

COMMUTING IN THE CONTEXT OF WLB

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Abstract

The paper deals with the issue of commuting to and from work in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. We focus on identifying the average weekly length of commuting. Travel-to-work essentially lengthens the working day and is difficult to use productively, especially when commuting by car. The aim of the paper is to identify the impact of commuting on the private life of men and women in Slovakia. Our findings show that women perceive the commuting more negatively than men, although men spend more time on average by commuting comparing to women. The results show that the vast majority of respondents have a neutral attitude towards commuting to and from work, which could be estimate positively in terms of labour mobility and labour market flexibility. Our evaluated sample of 1.043 respondents (568 men and 475 women) consisted only of individuals who had at least one paid job at the time.

Keywords

Labour Market, Paid Work, Commuting, Work-life Balance

I. Introduction

Working conditions have changed over time around the world. The biggest changes occurred because of the industrial revolution, when the demands on working time also increased. In the 19th century, people (often children) worked about 10 to 16 hours a day. Americans were among the first to promote 8-hour work. The Australians proposed dividing the day into three parts - 8 hours of work, 8 hours of rest and 8 hours reserved for private activities. Workers went on strike not only for higher wages, but also for better working conditions, including reduced working hours. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, working hours were set at 8 hours a day. Currently, the situation is changing again. Not only we do work more hours a day, but the retirement age is also rising. Although the Labor Code says that an employee's working time is a maximum of 40 hours per week and the average weekly working time, even with overtime, must not exceed 48 hours per week, the reality is different and Slovaks also seem to spend more and more time at work.

Deciding how to allocate time between paid work, unpaid work (childcare, shopping, cleaning, cooking, etc.) and leisure time is largely subjective and results from the personal preferences of the individual or household. To some extent, an employer who has certain claims can influence it. However, it is clear that if time spent in paid work increases, it is at the expense of time spent with family, friends or individual activities outside of work. There are studies that show a positive correlation between long working hours and poor employee health (Spurgeon et al., 1997, Sparks et al., 1997, Vand Der Hulst, 2003). Long working hours can have an impact on health by impairing an employee's ability to recover sufficiently, both mentally and physically. Other studies have revealed the effects of long working hours, especially on women's health, although the reasons for such "gender" differences are unclear (Alfredsson et al., 1985, Starrin et al., 1990). Time spent in paid work includes not only time spent at work, but also time spent by commuting to and from work. The impact of time-consuming commuting on an individual's health was investigated by Costa et al. (1988a, 1988b) and demonstrated its negative impact. Although an extensive cohort study conducted in Finland (Muresula et al., 2006) did not show

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an increase in morbidity depending on the length of working time, it assumes an increase due to the long time spent on unpaid work and commuting to and from work.

Time spent by commuting affects how households organize their day-to-day activities. Travel-to-work is one of the key potential areas of conflict associated with work-life balance. Work-related activity of this nature, as well as linked household responsibilities including the „school run“, impact transport preferences. These activities represent significant areas of „spillover“ between paid work and life (Wheatley, 2012).

II. Literature review

According to Wheatley and Wu (2014) work-time is used to describe the time spent in work for an employer (working hours, overtime – paid/unpaid). Commuting time is a necessary work-related activity, but is distinct from work-time. Household time describes time in other work activity including housework, in (ill/elderly) care (unpaid work in our survey).

Travel-to-work is of strategic importance in daily living. It links personal life and working life, enables reach and access on the labour market, and can manifest gendered relationships between women and men. Accordingly, commuting is a concern at both the individual and household levels as well as for policy and planning at various levels (Solá, 2016).

Basmajian (2010, p. 77) considers commuting as a “fluid experience equally blended into home life and work-place and points in between”.

The household division of labour heavily influences patterns in commuting, which evidence suggests, have important implications with respect to subjective well-being. Travel affects well-being in a range of ways (De Vost et al., 2013, in: Wheatley, 2014): through potential travel, activities during travel, participation in activity (work or leisure), enabled by travel, and travel for leisure purpose where travel is the activity which itself acts as a source of utility. It is considered that “travel-to- work” is often perceived as generating dissatisfaction” (Wheatley, 2014, p. 189).

Long journeys appear to have negative impacts on subjective well-being, especially because of stress and tiredness according to Sullivan, 2007, Lyons and Chatterjee, 2008, Stutzer and Frey, 2008, Olsson, Garling, Ettema, Friman and Fujii, 2013.

According to Sweet and Kanaroglou (2016, p. 24) identifying how travel and time use outcomes are linked with subjective well-being has important implications if improving quality of life is to be a meaningful planning policy goal. First, it provides guidance on what types of travel outcomes planners should target to improve subjective well-being. Second, it identifies what types of time use and activity participation outcomes can improve subjective well-being. Third, it can provide evidence on whom common existing policy actions and objectives are most likely to benefit.

