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Planes, Trains, and Automobiles: Commuting in the 2020s and Beyond

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue about commuting, we invite readers to consider how this frequently occurring worker activity should be integrated and investigated within the organizational sciences. Commuting is ubiquitous in organizational life. Yet, despite this centrality, it remains one of the most understudied topics in the organizational sciences. This special issue seeks to remedy this oversight by introducing seven articles that review the literature, identify knowledge gaps, theorize through an organization science lens, and provide directions for future research. We introduce these seven articles by discussing how they address three cross-cutting themes (Challenging the Status Quo, Insights into the Commuting Experience, The Future of Commuting). We hope that the work within this special issue informs and inspires organizational scholars to engage in meaningful interdisciplinary research on commuting going forward.

Commuting is a frequently occurring activity that most employees traditionally engage in on most workdays. Early commuters lived near their workplace and walked or took rail transportation to work. The advent of the automobile let employees live further away from their workplace and had them waxing poetic about the opportunity to enjoy the fresh air and have control over when they arrived at work (Baker, 1912; Bangs, 1908; Frederick, 1912). Commuting eventually became sufficiently prominent as an activity that scholars began to study it scientifically, initially researching topics such as the application of mathematical models to commuters' traffic patterns (e.g., Tan, 1967), the optimization of travel times (e.g., Vuchic & Newell, 1968), the development and causal factors of commuting patterns (e.g., Carroll, 1949; Thompson, 1956), and the value of time for commuters (e.g., Thomas, 1968). The psychological sciences took notice in the late 1970s, with studies focusing on commuting stress and well-being (Greenberg, 1978; Novaco et al., 1979; Stokols et al., 1978). Despite its prevalence as a frequently occurring (near) daily activity for many employees, the study of commuting through an organizational science lens has been sporadic over the years (Evans & Carrère, 1991; Kluger, 1998; Novaco et al., 1990, 1991), only recently re-emerging as a major topic of interest (Calderwood & Mitropoulos, 2021; Gerpott et al., 2022; Jachimowicz et al., 2021).

We contend that a dearth of targeted theorizing specific to commuting-relevant phenomenon may be partially to blame for the more fractured, piecemeal nature of the commuting literature. This special issue lays the groundwork for the continued examination of commuting within the organizational sciences by coalescing across disciplines what we know, what we do not know, and what we should know in the future about commuting, with an eye towards theoretical development of several major concepts and processes relevant to commuting experiences. By doing so, the papers presented in this special issue challenge organizational scientists to reframe how we think about the commute, synthesizing what we have learned in the past with theoretical development to lay the groundwork for where commuting research may go in the coming decades.

A significant factor in this reframing of the conversation about commuting is the substantial impact the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have on commuting. During the pandemic's early stages, many employees shifted to remote work and avoided public transportation (Liu, 2021; Montañez, 2020; Segal, 2021a, 2021b). Many early news articles suggested commuting was a thing of the past (Putzier, 2022; Segal, 2021b). Nevertheless, the lack of the commute significantly impacted employee attitudes and behaviors during this time, with many employees reporting that they missed the commute and some employees creating faux-commutes to simulate the commuting experience (CNN, 2021; Haupt, 2021). This sudden disappearance of the time between the work and home life domains may have led some employees to reframe their negative perceptions about the commute – realizing that there may be beneficial aspects of the “daily grind.” As we emerge from this global pandemic, we must realize that the influence of the commute on employees’ lives is complex, entailing both positive (e.g., potential to facilitate transition between the work and home role; Jachimowicz et al., 2021) and negative (e.g., strain inducing aspects of the commute; Koslowsky, 1997). Several articles within this special issue address the underlying phenomenological processes that occur during the commute and speak to how these processes may (or may not) generalize to employees’ with commuting experiences that have been altered by the circumstances of the pandemic.

