



The role of transport in supporting the autonomy of young adults



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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between transport independence and autonomy among young people. A sample of 543 participants aged between 17 and 25 years ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 2.4$) completed an online survey asking about well-being, psychological autonomy, transport independence and transport disadvantage. It was predicted that transport independence would be positively related to psychological autonomy and enhanced well-being, whereas transport disadvantage would be inversely related. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling. Consistent with the study hypothesis, it was found that transport independence through car ownership and low levels of transport disadvantage were associated with high levels of psychological autonomy which was strongly correlated with well-being. This suggested that having the freedom and means to get around and visit friends, go to work or school and to participate in leisure activities may provide young people with a sense of autonomy and that this may lead to enhanced well-being.

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1. Introduction

Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage where adolescents transition to adulthood. An important part of this process is the development of psychological autonomy, that is, the ability to think, feel and make decisions on one's own (Russell & Bakken, 2002). Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), when someone is functioning autonomously they experience a sense of personal choice to act upon their interests, values and goals (Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, & Beyers, 2013). Adolescents with a stronger sense of psychological autonomy tend to be happier, experience less depression and have higher self-esteem (Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 1999; O'Donnell, Chang, & Miller, 2013).

Adolescence is also a time when young adults are becoming more physically independent from parents, taking control of their travel to school, work and social experiences (Currie, Gammie, Waingold, Paterson, & Vandarsar, 2005). Transport plays an important role in facilitating independent travel and a lack of transport has been linked to poor psychological well-being (Bergstad et al., 2011; Delbosc, 2012).

Being in control of one's travel increases independence as it reduces the need to depend on parental lift-giving. Yet at present very little is known about whether transport can support or hinder psychological autonomy. This knowledge gap is particularly significant against the backdrop of recent changes in the travel habits of young adults. In the last decade young

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adults in much of the developed world have become less likely to get a driving license (Delbosc & Currie, 2013, 2014; Sivak & Schoettle, 2012) or reduced the amount of driving they are undertaking (Kuhnimhof, Buehler, Wirtz, & Kalinowska, 2012; Ministry of Infrastructure, 2014). Although these trends are positive from the perspective of environmental sustainability, it is important to understand whether restricted mobility may have a negative impact on the well-being of young adults.

The objective of this paper is to explore whether transport is associated with psychological autonomy and well-being among young adults. This objective is supported by 3 hypotheses which will be tested in this paper:

1. Restrictions on mobility are associated with reduced transport independence (H_1).
2. Transport independence is associated with increased psychological autonomy (H_2).
3. Transport independence is associated with increased well-being (H_3).

This paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the importance of both psychological autonomy and transport in facilitating psychological well-being. Then the recruitment, survey and analysis methodology is described, including a validation of a new 'Transport Independence Scale' (TIS). Next the paper presents the results of a structural equation model of the relationship between transport independence, autonomy and well-being. Finally the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for policy and future research.

1.1. *The importance of autonomy to well-being in adolescents*

Supporting the autonomy of young adults is important to facilitate their psychological well-being. Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000) includes autonomy as one of three universal psychological needs (along with relatedness and competence). There is considerable support for the notion that individuals who are able to consistently meet these psychological needs will demonstrate healthy functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is distinct from independence, self-reliance or individuality, that is, not having to rely on others for help or support (Steinberg, 2002):

“Although we often use the words *autonomy* and *independence* interchangeably, in the study of adolescence they mean slightly different things. Independence generally refers to teens' capacity to behave on their own. . . . [Autonomy] means thinking, feeling and making moral decisions that are truly your own, rather than following along with what others believe” (Steinberg, 2002, p. 276).

Although both autonomy and independence tend to increase during adolescence, an exploration of autonomy from the perspective of Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is appropriate. The literature is unclear with regards to the importance of independence for adolescent well-being, particularly as this can also result in detachment from parents and support networks (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Van Petegem et al., 2013). In contrast, the need for autonomy is considered universal (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). There has been considerable support for autonomy to be associated with desirable outcomes such as increased school engagement (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), improved adherence to weight loss programs and maintenance of weight loss (Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996), high levels of happiness (O'Donnell et al., 2013) elevated self-esteem and lower symptoms of depression in a teenage sample (Noom et al., 1999).

1.2. *The psychological importance of transport*

Transport mobility enhances opportunities for individuals to engage in essential tasks outside of the home environment, such as going to work, accessing health services, socialising and buying groceries. Transport mobility can also assist individuals to fulfil inherent psychosocial needs which have been found to be important for well-being (Delbosc, 2012).

Research has supported the positive relationship between the extent to which individuals are satisfied with their travel experiences and their well-being (e.g. Bergstad et al., 2011). Spinney, Scott, and Newbold (2009) found that older individuals who were able to access community resources and interact with others outside of the home reported feelings of freedom and psychological well-being. Conversely Peel, Westmoreland, & Steinberg, 2002 found that when mobility and access to important services and social interactions were hampered, that dissatisfaction, social isolation and psychological impairment ensued. This means that individuals who have limited mobility, whether it be as a result of a health issue or due to not owning a car, are likely to be less active outside the home and will subsequently report decreased quality of life compared with those who are more mobile (Mollenkopf, Marcellini, Ruoppila, Szeman, & Tacken, 2005).

More recent work in Australia found that transport disadvantage reduced subjective well-being (Currie & Delbosc, 2010; Delbosc & Currie, 2011a). One study found that this relationship is mediated by meeting psychological needs such as having positive relations with others and feelings of environmental mastery (Vella-Brodrick & Stanley, 2013). Environmental mastery is the ability to capitalise on opportunities to create contexts that align with personal needs and values, a concept that is not dissimilar to psychological autonomy.

If, as previous research suggests, transport disadvantage can erode opportunities for individuals to meet inherent psychological needs, it seems relevant to explore whether transport can facilitate the development of psychological autonomy (Hypothesis 2) and well-being (Hypothesis 3).

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