
TRAVEL TIME: GIFT OR BURDEN?

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Please note: Further to an invitation at short notice to contribute to the conference, it has not been possible to provide a full paper for the proceedings. For more information about 'Travel Time Use in the Information Age' please visit <http://www.transport.uwe.ac.uk/research/projects/travel-time-use/>

Summary

In transport studies it has often been taken as given that travel time is wasted time. The utility of travel has been assumed conventionally to be derived from the access it affords to destinations and activities with little or no acknowledgement that the actual time spent travelling may also have an intrinsic utility. The prospect of positive utility of travel raises important questions about how this could influence travel behaviour and the economic appraisal of travel time. Academic research is beginning to turn its attention to such questions. There are indications that transport providers and technology developers have also identified the potential for transforming travel time into productive activity time (as is seen in the marketing of 'business class' for rail and the marketing of mobile technologies). This conference contribution argues that rather than conceiving travel time always as a burden, the positive utility of travel could be understood as a gift. It is argued that to develop a rational for using the gift concept, travel time should be considered in the context of individual time-space commitments and social relationships. Theoretical understandings of the gift concept are explored. Emerging insights from six focus groups are discussed, leading into consideration of different 'gift-burden scenarios'.

1. Situating the Gift or Burden of Travel Time

Following the assumption that travel time is a disutility, the logical goal would be to reduce travel time to zero. Research by Mokhtarian and Salomon (2001) applies a 'teleportation test' to consider whether such a logical goal is borne out in practice amongst commuters and argues that there are many circumstances under which people *want* to maintain existing amounts of travel or even increase them. Thus, there is a need to question what transforms a negative utility (time 'wasted' travelling) into a positive utility, or from burden to gift.

The utility of travel may not always have tangible or direct benefits for the individual (or society). For example, a pleasant relaxing trip to work where the commuter is able to prepare mentally for the day ahead may yield nothing from the journey itself but serve to improve productivity subsequently in the work place. Relevant contextual issues include:

- place to place relationship (e.g. differing roles, pressures and pleasures between work and home);
- the desirability of being at the destination;
- routine/regular trips versus less frequent or unknown routes;
- spatial environment (e.g. crowded or empty train); and
- environmental factors shaping the traveller's 'gaze' (e.g. tourist trip).

2. Theory of Gift

Mauss, a social anthropologist, developed an understanding of social relationships based on the concept of the gift (Mauss, 1969). Gifting is not a neutral activity but power laden. The person gifting binds the recipient into a relationship of exchange with a return gift.

There are number of questions arising from the concept of the gift in relation to travel time, and its usefulness as a term. In particular our conference contribution questions who is gifting time, who is the recipient, and what is expected in return? Is the gift recipient reactively embracing the gift (e.g. making the best of an otherwise unappealing journey) or proactively pursuing the gift (e.g. planning activities and travel with an expectation of positive experience of travel time use)? Does a transformation of burden to gift or a heightened 'value' of the gift arise from increasing demands on an individual's time at home and work that 'squeeze out' the opportunities for time for oneself?

3. Discourses of Gift

Discourses of gift are explored through travel narratives generated through focus group research. The notion of travel time being a gift will be organised (as highlighted above) around two perspectives of 'Its my time':

1. Proactive - actively pursuing the benefits of travel time
2. Reactive - finding coping mechanisms so travel time is not wasted

In both scenarios the individual seeks or has a set of activities/resources to utilise travel time, some of which may be seen as saving time otherwise needed for tasks at work. Yet expectations of gift can be transformed back to burden by factors such as overcrowding, other passengers, etc.

4. Gift-Burden Scenarios

Considering the traditional economic imperative of reducing journey time in the context of gift presents a set of differing scenarios as seen from the individual's perspective:

Burden to gift: The individual's travel time is a burden to them and 'recovered' travel time resulting from a quicker journey can be used by them positively such that the time is transformed from burden to gift.

Burden to burden: The individual's travel time is a burden to them but 'recovered' travel time resulting from a quicker journey is allocated to duties to others such that the time experientially remains a burden.

Gift to burden: The individual's travel time is one of positive experience and hence judged as a gift but 'relinquished' travel time resulting from a quicker journey is allocated to duties to others such that the time experientially becomes a burden.

Gift to gift: The individual's travel time is one of positive experience and hence judged as a gift and 'relinquished' travel time can also be used by them positively such that the time remains experientially a gift.

These scenarios are explored in the conference contribution.

References

- Mauss, M. (1969). *The Gift: forms and functions in archaic societies*. Cohen and West, London.
- Mokhtarian, P.L. and Salomon, I. (2001) How Derived is the Demand for Travel? Some Conceptual and Measurement Considerations. *Transportation Research Part A* **35**, 659-719.