Our introduction to the special issue focuses on identifying cross-cutting themes across these papers as an “amuse-bouche” for readers. We begin by addressing how these papers led us to question pre-conceived notions about the commuting experience (e.g., Is the commute necessarily negative? Does commuting need to happen every day?). The next theme concerns a closer examination of what occurs during the commute. Many of the papers in this special issue address the cognitive processes and behaviors that take place during the liminal period between work and home. Lastly, we synthesize how these manuscripts look to the future of commuting research and how organizational scientists need to work across disciplines to produce novel research insights on the commuting experience. This latter point is a major theme of the papers collected here, in that these papers combine to suggest that commuting research is inherently inter-disciplinary, encompassing insights from psychology, management, transportation, education, public health, physiology, economics, and geographic studies. We encourage readers to adopt an open mind to how the insights from these various disciplines are relevant to commuting as positioned within the psychology of work, as many of these cross-disciplinary insights are highly relevant to advancing the conversation about commuting from an organizational sciences perspective.

Challenging The Status Quo

Commuting to and from work is often perceived as a “less than desirable activity” (Kahneman et al., 2004). Indeed, the popular press is full of articles bashing the commute, and the negative framing of the commute is seen in how researchers have typically conceptualized and discussed the commuting experience (see Calderwood & Mitropoulos, 2021). Researchers have primarily focused on the negative perceptions employees have about their commute and the stress that the commute engenders. Certainly, the commute has its downsides, but we should not ignore the potentially beneficial aspects of the commute. Many papers within this special issue ask readers to reconsider the commute in a more balanced way. Murphy et al. (this issue) recognize that the prevailing perspective in the literature about commuting has been negative and directly assert that the commuting experience can have positive attributes. Other papers make this point a central aspect of their contribution. For example, Pindek et al. (this issue) propose that commuters can use the time they are traveling to and from work as “Me Time,” where they recover from their experiences in their previously occupied domain and replenish crucial personal resources that may be depleted by working. Gerpott et al. (this issue) break down the psychological aspects of the commuting experience in explaining when the commute positively or negatively affects experiences in the commuter’s subsequently occupied domain (e.g., work, home).

In a related vein, two papers challenge what most people think of when they are defining a “commute”. Fruhen et al. (this issue) will expose readers to a very different type of commuting from what is typically studied that reflects Fly-In-Fly-Out work. This work requires employees to travel long distances, and leave their home environment for an extended time (days, weeks). This type of commute deviates substantially from the “daily grind” that many employees associate with the commute and the paper excellently highlights the disruptive and taxing nature of this commuting modality. McAlpine and Piszczek (this issue) similarly challenge the reader to think of the commute as a liminal space that is not connected to any particular major, salient life domain. These authors suggest that the commute can be used for various functions – particularly transitioning between different life domains (e.g., work, home). In fact, that brings us to another theme across these manuscripts: what actually happens during the commute.

Insights into the Commuting Experience

The commuting experience has historically been viewed as “lost time” When asked, “What is the commute for?” the standard response may be: “absolutely nothing.” However, just as the study of more general non-work time (i.e., leisure) experiences evolved from viewing time away from work as wasted towards a more productive view of this time (Neulinger, 1974), several papers collected in this special issue reframe the commute to focus on its productive potential. Yet, the authors of these manuscripts present an alternative perspective to what about commuting time may be valuable.

As noted earlier, Pindek et al. posit that workers engage in activities aligned with their own goals and interests that promote recovery from work (e.g., socializing, entertainment,

exercising) while commuting. Similarly, Danna et al. suggest commuting time can be used to engage in commute-based learning (i.e., the pursuit of informal learning opportunities during the commute). These authors thoroughly investigate the characteristics of the commute, person, and organization that facilitate commute-based learning. This paper pairs up nicely with the contribution by Nolan et al. (this issue), which parallels the role-transition perspective advocated by several papers included in the special issue (e.g., Danna et al., this issue; McAlpine & Piszczek, this issue), but extends it by discussing how commuters balance role transition demands with the spatial navigation demands inherent within the commute. Gerpott et al. (this issue) supplements this work by highlighting how different commute modes may engender different psychological experiences. These works provide new insights into the thoughts and behaviors of the commuter, which can set the stage for future research focused on when and how commuting time can be used productively.