The difficulty and ambiguity of this issue reflect, for example, Haas and Osland (2004), according to who there is no unambiguous theory that would give a coherent picture of the relationship between time spent by commuting and the subjective feeling of individual satisfaction.

How to harmonize work and personal or family life is the subject of the theory of work-life balance. According to Poulouse (2014) “work-life balance is a broad concept, defines in different ways by different researchers using diverse dimensions. The origins of research on work-life balance can be essentially traced back to studies on women having multiple roles”. Work-life balance was initially termed as work family conflict, Kahn et al. (1964) defined as a form of inter role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually

incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role being made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role.

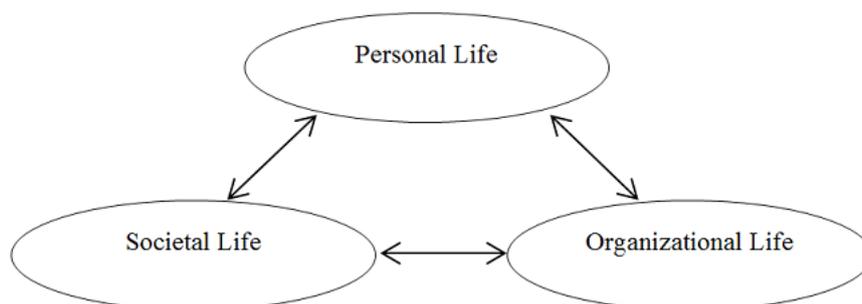
Today work-life balance is discussed with respect to multiple affected groups. In this newer perspective, multiple work and life (not just family) roles are viewed as potentially benefiting, as well as harming, one another (Rife and Hall, 2015).

As Byrne (2005) states individuals with work-life balance feel their lives fulfilled both inside and outside of work and experience minimal conflict between work and non-work roles. Those who achieve this balance tend to have higher levels of satisfaction with their jobs and life in general, as well as lower levels of stress and depression.

According to Wikipedia “work–life balance is a concept including the proper prioritization between work (career and ambition) and lifestyle (health, pleasure, leisure, family). The work–leisure dichotomy was invented in the mid-1800s. Paul Krassner, an American journalist, observed that anthropologists define happiness as having as little separation as possible between your work and your play. The expression “work–life balance” was first used in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s to describe the balance between an individual's work and personal life. In the United States, this phrase was first used in 1986”.

According to Poulouse and Sudarsan (2014) work-life balance is a balancing between three dimensional aspects of life namely organizational, societal and individual’s personal life as depicted in the figure 1.

Figure 1 Work-life balance



Source: adapted from Poulouse (2014, p. 1)

We agree with the claim, that in the context of work and life, balance does not refer to an equal weighting of the two, but rather an acceptable, stable relationship (Guest, 2002).

One of components to measure work-family or work-life balance is time that relates the amount of time spent at work with the amount of time spent on home and family activities. Time based conflict occurs when time devoted to one role makes it difficult to fulfil the demands in another role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985, Fisher, 2001, Greenhaus, Collins and Shaw, 2003, Poulouse, Sudarsan and 2014).

III. Data and method

The aim of the paper is to identify the impact of commuting on the private life of men and women in Slovakia. Within the framework of the project VEGA No. 1/0621/17 "Decision-making Process of Slovak Households about Allocation of Time for Paid and Unpaid Work and Household Strategies' Impact on Selected Areas of the Economic Practice" at the Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University in Slovakia, we conducted a primary survey using a questionnaire method. Questionnaires were distributed to Slovak households in April - May in

2018 and consisted of several parts, resp. modules that aimed to find out more information (selected aspects of paid work, structure of unpaid work, division of roles in the household and others) both about Slovak households and about individuals in them. In particular, the uniqueness of the survey is that it provides aggregated data that cannot be obtained from available official statistics. By evaluating and comparing them, it is possible to stimulate a social debate in selected areas.

