

The psychology of transport choice

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Individual mobility behaviour is based on a complex system of situational and personal factors. Knowledge about these factors is necessary in order to promote sustainable mobility by effective policy intervention. In this respect, recent behavioural research shows a shift from its long kept focus on attitudes to a broader view, especially acknowledging the strong influence of habits and routines.

Too much attitude – The role of habits and routines in travel mode choice

Any human decision is made on a dimension that spans from decisions without much thought to highly elaborate and thoughtful decisions. Within the last few decades, a lot of attention has been given to attitudes, as an important determining factor in decisions. Research, as well as unsatisfactory outcomes of policy intervention suggest that (green) attitudes do not influence travel behaviour very much. Research finally shows that attitudes alone cannot predict behaviour, especially routine behaviour such as everyday commuting. Therefore, the influence of habits and routines on decisions has to be considered to a much greater extent. Habits and routines help simplify everyday life for most people and are deeply rooted into their behaviour.

Further factors

Apart from habit, routine and attitude, there are other behaviourally relevant factors for transport mode choice.

Situational factors, of course, set the framework within which individuals make decisions. It is essential to address all situational factors that influence travel mode choice, as these factors often have a strong influence. For instance, if there is no sufficient public transport or if the weather prevents people from riding a bicycle, these modes of transportation are simply not available in the view of the traveller and, hence, will not count as an option at all.

Economic factors are basically a subset of situational factors. For travel mode choice, time used for travelling, and, in most cases, the cost of the journey, are the determining economic factors.



In connection with situational and economic factors, the availability of **information and knowledge**, for instance about improved timetables, reduced fares of public transport, but also about the environmental impacts of transport modes, are major preconditions for behavioural change. In case of available mode choices, information is necessary for consumers to make informed decisions. On the other hand, if measures such as rules, fees, road charges, taxes or a ban of cars in inner cities are introduced, information and education (for instance about the detailed use of fees) are essential to avoid reactance, which is an emotional reaction to measures that reduce behavioural freedom such as choice of travel mode.

Social norms continuously influence human behaviour. As powerful factors they can inhibit but also foster sustainable transport choices. For instance, for environmentalists it could be an unacceptable social norm to own a car, whereas for many other social groups in developed countries a car is essential to fulfil the social norm. Also the need to be physically present at meetings can be seen as a strong social norm in business relations.

Demographic factors such as income, age and gender genuinely describe travelling people. They also are strong determinants of certain mode choices. Especially for younger and elderly people but also for families, special needs such as height differences between platforms and carriage or the physical effort to access a car have to be taken into account when choosing a transport option.

Mobility biographies deal with the development of travel behaviour over the course of life. Mobility biographies go alongside other partial biographies such as residential, employment and household biographies. The basic, and in many cases already proven assumption of this line of research is, that travel demand is relatively stable on a medium timescale, but can change significantly in connection with certain life key events of an individual. The direction of change in key situations such as moving house, change of workplace and childbirth, highly depends on many situational variables and hence offers a window of opportunity for policy intervention.

Towards behavioural change – What should policy address?

This short overview shows that policy promoting sustainable mobility has to target the problems of consumer lock-in, old unsustainable habits and the complexity of individual behaviour. Hence, it must be clear that no simplistic prescriptions for change are available. This means that policy intervention has to be tailor-made for most cases.

In current policy-making, two types of measures are used to improve the sustainability of passenger mobility. These are “hard measures” – regulatory and fiscal measures that aim at efficiency improvements of transport technologies, and many other activities such as prevention of urban sprawl and improving public transport. The other kind of measures are the so called “soft (policy) measures” such as information campaigns or social marketing for sustainable mobility. Especially for soft policy measures, knowledge about factors that influence transport choice is important, as the success of these measures highly depends on their fine-tuning. Furthermore, the hard and soft measures should not be considered separately, as research shows that especially hard measures have to be supported by soft measures in order to succeed or to become more effective.

For any policy measure, it is important to know whether the relevant travel choice is based on a habitual routine or on more conscious deliberation. For instance, decisions about holiday travel are much more conscious than decisions about everyday mobility (see Knowledge Unit on leisure mobility). Hence, information campaigns might be able to influence some people's decision on their holiday destination, but information will certainly not be enough to change everyday mobility patterns. To change everyday mobility, hard policy measures such as taxes directly change situational and economic factors but also draw attention to everyday travel routines and make them conscious so that they can be re-evaluated. To support the re-evaluation, information is essential. Hence, soft measures such as information campaigns should be used to support the hard measures.

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