The Future of Commuting

What is on the horizon for commuting research moving forward? Another shared theme across these articles is the role of time. Several authors noted the need to examine the commuting experience using intensive longitudinal methods (Fruhen et al., this issue; Murphy et al., this issue; Nolan et al., this issue; Pindek et al., this issue). Longitudinal methods are critical within commuting research as these experiences naturally fluctuate daily (e.g., commuting times, conditions, and experiences may change substantially from day-to-day), and the impact of this commuting variability can have both shorter- and longer-term consequences. Several phenomena within the commuting literature also may operate differently when measured at different temporal intervals (e.g., commute variability, commute predictability, commute quality). Further, the authors of several papers in the special issue call out the need to expand upon the typical methodologies used in commuting research (Pindek et al., this issue; Nolan et al., this issue). One recommendation is to use newly advanced technological tools to better understand the commuting experience (e.g., virtual reality, mobile surveying technologies). For example, some surveying platforms (e.g., Expiwell, Metricwire) have developed (or are developing) geo-location survey pings which will allow researchers to capture background geo-location data as well as send survey pings to participants as soon as they arrive at a particular location (e.g., work, home). Another example is using “onboard” devices, including dashcams, autonomous vehicle sensors, and tools that interface with a vehicle’s on-board diagnostics (e.g., Dingus et al., 2006). These tools will allow researchers to capture greater and more accurate data to answer their research questions about commuting experiences.

To truly capitalize on these technological advances, the future of commuting research almost necessitates interdisciplinarity. Capturing and understanding autonomous vehicle or biometric sensor data is outside the purview of many organizational scholars’ expertise, but critical to producing a temporally nuanced understanding of the commuting experience. Moreover, commuting can be viewed as a spatial navigation event – a topic where cognitive neuroscientists can be especially helpful (Brown et al., 2020; He et al., 2019). Hence, we must partner with scholars with expertise in these areas to integrate our expertise. Furthermore, all the authors included in this special issue imply or reference that organizational scholars are juniors in this domain relative to other disciplines that have

studied commuting experiences for longer, calling on us to work with scholars in these other disciplines to move the scientific study of commuting forward (e.g., transportation scholars, occupational health psychologists, civil engineers, cognitive psychologists). Thus, organizational scholars may need to be willing to dive deeper into less familiar literatures from other disciplines to better ground their theorizing and empirical applications in the extant commuting research base.

Lastly, it is impossible to speak to future commuting research without acknowledging the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. As many papers note, telework and flexible work policies are becoming more common and could substantially impact how employees view their commute in both positive and negative ways. For instance, some employees may look at their commute with more dread and disdain if they compare themselves to other workers who have the luxury of working from home. Moreover, teleworkers may struggle with transitioning between life roles if they do not have that liminal space that the commute provides. This becomes an increasingly complex problem when considering employees that go to work and telework within the same week. Specifically, the routines that facilitate role transitions will differ for these employees daily, placing an additional resource burden on the employees. In line with the calls above, organizational scholars will need to continue to approach research on commuting in a nuanced and comprehensive manner.

Conclusion

Over the last 70 years, the commuting literature has developed with more limited involvement from organizational scholars relative to members of other disciplines. This special issue was proposed in the hopes of changing that. As the authors of this special issue point out, the expertise that organizational scholars bring to the table will help answer interesting questions and reveal new insights into the commuting experience.

Understanding the commuting experience is more important now than ever. As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the nature of work in impactful ways, and the commute is no exception. Employee attitudes towards the commute are changing. Organizational policies concerning the commute are becoming more common (e.g., flextime, telework). Whether a job requires one to commute may become a serious consideration when a worker is deciding whether to accept a job. Yet, many workers will need to continue to commute to work (Tayag, 2021) and, consequently, understanding commuting experiences will be a critical aspect of future research. With commutes getting longer (Ingraham, 2019; Rumer, 2018) and autonomous vehicles on the rise (Clayton et al., 2020; Talebian & Mishra, 2018), there is still much for us to understand about the commuting experience.

We hope the work within this special issue will inspire scholars to engage in meaningful interdisciplinary research and to approach the commute through a more balanced lens that recognizes both potential positive and negative aspects of commuting. The results of these efforts will hopefully reach organizational and government policymakers, inspiring them to design policies that promote a better commute for all employees. These decision-makers could help build a better commuter infrastructure, make commuting more accessible, or

guide employees on strategies to improve the commuting experience. We hope the readers enjoy this special issue, and we are looking forward to seeing what this work inspires.

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