The use of “formal” travel information pertaining to costs, routes, journey times, or real-time transport disruptions, and its role in travel behaviour (for example, choice of mode, route or departure time) has been widely studied (e.g. see Chorus et al. 2006, Lyons et al. 2007 for reviews), but much of this work has focused on the outcome of decision-making rather than generating a richer understanding of processes leading up to it. Whilst observations of travellers’ choices might provide some indication of their preferences and the journey attributes important to them when making travel choices, it sheds only a little light on the processes through which such information is obtained. In particular, little is known about the part played by “informal” information, shared through word-of-mouth amongst friends, family, colleagues and other social networks, in relation to everyday travel behaviour (although the role of word-of-mouth information-sharing has been studied in fields as diverse as consumer studies, health and tourism). This study used a qualitative methodology to explore the characteristics of informal information and its diffusion through word-of-mouth, seeking to improve understanding of the processes whereby attitudes and intentions are formed which might lead to particular travel behaviours. This has potential applications in the context of community-based “soft” transport measures, the marketing of public transport services, and in the field of advanced traveller information, where new technology offers increasing scope for the diffusion of informal, user-generated content (for example through social networking, on-line reviews and interactive maps) alongside more familiar types of travel information provided by government and transport operators.
The key research questions addressed by this exploratory study were: with whom and in what circumstances do social interactions about travel occur, and to what sort of knowledge are they thought to contribute? The study also aimed to explore participants’ perceptions of how far they had influenced one another’s travel behaviour though word-of-mouth, and to draw out some of the social psychological factors underlying these processes. A number of social-psychological theories were drawn upon to help identify and explain these factors, using constructs such as social learning (Bandura, 1977), social identity (e.g. Tajfel, 1981), social norms (e.g. Cialdini et al. 1991) and pro-social behaviour (e.g. Bierhoff, 2002). The aim was not to test specific constructs, but identify those which might emerge as salient in this context, and therefore promising for further study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups, conducted among new members of staff and students at the University of the West of England. This offered the opportunity to explore and compare the different forms of information used by people travelling to a common destination for the first time, as well as to consider social norms and social identities within a particular organisation, or sub-groups within it. This method was chosen as a means of drawing out themes in a relatively grounded manner from participants’ explanations of their behaviour and motivations. There is some novelty in this approach, as qualitative methods have been used infrequently in the application of social psychology constructs to travel behaviour. A deeper and richer understanding of the processes leading to certain travel outcomes could serve to complement quantitative research testing and measuring theoretical models of behaviour.

Participants elucidated both the active seeking and giving of informal advice about specific trips (both pre-trip and en route) and the sharing of personal travel experiences within everyday social interactions. Whereas information actively sought and offered through word-of-mouth in relation to specific trips played an explicit role in cognitive processes of decision-making (even if it was ultimately disregarded), information which arose in the course of everyday conversation tended to be “passively absorbed”; it might later be recollected and drawn upon if appropriate circumstances arose. At another level, general conversation about travel was thought of as a means of easing social interactions and reinforcing norms or popular discourses within a social group, such as the workplace. In these cases, it was not thought of as active information-sharing, but as a broader social process which might still influence travel behaviour, but in more subtle ways.

All participants described examples of receiving specific pieces of information from friends, family, colleagues or neighbours, which were often thought to have influenced particular elements of a
trip, such as travelling at a time which avoided traffic congestion, trying out a new route (route-sharing being particularly common among cyclists) or using a particular train station or bus service. Thus, the type of personalised information communicated through word-of-mouth was thought by everyone to provide the extra detail which might make a journey easier or more pleasant. Several participants referred to a process of considering another people’s advice, then tempering it with what they knew of that person, and applying it to their own circumstances. They were more likely to act on information from a person they knew, rather than a stranger, because they were better able to compare that person’s preferences with their own, judge their reliability, and make allowances for that person’s approach to travel (e.g. always allowing a lot of time).

All participants in this study viewed themselves as independent, rational decision-makers, engaged in a process of gathering different types of information, including through word-of-mouth, considering different options and “making their own minds up”. Although most participants considered that their propensity to act (or not act) on informal information was affected by social considerations such as identifying with or empathising with the other person, enjoying their approval, or sharing common interests, social psychological factors were believed by participants to play a more subtle role than “rational” factors, such as the other person’s local knowledge, their experience of that particular journey, and the consequent trustworthiness of their information. This could be interpreted to be, in part, a reflection of the culture of “rational thinking” among people who study or work within a university, as well as a broader individualist discourse within UK society. These findings have implications for the next stages of the research, which may employ different methods to probe certain social psychological factors in greater depth, such as the ways in which social norms and social identities around travel are established or reinforced in peer-groups through word-of-mouth interactions.

References


