

Mobility and Mood: Does Your Commute Make You Happy?

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In a new study on the connection between mood and transport, bicyclists were found to be the happiest, giving one more reason to choose sustainable mobility. Photo by Onny Carr/Flickr.

There is a complex connection between the environments we inhabit and the way we feel. For instance, urban physicists have studied how rain and wind influence walking patterns, environmental psychologists have researched how the presence of nature influences well-being, and urban designers have studied how street design can create safety and social closeness.

But, until earlier this month, people only had a hazy, individual idea of how they felt while using different mobility modes. Now, Eric Morris from Clemson University and Erick Guerra from the University of Pennsylvania have published a study in the journal Transportation entitled "Mood and Mode: Does how we travel affect how we feel?". The study looks at how levels of stress, fatigue, pain, and happiness vary across users of different transport types.

While their research has found some important connections between biking and happiness, the true strength of this approach is that it rests as a foundation for city leaders to ask bold new questions about the relationship between the built environment and quality of life.

Bicycling brings happiness

Morris and Guerra used data collected by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics as part of the American Time Use Survey, pulling from 13,000 respondents. The transport modes included in the survey were bicycling, walking, driving in a car as a passenger, driving in a car as a driver, and using bus and rail transport.

The data revealed that those who bike are by far the happiest, with passengers in cars second, followed by drivers in cars. Passengers on buses and trains ranked as the least happy.

The conclusions for bicycling are clear: cyclists tend to be happier than people who use other means of transport. This finding is good news for bike advocates and city planners, for along with the environmental and health benefits often cited as reasons to bike, adding happiness to the list is powerful. It also seems to be a simple conclusion, for physical activity releases serotonin, the "happiness hormone." Yet, Morris called for caution in fully trusting these initial results, as "bicyclists are generally younger and physically healthy, which are traits that happier people usually possess." So, while cyclists might be the happiest travelers, it isn't yet clear that they are happy solely because they're biking.

Changing the course for transport investment

Although further research is necessary to develop a clearer sense of precisely how mobility options influence emotion, the potential for what this might mean for transport investment is already exciting. Said Morris: "Understanding the relationship between how we travel and how we feel offers insight into ways of improving existing transportation services, prioritizing investments and theorizing and modeling the costs and benefits of travel."

Improving the emotional experience of how people move might be as important as investing in traditional infrastructure or traditional advocacy campaigns to get people to choose sustainable transport. If it were possible to redesign the experience of bus travel to make it as pleasurable as driving, would it be possible to entice those still adamant about car transport? If it were possible to chart a route in Google Maps that gives not the quickest but the most *enjoyable* trip, would it radically alter mobility patterns?

For now, these are simply questions. But exploring the link between mood and transport encourages a shift in how we build our cities, moving from traditional ideas of passenger flows and route times as the markers of a successful transport system, to a much more nuanced and holistic conception of success that incorporates user experience and enjoyment.

This article is inspired by TheCityFix Brasil's "Pedalar para ser feliz no trânsito" by Priscila Kichler Pacheco.

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