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Travel mode choice among same-sex couples



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ABSTRACT

Same-sex partnered individuals are far more likely to use transit, walk, and cycle, and to a lesser extent, use carpools than are people in straight couples. As society becomes more tolerant, gay and lesbian populations are an increasingly visible social group, yet they have received scant attention by transportation scholars. This paper builds on this nascent literature by documenting and attempting to explain these dramatic differences by controlling for factors known to influence mode choice.

We perform two separate analyses employing two distinct datasets. The first analysis examines journey-to-work data from the American Community Survey. The second analysis focuses in specifically on non-motorized (walking, biking) travel using use self-reported walk and bike frequency from the 2009 National Household Travel Survey. In both, we find that characteristics of the neighborhoods in which gays and lesbians live, as well characteristics of the individuals themselves, only explain part of the increased propensity to use “alternative” modes of transportation; a strong residual effect remains.

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1. Introduction

We know little about the travel behavior of gays and lesbians, though recent work has begun to explore this topic. Census data on commuting behavior reveals that partnered same-sex couples are considerably more likely to use “alternative” modes of transportation such as transit, walking, and biking than are straight men and women. In 2010, men in same-sex couples use public transit almost three times as much as men in different-sex couples (10.3% versus 3.5%), and walk and bike at twice the rate (5.3 versus 2.3%) (Ruggles et al., 2010). Women in same-sex couples similarly use transit more than their different-sex-coupled counterparts (6.0 versus 3.7%), and walk and bike at one and a half times the rate (3.3 versus 2.1%). This is particularly startling given the higher average incomes of same-sex partnered male couples, typically a strong indicator of automobile use. Indeed, at all levels of income, same-sex couples are more likely to use “alternative” modes.

But what explains these differences? Characteristics of the individuals and their households might explain some, or all, of these differences. Partnered same-sex couples, especially male same-sex couples, are less likely to have children than are different sex-couples (Black et al., 2000), which might lead to fewer chauffeuring trips and less trip chaining. Geography may also explain much of the differences in travel patterns. Most cities in the US are home to easily identifiable queer, gay and/or lesbian neighborhoods and many (though certainly not all) gay and lesbian individuals live in gay and lesbian enclave neighborhoods. In the US, gays and lesbians are more likely to live in urban areas than are heterosexuals (Gates

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and Ost, 2004). Additionally, gay men tend to live closer to the urban core than lesbians and straight individuals (Knopp, 2007). And because they are less likely to have children living with them, gay men (in particular) are more likely to have the budget to live in high-amenity urban neighborhoods (Black et al., 2002). The extensive literature on urban form, density, and design all suggest that the characteristics of these dense, urban, queer neighborhoods may be conducive to very local travel made on foot, bicycle, and by transit (Chatman, 2009; Ewing, 2005; Ewing and Cervero, 2010).

Social aspects of gay neighborhoods also set them apart from other dense urban places. Echoing previous research on the role of immigrant enclaves in shaping immigrants' travel patterns (e.g. Blumenberg and Smart, 2014; Liu and Painter, 2012), new research suggests that the combination of being gay or lesbian and living in a gay or lesbian neighborhood matters for travel behavior. For instance, gay men living in gay and lesbian neighborhoods make trips that are significantly shorter (in distance) than their straight neighbors or gay men living outside of these enclaves (Smart and Klein, 2013). Strong social networks within the queer community, spatially concentrated residences, and queer-oriented business and institutions in gay and lesbian neighborhoods may enable these particularly local travel patterns. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the only relevant study of commute duration compared men and women in same-sex and different-sex couples, finding that straight women had the shortest commute times and that lesbians did not have significantly different commutes than males in either same-sex or different-sex couples (Rapino and Cooke, 2011). Notably, when Smart and Klein (2013) excluded variables indicating gay and lesbian neighborhoods from their models, they found similar results to Rapino and Cooke, suggesting that differences in travel between gay and straight persons may be due to the neighborhood where they reside.

Of course, some gay and lesbian individuals may choose to live in urban queer neighborhoods due to the particular transportation environment available there, such as high quality transit service or a particularly pleasant walking environment. While few have explored the nexus between queer neighborhood formation and transportation, the broader literature on the formation of queer neighborhoods suggests that factors other than transportation dominate queer location choice (Abrahamson, 2006; Adler and Brenner, 1992; Castells, 1983; Lauria and Knopp, 1985). Wolf (1980 quoted in Adler and Brenner, 1992), an exception, suggests that certain lesbian concentrations in San Francisco formed precisely because these women were poor and lacked cars and therefore needed to live in close proximity in order to socialize. However, there is little reason to believe that the transportation preferences of queer populations are different from those of straight individuals. Together, this research on queer neighborhoods suggests that the safety, political empowerment, and social aspects of queer neighborhoods are likely to attract queer individuals, rather than any particular feature of the local transportation landscape. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that residential self-selection due to transportation and other amenities may muddy the waters regarding the direction of causality in mode choice. The potential for self-selection bias might lead to either over- or underestimation of neighborhood or group-membership effects (Cao and Chatman, 2016), though we believe this is likely a minor concern.

Researching the travel behavior of gay men and lesbians contributes to an ongoing effort to expand and diversify knowledge of how individuals make transportation choices. We build on a large body of research that has examined the varied travel behavior of women (Crane, 2007; Giuliano, 1979; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Rosenbloom, 1978), low-income households (Ong, 2002), people of color (Giuliano, 2003), and immigrants (Chatman, 2014; Smart, 2015) to name a few. As noted above, transportation research on sexual minorities is limited though there is a growing body of research on queer populations within the broader field of urban planning (Doan, 2011; Forsyth, 2011; Frisch, 2002). Further, transportation planners and policy-makers have an inherent interest in the travel experiences of various social groups to the extent that these differences indicate inequalities within society and inform our understanding of travel behavior of the broader population (e.g. Rapino and Cooke, 2011).

The following section outlines the hypotheses for this study. We then discuss the challenge of identifying gay and lesbians in publicly available datasets. Next, we describe the data and methods used to analyze mode choice for the commute trip (our first analysis) and describe our findings. We then present data and an analysis of the use of non-motorized modes, our second analysis. We conclude with a discussion of the findings from our analyses and discuss the implications of this work for practice, research, and travel behavior theory.

2. Hypotheses

Why do same-sex partnered individuals use transit, walk, and cycle more than their peers in different-sex couples? We suggest two hypotheses that may explain these differences in daily travel. First, we hypothesize that some of the differences between same-sex and different-sex partnered individuals can be explained by "the usual suspects" such as residential and employment density, residential centrality, and the like; and secondly, that some of the remaining differences after controlling for the above factors can be explained by the co-location of many same-sex couples in LGBT neighborhoods, where activity patterns have been shown to be more local, and thus more amenable to transit, walking, and cycling. We explore the first hypothesis using data from the 2007–11 five-year estimates of the American Community Survey (ACS), which contains information on journey-to-work trips, including those for nearly 50,000 same-sex couples living in a variety of settings around the United States. We control for factors known to influence mode choice for the journey to work. These include characteristics of the individual, household and neighborhood where they reside. We hypothesize that many of these characteristics (such as living in the central city, living at higher residential densities, and decreased probability of having children) can explain at least some of gays' and lesbians' increased propensity to use "alternative" modes of travel. However, we expect

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