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How Commuting is Changing Who We Are

By David Bissell (Geographer)

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Long hours spent traveling to and from work are subtly changing the way people experience, feel, apprehend and live their lives, especially in a city like Sydney where transport is poor and painful.

Hello my name's David Bissell and I'm a mobilities researcher who examines how different forms of travel change who and what we are, our relationships to others, and our attachments to places. I'm currently leading a project that is focused on Sydney, Australia. The city of Sydney represents some incredibly positive and alluring things. It is Australia's only global city and a very successful story in economic terms. This is reflected in the sheer growth of the city over the past few decades. It consistently scores very highly in rankings that compare the liveability and quality of life of the world's major cities. In terms of its reputation on a global stage, Sydney continues to be a really desirable holiday destination; and of course it hosted what is often talked about as being one of the most successful Olympic games ever staged. Put simply Sydney is a city where people want to be.

Transport is Sydney's most fundamental drawback

But behind this glitzy façade is a much more troubling everyday reality for many people who work in the city. And this concerns the experience of moving around Sydney. Transport in Sydney is an incredibly heated issue and the source of massive contempt. In fact, economically, in terms of its competitive edge, poor transport is often regarded as Sydney's most fundamental drawback. Of course it is commuters who this problem affects the most, because they have to endure Sydney's transport system often on a daily basis. Now this is a problem that might not be easy to see at first, but it's there. For a start commuting misery is recounted in daily column inches in national and local presses. And

these gripes are confirmed by recent quantitative studies. For example, a study in 2011 showed that three quarters of commuters in Sydney experience significant pain as a result of traveling to and from work. On average Sydneysiders have the longest commutes in Australia; and a survey in 2013 has suggested that commuting in Sydney and its congestion is on a par with that of Los Angeles, and of course Los Angeles is a city that has attracted considerable renown for its traffic problems. Now, the state government of New South Wales recognises that this is a huge problem. It was one of the key issues in the most recent state election, where the current State Premier of New South Wales said on election night that fixing Sydney's transport was his number one priority. Now, one concrete problem is that investment in transport infrastructures haven't kept pace with the growth of Sydney and the demand for travel that has been created by the sustained economic growth. Now there are many reasons for this. But a key part of this problem is because the short three-year political cycles aren't conducive to the kinds of long-term financial commitment that is required to develop infrastructures. But with Sydney's population forecast to grow from around 4.5 million to around 6 million by 2031, and commuter trips increasing by 34% over the same time, even with modest investment in road building and public transport, these commuting pains are likely to intensify further over the coming years.

Painful commuting: an understudied reality

Now, we know some things about why commuting in Sydney might be painful; for example, sitting in traffic jams and stop-start traffic, overcrowding and delays on public transport; aggressive drivers and rude passengers. A lot of these things might seem quite obvious. But we know much less about how these painful commutes are actually changing people in all kinds of ways that fly under the radar, maybe because of the timescales involved, but also because the transformations that are happening just can't be captured by the kinds of quantitative approach that research often uses. For instance, we know very little about how painful commutes are changing people's sense of self; how they are affecting relations with friends and family in subtle but profound ways; how they are affecting people's work lives; and how they are changing the way that people feel about living in Sydney. Put simply, we know very little about how painful commutes are transforming people and their relationship to cities. The New South Wales auditor general recently likened the commute in Sydney to '15 rounds with Muhammed Ali'. So it is vital that we get a better understanding of just what kinds of effects these traumas are inducing.

