



# Should we all just stay home? Travel, out-of-home activities, and life satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

How and why travel contributes to our life satisfaction is of considerable import for transportation policy and planning. This paper empirically examines this relationship using data from the American Time Use Survey. It finds that, controlling for relevant demographic, geographic, and temporal covariates, travel time per day is significantly and positively associated with life satisfaction. This relationship is attenuated, but still significant, when the amount of time spent participating in out-of-home activities is controlled for. Time spent bicycling is strongly associated with higher life satisfaction, though it attains significance only in some models; time spent walking is also quite positive, though it is not significant. However, both walking and bicycling are positively and significantly associated with life satisfaction when time spent on purely recreational walking and bicycling is included. Life satisfaction is positively and significantly associated with time spent traveling for the purposes of eating and drinking, religious activities, volunteering, and playing and watching sports. Travel time exhibits a strong positive relationship with life satisfaction in smaller towns and cities, but in large cities the association weakens, and for very large cities travel time may actually not be associated with life satisfaction at all. This may be due to the costs of traffic congestion, which disproportionately exists in large cities. In all, while the associations between travel and life satisfaction are clear, the causal story is complex, with the positive relationships potentially being explained by (1) travel allowing us to access destinations that make us happy, (2) the act of travel itself being fulfilling, and/or (3) intrinsically happier people being more likely to travel. In all likelihood, all three factors are at play.

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## 1. Introduction

For thousands of years, philosophers have asked what brings us happiness (Kesebir and Diener, 2008). Today, however, thanks to modern data gathering, statistical techniques, and computing power, we are finally uncovering empirical answers to this question. For this reason, happiness study has been intense in fields such as economics and psychology. For reviews of these efforts, see Dolan et al. (2008), Argyle (2001), and Diener et al. (1999). Governments are increasingly collecting happiness data to supplement more traditional measures of well-being like income (Delbosc, 2012).

A growing body of research has begun to address the questions of how and why travel affects our emotions and our overall quality of life. However, gaps remain. Ettema et al. (2010) report that “unfortunately, the relationship between travel and

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SWB [subjective well-being] is unexplored in travel behavior research” (p. 729), an observation seconded by the review by De Vos et al. (2013). This paper addresses this lacuna.

This topic is of considerable import. Considerable effort has gone into measuring the transportation system's costs and benefits. However, it has been argued that the common outcome metrics—such as fuel consumption, travel time savings, monetary savings, or emissions reductions—are only intermediate steps on the way to the most fundamental good: making people happier (Stanley and Vella-Brodrick, 2009).

Quite obviously, travel is perceived to have benefits for the traveler; otherwise it is difficult to understand why autos fill our roads. However, it may be that these benefits are illusory, for example because we simply do not understand the costs of travel in terms of time, frustration, and money, or because we overestimate the degree to which activities outside the home are fulfilling. This paper will consider whether those who travel more and engage in more out-of-home activities are more satisfied with their lives.

## 2. Prior literature on travel, activities, and well-being

Beginning with Andrews and Withey (1976), scholars have subdivided happiness into three distinct, though interrelated, domains. The first two are positive affect (e.g. elation, joy) and negative affect (e.g. stress, fatigue) as experienced while activities are undertaken. Positive and negative affect, though related, are disaggregated because it is possible that some individuals may experience both more highs and lows than others. However, as would be expected, the two are negatively correlated (Tellegen et al. (1988) estimate a correlation of  $-.43$ ), particularly over short timeframes (Argyle, 2001; Diener and Emmons, 1984).

The third domain is labeled life satisfaction. This calls on subjects to form a cognitive judgment about the overall quality of their lives. Life satisfaction is considered to be distinct from both positive and negative affect: individuals who tend to experience upbeat moods may not be satisfied with the overall state of their lives, and vice versa. However, as would be expected, life satisfaction is correlated with both positive and negative affect; Headey and Wearing (1992) find  $r$ 's for the relationships between life satisfaction and positive and negative affect of roughly 0.5 and  $-0.5$  respectively. Life satisfaction is the primary focus of this paper, though I review literature on the links between affect and travel because presumably one's mood during travel is one contributor to whether travel contributes to one's overall life satisfaction.

### 2.1. Travel and affect

A body of prior research has examined the links between travel and affect (Archer et al., 2013; Ettema et al., 2012; Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001; Morris and Guerra, 2015; Ory et al., 2004; Ory and Mokhtarian, 2005; Redmond and Mokhtarian, 2001; Turcotte, 2005; White and Dolan, 2009). In general, prior work finds that, in terms of mood, travel is roughly average compared with the universe of activities. While travel has emotional costs in terms of things like stress, discomfort, and fatigue, these can be offset by things like novelty, adventure, satisfaction, the thrill of moving at high speed, mastery, autonomy, the pleasure of watching the scenery, escape from the stresses of home and work, the satisfaction of curiosity, and activities undertaken while traveling (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001). A number of studies find that auto travel elicits more positive emotions than transit travel (Abou-Zeid, 2009; Abou-Zeid et al., 2012; Abou-Zeid and Ben-Akiva, 2008, 2012; Ellaway et al., 2003; Ettema et al., 2011; Gardner and Abraham, 2007, 2008; Hiscock et al., 2002; Jensen, 1999; Mann and Abraham, 2006; Olsson et al., 2013; Ory et al., 2004; Stradling et al., 2007; Tertoolen et al., 1998). Some research has found that active travelers (i.e. walkers and bicyclists) are in a more positive mood than either drivers or transit riders (Duarte et al., 2010; Morris and Guerra, 2015; Olsson et al., 2013). A number of studies have found that longer trips are more deleterious to traveler mood, for example by raising fatigue and stress levels (Evans et al., 2002; Evans and Wener, 2006; Gatersleben and Uzzell, 2007; Gottholmseder et al., 2009; Kluger, 1998; Koslowsky et al., 1996; Sposato et al., 2012; Stokols et al., 1978; Wener et al., 2003; Wener and Evans, 2011). Other work finds that experiencing traffic congestion negatively impacts mood (Duffy and McGoldrick, 1990; Evans et al., 1999, 2002; Evans and Carrère, 1991; Hennessy and Wiesenthal, 1997, 1999; Novaco et al., 1979; Novaco and Collier, 1994; Schaeffer et al., 1988; Stokols et al., 1978; White and Rotton, 1998).

### 2.2. Travel and life satisfaction

In terms of life satisfaction, Morris (2011) finds that both vehicle ownership and proximity to transit are associated with modestly but significantly higher life satisfaction. Bergstad et al. (2011) find that travel has benefits for life satisfaction primarily due to greater satisfaction with activities. Ellaway et al. (2003) find that owning an auto is associated with mental health benefits. Delbosc and Currie (2011a,b) find that those who report being transport-disadvantaged have lower life satisfaction. On the other hand, Currie and Delbosc (2010) find no link between self-reported transport deprivation and well-being.

There have been efforts to monetize the value of travel. Stanley et al. (2011a) estimate a marginal willingness to pay of A\$19.30 per trip for the typical respondent and perhaps twice that for those who have one-half the average income; in

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