In connection with labor mobility, when processing the data, we focused on household members who were aged 15 to 64 and had paid job at the time. For the purposes of our survey, the type of employment relationship as well as the form of employment of the respondents was irrelevant. The questionnaire was representative of the gender, age and education of respondents. It was distributed to 732 households and attended by 1.819 respondents. Our evaluated sample of 1.043 respondents (568 men and 475 women) consisted only of individuals who had at least one paid job at the time. According to the aim of the paper we have formulated the research assumption:

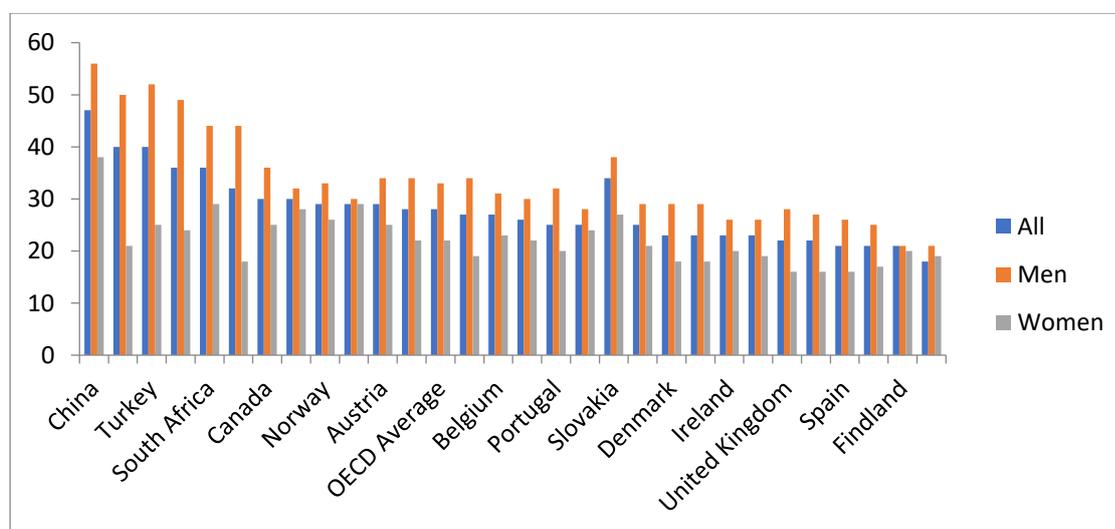
We assume that the impact of commuting on private life is perceived more negatively by women than by men. Our assumption is consistent with e. g. Dickerson et al. (2014) and Sweet, Kanaroglou (2016).

With regard to the goal of the paper, we have used simpler mainly descriptive statistical methods, which have resulted in a unique result for the first time ever.

IV. Results and discussion

In our previous research, we tried to quantify the time spent on commuting to and from work in Slovakia and compare it with other countries. It is clear that there are similarities in the world, but also significant differences in labour mobility. For better illustration, we have used the latest available OECD statistics (from 2016), which provide a comparison of time spent by traveling to and from work or studying for men and women in OECD member countries, China, India and South Africa. As these statistics do not have data for Slovakia, we supplement them with our findings. Given that we conducted our survey in 2017 and took into account only workers and not students, our comparison may be skewed. Nevertheless, in an effort to compare the situation in Slovakia with labour mobility in other countries, we illustrate the following Figure 2.

Figure 2 Average daily time of commuting to and from work or studying for men and women in selected countries (1999 - 2014) and Slovakia (2017)



Source: OECD, own processing according to VEGA 1/0621/17

Differences in labour mobility are related to the size of the economy, population density, labour market specificities and other country-specific characteristics. It is worth noting that the most time spent by commuting in the period under study was the Chinese population, who commuted an average of 47 minutes a day (men up to 56 minutes a day). In Japan, Turkey and Mexico, it averaged about 40 minutes a day. The inhabitants of Sweden spent the least time by commuting, on average only 18 minutes a day. Countries such as Finland, the USA, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and others are also characterized by shorter commuting times.

Based on the analysis of our questionnaire survey in 2017, we found out that Slovak workers commute on average 34 minutes a day (men 38 min / day, women 27 min / day). We can conclude that Slovakia is one of the countries where people spend more time by commuting. We are relatively well above the average of euro area countries (25 min / day) and the OECD (28 min / day) (Kollár, Mazúrová, 2019).

Further analysis revealed that there is a significant difference in the average time spent on commuting to and from work between the areas of the Slovak Republic at NUTS 2 level. The relatively longest average time spent on commuting was found in the Bratislava region, which may be related with a traffic situation in the capital (Mazúrová et al., 2017).

In addition to the time that employees spend commuting to and from work (so-called implicit costs), expenditure directly on travel expenses (so-called explicit costs) is also significant, which reduces households' disposable income. The questionnaire survey showed that a large proportion of commuters use their own motor vehicle and the average weekly monetary costs to travel to work are on an average 50 €/month. Differences in the length of commuting time as well as monetary costs are affected by the mode of transport as well as net wages. With a higher net wage, the average weekly attendance for work also increases. The above factors and more other create preconditions for the impact on the private life of employed individuals.

Table 1 shows the results of a questionnaire survey on the impact of commuting on the private life of employed men and women. The findings we present represent a subjective and retrospective view of commuting.