Commuting experience: the vital missing link to productivity and quality of life

Now, why are these things important? Well whilst our wellbeing is often thought of as something related to the quality of work or home life, commuting provides the vital missing link to that story. The economic productivity of cities like Sydney are much less about the production of objects and much more about the production of specific feelings and experiences. The success of creative industries, care industries, industries that deliver tourism and hospitality, customer service, and education in particular, are premised on creating and sustaining positive feelings. So understanding the extent to which commuting pains impact on these positive feelings is crucial. We also need a better understanding of how the pains of the commute impact on life at home. Quality time with others is already being jeopardised by the time-squeeze created by domestic and family obligations. And this is compounded by the increased blurring of home and work spheres where work demands much more of our attention outside office hours. Grappling with how commuting pain impacts on our quality of life in this already compromised domain is therefore vital. Finally, we need a better understanding of the long-term effects of commuting pain. Whether we become used to the pains over time in ways that make them easier to bear, or whether they intensify and chew us up in all kinds of ways clearly has significant implications for how we understand the changing nature of life in cities.

How commuting is transforming people's desires

Now, the reasons why a lot of these things aren't known about is because they concern changes that might be very difficult to see, and nearly impossible to measure, at least through the kinds of survey approach that much commuting research has tended to adopt. Now what I'm interested in is how commuting in Sydney is transforming people's desires, their expectations, their aspirations, their sensitivities, their susceptibilities, their tolerances—put simply, those less tangible things that make us who we are and that attach us to the places and other lives that shape us. I'm interested in the kinds of atmospheres that commuting creates but are again difficult to pin down, although they are of course no less real and consequential than the objects that commuting researchers have traditionally been interested in. So earlier this year I conducted in-depth interviews with over 50 commuters for whom commuting significantly impacts on their life. These interviews allowed me to draw out some of these less tangible transformations and get a sense of where and how these subtle dispositions and tendencies are being changed over time. And the next stage of the project will turn to an historical focus, using archive media analysis to look at the kinds of rhetorical and discursive ways that commuting has been talked about, and how these commuting pains might have changed over time.

Changing tolerances, changing relationships

So I'll just take you through four of the main findings so far:

1. Changing bodies tolerance

Firstly, there are changing tolerances. Now, we often think of disruption as something that happens really quite abruptly. But a lot of the transformations going on here are disruptions that take place over long periods of time. For example, bodily fatigue, particularly for older commuters, who find that constant traveling exacerbates significant health issues. It is these kinds of depleting tolerances which show how commuting literally grooves into our bodies. Commuting doesn't just create time squeeze, but it also dries up the enthusiasm and energy to do things, for example in the evenings and at weekends.

2. Changing relations

Second, there are changing relations. In particular, there was a palpable sense of loss that characterised many of the interviews. This concerns the changing nature of friendships because there are fewer opportunities for socialising. It also concerns relations with work colleagues, for example, having fewer opportunities for socialising through after-work drinks. Perhaps even more significantly, these losses also concern how parent-child relationships are being shaped by commuting where some children are seeing a commuting parent only at weekends. These are key ways that relations are being depleted over long time periods.

3. Changing comprehensions of otherness

Third, there are changing comprehensions. This concerns the way that we become differently attuned to the lives of others. Commuting heightens all kinds of incomprehension and resentment; but it also generates empathy and compassion, commiseration and consolation. In fact, what I've found in this study is that commuting generates all kinds of new kinds of dispositions towards others, demonstrated through all kinds of small acts of generosity. What is particularly interesting here is how transport providers and workplaces are also implicated in these changing comprehensions that commuting gives rise to; reflected through things like flexible work arrangements.

4. Changing desires

And fourth, there are changing desires. Now, one of the things that I hear a lot from transport planners and policy makers is the phrase 'what people want is...'. But what I've

found through interviews so far is that the nature of desire is actually quite complex; and much less fixed than we might often assume. People's desires are being transformed in quite significant ways by the journeys that they undertake every day; for example orientations to exercise change, orientations to what to do at the weekend change, orientations to how people want to work changes. So the insights that this project provides us with reminds us that traditional solutions to commuting problems such as road building and the provision of public transport are only part of the answer to this problem. The ways in which people are experimenting with all kinds of new ways of living and working in response to commuting pressures and frustrations points us towards new sites for intervention: so, new ways of working; new ways of thinking about futures; new ways of finding relief; and new ways of relating.

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