Milkie et al., 2008). Moreover, job-related factors, such as task complexity and control over work time seem to influence the perceived balance. Also, individual traits and characteristics have been recognized as significant predictors (Duncan and Pettigrew, 2012). In a recent study of working parents, Allen (2012) found that mindfulness was positively related to work-family balance, while sleep quality and vitality may function as important mediating variables. Thus, various factors determine an individual's ability to cope with work and home responsibilities.

The inclusion of commuting as a predictor of work-family balance is motivated by the impact of the work commute on framing family activities and social relationships (Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Lyons and Chatterjee, 2012; Meil, 2009). Commuting time influence how couples organize their everyday activities, and research has documented that longer distance commuters spent less time with family and friends than those with shorter commutes. More precisely, Christian (2012) found that a one-hour increase in commuting time was associated with an 11.9-min decrease in time spent with friends. Moreover, the risk for divorce/break up is significantly higher for couples where one of the partners is commuting long distance (Sandow, 2014). Also the commuter's wider social network may suffer. A study focussing on commuters' local environment and social networks showed that commutes of over thirty minutes translate to a reduced satisfaction with one's social contacts (Delmelle et al., 2013). Thus, time spent commuting may be at the expense of time spent developing social relationships in the local community and general local engagements. Empirical works have found general support for Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that commuting time is responsible for the decrease in social capital among citizens in the US over the past decades (Besser et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2014). Negative relationships between civic engagements, local social networks and commuting time have also been documented in European studies (Mattisson et al., 2015). Finally, "spillover effects" may occur, where the psychological state in one life domain transfer to another domain, for instance, commuting conditions and associated moods affecting performance at work and one's mood at home (Wener et al., 2005). For instance, Abou-Zeid and Ben-Akiva (2011) reported a positive effect of work commute satisfaction and work well-being. It is reasonable to assume spillover effects also in the present context, i.e., when people reflect about their ability to cope with responsibilities at work and home, they take into consideration their overall satisfaction with the work commute.

Taken together, the above discussion suggests the following hypothesis:

H1. Work commute satisfaction is positively related to satisfaction with work-family balance.

2.2. Determinants of work commute satisfaction

Provided support for H1, antecedents of satisfaction should be determined to increase positive feelings during the work commute. Various travel characteristics explain commute satisfaction. *Commuting time* is generally negatively related to travel satisfaction mainly due to many travellers' perception of travel time as wasted time. Henscher et al. (2003) found that travel time, together with travel costs, were the two greatest sources of negative satisfaction among bus passengers, while Olsson et al. (2013 p. 259) state that "...negative feelings during the work commute increases with the length of the commute." Moreover, for long distance commuting research has found that the commute may have negative effects on the commuter's mental health and increase stress levels (Evans et al., 2002; Legrain et al., 2015; Rissel et al., 2014). On the other hand, Mokhtarian and Salomon (2001) proposed the term "anti-activities" to denote the use of travel time for relaxing, thinking, and shifting gears mentally between origin and destination activities and roles, implying that the traveller may not always try to minimize travel time. In an indicative study of travellers in the San Francisco bay area, the authors found that the ideal one-way commute was on average set to 16 min. This is half of the average commuting time in urban areas in the US (Wener et al., 2005), suggesting that the great majority of US workers (and elsewhere) have commuting times beyond the ideal.

On the other hand, access to mobile communication technology can convert travel time to productive time. Activities once closely related to geographical places – work, education and leisure – have become increasingly fragmented into multiple smaller timeslots in different places, including transport (Alexander et al., 2010; Lenz and Nobis, 2007). In particular, public transportation has become a "place" where different activities are carried out, and provides an opportunity for multi-tasking of different degrees of complexity (Guo et al., 2015; Kenyon and Lyons, 2007). A recent study shows that 98% of public transportation passengers have access to mobile communication devices on their journey, and approximately 80% have smartphones or other smart devices (Julsrud and Denstadli, 2017). Internet access and mobile communication devices facilitate work or other productive activities en route, which is likely to increase commute satisfaction.

Commuting can elevate high levels of stress. Indeed, in a time use survey, Kahneman et al. (2004) found the work commute to be among the events that generate most negative feelings during the day. Singer et al. (1978) reported that commuting by train increased objective indicators of stress such as blood pressure and neuroendocrine processes. Subsequent studies using objective and self-report measures of stress have reached corresponding conclusions (Bhat and Sardesai, 2006), and Wener et al. (2005) concluded that infrastructure improvements enhance passenger well-being by reducing commuting stress. Although the level of commuting stress is related to transport mode (see below), empirical evidence generally points to the work commute as an experience that can elevate stress and generate negative feelings.

Two other travel characteristics that are hypothesized to impact commute satisfaction are travel costs and environmental perceptions. *Travel costs* is a general predictor of mode choice and travel satisfaction. For public transportation, several studies report fare to significantly impact passengers' satisfaction with the transit systems (Henscher et al., 2003; Tyrinopoulos and Antoniou, 2008). Thus, the traveller's satisfaction with commuting costs is likely to be positively related to commute satisfaction. Finally, we assume a positive link between *environmentally friendly travel* and commute satisfaction. Traveling by environmentally friendly modes represents an additional benefit of the commute that is likely to positively impact the overall experience with the journey. This relates to the commuters subjective feeling of the eco-friendliness of the transport mode, which may or may not agree with the real situation (e.g., a commuter who is car-pooling and one who is cycling may have equal ratings of the eco-friendliness of the commute).

Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are suggested:

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