Table 1 The impact of commuting on the private life of men and women

| Impact on private life | Men | Women |
|------------------------|---------|---------|
| very positive | 10.15 % | 6.46 % |
| rather positive | 19.37 % | 14.15 % |
| neutral | 48.89 % | 49.23 % |
| rather negative | 15.68 % | 22.46 % |
| very negative | 3.14 % | 5.07 % |
| I can't evaluate | 2.77 % | 2.62 % |

Source: Own processing using primary data from VEGA Project. No. 1/0621/17

Table 1 shows that about half of men and women are not affected by commuting at all. Interestingly, the attitudes of men and women in this case are very similar which we did not assume. Commuting has a more positive effect on men than women. However, the length of commuting is perceived less positively by women. Although the proportion differences are not very significant, the deviations are probably due, among other things, to the above-mentioned factors. Although we found out earlier that women spend less time by commuting compared to men in Slovakia, they perceive it more negatively. This finding may also be due to the fact that the total allocation of time during the day is different for women than for men. The difference in this case could be the subject of an even more detailed analysis, which could help to determine the cause of the impact of commuting on private life of men and women.

Table 2 shows the average assessment of the impact of commuting on the private life of employed individuals.

Table 2 Average values of the impact of commuting on the private life of men and women

| Sex | Mean |
|-------|------|
| Men | 3 |
| Women | 3.22 |

Source: Own processing using primary data from VEGA Project. No. 1/0621/17

The higher value, the more negative than positive is the subjective perception of commuting (1 is very positive and 5 is very negative). In general, we can conclude that commuting of individuals is not perceived as either very positive or very negative, which we evaluate positively in terms of labour mobility and labour market flexibility.

Commuting time is the duration of the transition between the work and family domains. The theoretical status of commuting is not very clear, and not many scholars thematize commuting even when dealing with subjects such as work – family issues e. g., Powell, Greenhaus (2006) or boundary management Clark (2000). It would be appropriate, among other things, to identify what activities individuals perform during commuting. Commuting time does not have to be just a loss of time, but can be used if the mode of transport allows it also by useful activities. We agree with the idea that commuting time may also be seen as useful and beneficial for both work and family domains. According to boundary theory, people seek to minimize the effort required to disengage psychologically and physically from one role and re-enter another Ashforth et al. (2000). Achieving the optimal state as well as the greatest possible usefulness from commuting probably often requires a change in the usual stereotypes of behavior. Although our findings and interrelationships help to uncover many patterns of commuting to work, we are still unable to describe many of the links.

V. Conclusion

Commuting is in most cases a standard part of the day of employed individuals. The monetary costs of commuting reduce disposable income of households and the time costs of commuting affect allocation of time for paid and unpaid work and leisure time of households and thus the work-life balance of individuals. We are convinced that every employee strives to optimize commuting to and from work to achieve maximum efficiency. These hypotheses depend on the technical infrastructure as well as the mode of transport of commuters and their possibilities in this way (private motor vehicle, company or shared car, public transport, etc.). However, commuters do not always have the opportunity to choose the mode of transport as well as the activities they could carry out during travel.

Our findings show that, on average, men spend more time by commuting to and from work during the week compared to women. We can confirm this conclusion from multi-year surveys, which we conducted in the conditions of Slovakia. We found that commuting affects both male and female commuters. Commuting to and from work has a more positive effect on men, even though on average they spend more time by commuting during the day. An interesting finding is that the vast majority of our respondents perceive commuting as neutral which foreshadows that this activity does not evoke any feelings in them. In our opinion, this could be evaluate positively in terms of labour mobility and labour market flexibility.

This year was the labour market effected by COVID-19 pandemic almost in the whole world. Although several employers switched to home office, surveys that have been carried out in the Slovak Republic in the last period foreshadow that work from home does not suit all employees who did not have the opportunity to perform it before the pandemic. It is also one of the signals

that the lack of socialization of employees can lead to a decline in labor productivity and upsetting between their work- lives balances.

The results of several foreign scientific research have shown that commuting is perceived as stressful by commuters, which is linked to many factors accompanying the travel (e.g. Hobfoll, 2001, Bakker, Demerouti, 2016). The travel safety affects pandemics even worse. It is therefore appropriate to improve the conditions of commuting and increase the quality of travel. Despite the current state of unsatisfactory technical infrastructure in Slovakia, low quality of second and third class roads, low quality and insufficient availability of public transport (bus, train), this issue in comparison with other countries (e.g. Germany, United Kingdom, etc.) is not given sufficient attention in even scientific research nor in the public discussion. As labour mobility is one of the essential components of labour market flexibility, we consider it important to pay more attention on commuting and its impact on employees. Therefore, it is necessary to address this phenomenon from the perspective of both the public and private sectors.

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