



# Gender differences: The role of travel and time use in subjective well-being



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## ABSTRACT

This research employs time use data from the Canadian General Social Survey of 2010 to explore the links between travel, activity participation, and subjective well-being. Policymakers regularly advocate for better life quality, but research on this topic has been more nascent. In this study, structural equation models are estimated to identify links between daily travel times, time use, and *subjective well-being* (SWB), the extent to which the overall quality of life is positively assessed. Models are estimated independently for men and for women and results suggest important gender differences in how targeting travel and time use outcomes could improve SWB.

Results provide evidence that participation in more daily activities is linked with higher SWB for women but that there is no evidence of a link for men. Moreover, contrary to our practice of valuing travel time reductions as the chief policy objective of interest, results indicate that travel times are unassociated with SWB for both genders. Instead, results are consistent with travel times serving as inputs in activity participation and therefore – at least for women – indirectly contributing to higher levels of SWB. These findings suggest that focusing on activity participation as a chief policy objective in transportation planning could yield higher quality of life benefits than a policy focus on travel time savings. But while employed women participate in more time-use incidents per day than employed men, descriptive statistics indicate that they spend less time on work, sports, and hobbies, while they spend more time on child care, domestic responsibilities, and shopping. These results suggest a disconnect between the activities in which women participate and the activities which may improve their quality of life.

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## 1. Introduction

What are the links between travel, time use, and subjective well-being? And does it vary between men and women? The answers to these questions are crucial for moving beyond the rhetoric of using transportation-land use planning to improve quality of life, and could provide evidence on how to measurably improve quality of life in practice. While planning practitioners have long discussed the desire to improve quality of life (Landis & Sawicki, 1988), research on this topic has been more nascent. *Subjective well-being* (SWB) describes the extent to which the overall quality of life is positively assessed and varies from temporary changes in mood or affect. In this article, the term “subjective well-being” (SWB) is employed

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to describe the object of inquiry while “quality of life” is employed in this article for the purposes of discussing implications for planning practice.

Identifying how travel and time use outcomes are linked with SWB among men and women has important policy implications if improving quality of life is to be a meaningful planning policy goal. First, it provides guidance on what types of travel outcomes planners should target to improve SWB. Second, it identifies what types of time use and activity participation outcomes can improve SWB. Third, it can provide evidence on whom common existing policy actions and objectives are most likely to benefit. Policies have conventionally prioritized mobility-oriented outcomes, such as increasing travel speeds, reducing congestion, and decreasing travel times. Only recently has there been shift toward accessibility-oriented planning which focuses on designing transportation-land use services which improve the potential to engage in opportunities consistent with positive social well-being. Does this switch have different implications for women than it does for men?

This study employs data from the 2010 General Social Survey of Canada on working men and women over 16 from major Canadian regions to explore whether travel and activity participation are associated with subjective well-being. Insofar that reducing travel times are a meaningful policy objective which could improve life quality, one might expect travel times to negatively influence SWB. Likewise, insofar that men and women have different capacities (e.g. due to travel limitations or social factors) to participate in the activities that are most fulfilling to them, one might expect differences in how activity participation influences SWB. This study focuses on these two hypotheses in an effort to identify what policy objectives should feature more prominently if transportation planning policy were to focus on improving quality of life outcomes.

## 2. Literature review

Since Ashton’s prescient contextualization in 1947 of transportation policy intervention as supporting time use patterns (Ashton, 1947), many scholars have noted that travel outcomes should be situated in the context of a derived demand for activity participation (Mokhtarian, Salomon, & Redmond, 2001; Meyer & Miller, 2001; Cervero, 1996a,b). But little research has explored whether better understanding the derived demand for travel might enable public policy to be more tightly linked with improving SWB. Moreover, while much research has noted gender differences in travel (Blumenberg, 2004; Dowling, Goellner, & O’Dwyer, 1999; Gustafson, 2006; Law, 1999), little research has explored how travel and its conferred activity participation benefits play a different role for women than men in advancing quality of life.

There are three chief bodies of literature, broadly reviewed here, which indicate why one might expect gender differences in how travel and activity participation shape subjective well being (SWB). First, research on the determinants of SWB indicates that access to resources and social differences shape the potential for different individuals to realize high levels of SWB (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Second, travel behavior research on commuting and accessibility indicates that because travel is a derived demand, focusing exclusively on travel time savings may be less material for well-being than focusing on activity participation itself (Cervero, 1996a,b). Finally, research on gender and user-based differences in travel needs suggests that modern transportation policy programs with dispersed and diffuse benefits may ignore the needs of subsets of system users (Blumenberg, 2004).

### 2.1. Subjective well-being

While quality of life improvements are among the most common justifications for intervening in transportation and land use planning, researchers understand relatively little about the link between planning policy and SWB (Landis & Sawicki, 1988). Quality of life has long been the focus of philosophers (Morris, 2011) and the variegated life events and habits of individuals which contribute to this outcome have been studied both within and outside of the field of policymaking (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Diener et al., 1999). Research has identified the role of income, life cycle, marital status, employment status, household structure and children, external life events, genetic dispositions, religion, daily travel, and broader environmental factors which influence SWB (Diener et al., 1999). Although the role of genetic dispositions in shaping SWB appears to be most important (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Weiss, Bates, & Luciano, 2008), environmental factors are also important (Diener et al., 1999) and may even be important enough to warrant additional attention by policymakers (Ettema, Gaerling, Olsson, & Friman, 2010).

Although SWB’s causes are both due to individual characteristics and external characteristics, previous findings already provide guidance on how travel and transportation policy influence SWB. Research on the links between travel and SWB indicates an important role for the enjoyment of mode-variant travel. According to both Morris and Guerra (2014) and St-Louis, Manaugh, van Lierop, and El-Geneidy (2014) bicyclists appear to be particularly satisfied commuters. In contrast, others have found that travel shapes SWB because it enables different levels of access to activities, especially among the elderly (Spinney, Scott, & Newbold, 2009) – leading the mobility premium of auto ownership and use to frequently translate into SWB premiums (Ettema et al., 2010, 2011; Jakobsson Bergstad et al., 2011, 2012). Others still have focused on how commuting influences SWB, finding that longer and more onerous commutes are associated with lower life satisfaction (Olsson, Garling, Ettema, Friman, & Fujii, 2013; Stutzer & Frey, 2008).

But, independent of the role of genetics in SWB, why might one not expect individuals to simply make life choices which maximize their SWB – in which case there would be evidence against the role of policy in intervening on the basis of improving life quality? Stutzer and Frey (2008) outline market failures as the root of why different types of travel outcomes

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