The road to happiness?

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Abstract

This paper reports results from an ongoing project named "The road to happiness". One of the overall aims of the project is to increase the understanding of the role of the car for the subjective well-being of people (also refereed to as happiness), and in what way changes in transport mode choice may influence satisfaction with travel and general satisfaction in life.

Motorized traffic is one important source to the adverse impacts on our environment. By changing peoples transport behaviour some effects may however be reduced. Despite different transport demand management measures, from more to less coercive, being implemented aimed at changing behaviour, the success has been limited. The present study aims at studying whether one reason for this might be that changes in transport behaviour influences our subjective well-being in life negatively, and that we therefore will not easily change.

The search for happiness has attracted a lot of attention in various disciplines a long way back in history and the search still goes on. Philosophy, religion, psychology and economics have all studied the phenomena in their own way, and the topic is still hot in some of them. Striving for happiness is perhaps the most fundamental goal in life for human beings and plays a major role in determining the things we pursue in life. It has also been suggested that about 40% of our happiness can be explained by our actions and behaviour (50% can be explained by genetics or personality and 10% by socio-economic circumstances). Therefore, it may be assumed that our daily activities, such as work, shopping, activities with our children, and different leisure activities, play an important role. Many of these daily activities require that we travel from one location to another. Since the car has been shown to usually outperform other modes of transport with respect to time-use and feelings of independence, it may thus be assumed that the choice of, or the possibility to choose, the car as transport mode may facilitate the performance of daily activities. From this it may be hypothesized that transport mode choice may influence satisfaction in life through our daily activities. A question that arises is what will happen with the level of well-being if we change our transport behaviour, such as for instance reducing our car-use? Will this lead to that we conduct fewer activities that may lead to lower levels of life satisfaction?

To assess these questions, a field study was performed with participants from an environmental project (EnvironmentEachDay) that had agreed to change their transport behaviour in various ways. EnvironmentEachDay was run by local authorities of a mid-size Swedish town with the aim to increase the awareness of the environmental consequences of everyday behaviour. The volunteers had agreed to change their everyday behaviour to become more environmentally friendly in four different domains; transportation, energy, shopping of non-durables and waste (they chose to make an active change in any, or all, of the four domains, some chose one domain whereas others chose all four).

The present study deals only with their change in the transport domain. Information related to various offers associated with different methods to change transport behaviour were explained for the participants by the local authorities. For instance, how to learn eco-driving, information regarding public transportation and free bicycle repairs were some of them.
Procedure
A questionnaire were distributed on two occasions, one before any changes had been made (September 2007) and a second after they had implemented some changes. From the initial 100 households participating in EnvironmentEachDay, 86 completed the questionnaire on the first occasion. These 86 received a second questionnaire 8 months later (April 2008), of which 70 responded. Participants were divided in two groups; one self-selected experiment group which were those stating that they had changed their transport behaviour (n=45), and one control group that had not made any changes (n=25).

Four main parts of information were collected in the surveys; socio-economic background, (ii) car-use, (iii) satisfaction with travel, and (iv) satisfaction with life (both cognitive and affective dimensions). Satisfaction with travel was measure using the Satisfaction with Travel Scale (STS; Jakobsson, Olsson; Gamble, & G?rling), affective dimensions with the Swedish core affect scale (cSCAS: V?stfj?ll & G?rling, 2007), and cognitive dimension of satisfaction with life (SWL) with the Satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1984).

Results
The major results from the study are somewhat surprising. Ratings of subjective well-being in life increased significantly for the experiment group. That is, those that had actually reduced their car-use increased their satisfaction with life. It should be noted that the experimental group had lower levels of well-being initially, but caught up with the control group over the 8 months. This suggests that one approach in the strive for changed transport behaviour may be to look for people that are generally less satisfied in life. Other research suggests that people that are less happy in life are more prone to make changes to increase their happiness as compared to happy people that are pleased with what they have.

Analyses of weekly activities revealed no difference between groups or between occasions. Thus, the ideas that reduced car-use would reduce well-being, neither direct nor mediated by activities, may be confirmed.

Analysis of STS did also provide interesting findings. The results show that there were no differences between the experimental and control group in any of the two occasions. This means that irrespective of transport mode participants were equally satisfied with their travel.

The project is still running, and by the time of the conference at least two more data collections have been conducted with the same participants. Although the EnvironmentEachDay project ended in Sept 2008 participants have agreed to continue to answer questionnaires for two additional years (four additional occasions). This will provide an opportunity to study long term effects of transport mode choices for both general satisfaction with travel and for subjective well-being in life.