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# Mood during commute in the Netherlands What way of travel feels best for what kind of people?

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## ABSTRACT

**Question:** How happy we are depends partly on how we live our life and part of our way of life is the commute between home and work. In this context we are faced with the question of how much time spent on commuting is optimal happiness wise, and what means of transportation. Since our personal experience is limited, it is helpful to draw on the experience of other people, of people like us in particular.

**Earlier research:** Several cross-sectional studies have found lower subjective wellbeing among long-distance commuters and among users of public transportation. Yet these differences could be due to selection effects, such as unhappy people ending up more often in distant jobs without having a car. Still another limitation is that earlier research has focused on the average effect of commuting, rather than specifying what is optimal for whom.

**Method:** Data of the Dutch 'GeluksWijzer' (Happiness Indicator) study were analyzed, in the context of which 5000 participants recorded both what they had done in the previous day and how happy they had felt during these activities. This data allows comparison between how the same person feels at home and during their commute. The number of participants is large enough to allow a split-up between different kinds of people, in particular among the many well-educated women who participated in this study.

**Results:** People feel typically less well when commuting than at home, and this negative difference is largest when commuting using public transportation and smallest when commuting by bike. It is not per se the commuting time that depresses mood, but specific combinations of commuting time and commuting mode. Increasing commuting times can even lead to an uplift of mood when the commute is by bike or foot.

Split-up by different kinds of people shows considerable differences, especially with regard to the different modes and company when travelling. Optimal ways of commuting for different kinds of people are presented in a summary table, from which individuals can read what will fit them best. The differences illustrate that research focusing on averages will not help individuals to make a more informed choice with respect to commuting mode.

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## 1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen a rising interest in subjective wellbeing. This topic has been around since antiquity in Western society and has been much debated ever since; once an object of theoretical speculation, now it is an object of

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empirical research in the social sciences and increasingly in economics (Layard, 2005; Frey and Stutzer, 2002). The rise of scientific interest in subjective wellbeing is part of a wider cultural change, in which 'quality of life' gains prominence relative to traditional values such as religious devotion and social success (Veenhoven, 2016).

Empirical research on subjective wellbeing has shown that most people are happy, at least in contemporary developed nations (Veenhoven, 2015a). Research in modern societies has also shown that greater wellbeing is possible for most people and that an individual's happiness depends to a considerable degree on the choices that one makes in life (Lyubomirsky, 2008). As people typically want to live a happy life, there is a demand for information on the effects of choices on happiness. This information demand reflects in soaring sales of 'how to be happy books' and increasing numbers of life-coaching businesses. Although much of this advice is based on folk-wisdom, empirical happiness research is increasingly used to support the informed pursuit of happiness (Veenhoven, 2015b).

One of the choices we make is how we travel between work and home, an important aspect of modern life and one which accounts for a considerable part of daily time spent. Even in a small country like the Netherlands, commuting is a time-consuming activity with an average commuting time of 34.5 min one way. Time spent commuting and distances commuted have increased considerably over the past decades (Van Wee et al., 2006; Susilo and Maat, 2007). To make a well-informed choice on this matter, it is helpful to know how different aspects of commuting affect the subjective well-being of other people in general and of people like us in particular.

### 1.1. Research questions

Hence, the question addressed in this exploratory paper is 'What does optimal commuting look like to enhance subjective well-being for whom?' To answer this question, three related sub-questions need to be answered.

1. Does commuting affect subjective well-being? If so, how much?
2. Which aspects of commuting influence subjective well-being most and least?
3. How different are these effects across persons and situations?

In particular, we focus on one specific aspect of subjective wellbeing, namely the mood level during commuting.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2. Link with the life-oriented approach

This article is part of a special issue on the life-oriented approach, which argues that behaviors in different life domains are interdependent and that travel results from life choices, while travel decisions also affect other choices in life (Zhang, 2017). That approach focuses on determinants of choice in the first place, while this study is about the consequences of choice, that is, on the effects on mood of chosen ways of commuting. This affective experience is likely to influence later travel decisions and a main aim of our study is to enhance that effect, making the consequence of commuting better visible and thus enabling choice that is more informed. More informed choice on commuting is likely to influence choice in other domains of life, such as where to live and work. We also followed the life-oriented approach in that we did not consider mood during commute in isolation, but studied it in the context of wider life, comparing with average mood during other activities of the day.

### 1.3. Plan of this paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Previous research on commuting and subjective wellbeing and lacunas in this literature are discussed in Section 2. The data and methodology of our study are introduced in Section 3 and the empirical findings are presented in Section 4, followed by discussion and conclusions in Sections 5 and 6.

## 2. Previous research

The earlier studies have considered different kinds of subjective wellbeing and different aspects of commuting.

### 2.1. Aspects of subjective wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is about the self-appreciation of one's personal condition. This appreciation can concern aspects of life or life-as-a-whole. 'Appreciation' is typically based on both affective experience and cognitive comparison (e.g. Diener et al., 1999; Veenhoven, 2000), the relative weights of which vary (Veenhoven, 2009). The different variants of subjective wellbeing are summarized in Fig. 1 with the variants used in research on commuting printed in *italics*.

<sup>1</sup> Following the happiness studies literature, happiness is a combination of affective experiences and cognitive comparisons. Hence, subjective well-being encompasses satisfaction with life in general and frequency of positive and negative mood, also known as affect (Diener et al., 1999). This is further explained in Sections 2 and 3.

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