Who wants to commute more and why?

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Abstract
It is a tradition in transport that travel is a derived demand: It is an activity undertaken and endured purely for the sake of reaching a destination. However in recent years there has been a growing body of work that has claimed that there are positive utilities within the experience of travel itself. The main motives of the study of travellers' experiences and preferences of commute time are of both a practical and academic nature: If characteristics of the people who wish to increase their commute could be discovered or speculated upon this might have practical implications for policies aimed at reducing commuting. Academically the study was intended to enrich the understanding of the commute.

The first stage of this study is based on a quantitative analysis of a dataset drawn from a survey of 1900 individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area (Mokhtarian & Redmond, 2001). Among the measures of commute time preferences studied by Mokhtarian & Redmond, two have specific relevance to this study - the "actual" commute time (A) and the "ideal", or desired, commute time (I). This study adds to the work done by Mokhtarian and her colleagues through looking at actual and ideal commute times at a disaggregate level, and studying the relationship between them. The analysis particularly focuses on a group of respondents who stated they would ideally commute for longer then they actually do (I>A). In addition to the analysis of the San-Francisco's database, some hypotheses are further explored by responses to questionnaire and interview-based study of the experiences and preferences of commuters in Bristol, UK.

One of the hypotheses studied in this work is that travellers' perception of ideal commute time is reference-based. A general observation of individual choice making is that "people normally perceive outcomes as gains and losses rather than as final states of wealth or welfare" (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). According to the theory people measure these gains or losses against a reference point. The reference point may be related to the person's present and past experience but also on the perception of how well other people are faring. Exploring the relationship between the ideal and actual commute time, a best fit line was found to be I=0.1A+13.05 (with R Sq Linear=0.864). It can be argued that commuters do not want to abolish all of their commute but rather all but 13 minutes of it. A second interesting observation is that people with longer actual commute put, on average, higher ideals then those with shorter actual commutes. Thus, that the longer the actual commute, the (slightly) longer the ideal this adds weight to the relevance of a reference point. The finding that Ideal commute time increases with actual commute time is in line with findings in Mokhtarian & Redmond (2001) derived from the same dataset using Tobit models.

The importance of the hypothesis that some people might have I>A because of reference points is hard to gauge. Interviews and questionnaire follow ups suggested that peoples' perceptions of how much others commute for are often of little relevance to the Ideal given. Responses of Bristol residents to a questionnaire showed a possible link between how long people judge is typical for others' commutes and the length of commute they would be 'satisfied' with. There was some evidence that the commuter's present and past actual commute time may have influenced the Ideal. Together with in-depth interviews with some of these respondents who stated they would ideally commute for longer then they actually do, it provided further understanding of the possible positive utilities of their commute. Some of the interesting findings are related to the difference in uses of, and attitudes
towards, the Am and Pm commutes.
Realising that some people may want longer commutes (and understanding the reasons of this preference) has important practical implications for transport professionals. One implication it could have is that perhaps the negative utility usually given to travel time in economic appraisals of schemes should be lessened, adjusted or reconsidered. This is important as travel time savings play a very large part in economic transport appraisals. The existence and type of people who may wish to commute further may also be important to the modelling of travel demand. Transport modelling often assumes people wish to reduce and minimise the time spent travelling but this may prove not to be the case for a minority. Understanding groups who wish to commute more may have policy implications: For instance such groups may be particularly resistant to policies aimed at reducing commuting; such as travel plans and other soft measures.

References