

The Emerging Commuter Families and Changes in Psychosocial and Health Behaviour Profile

Adriana Ortega^{1*}, Haslinda Abdullah^{1,2} and Samsilah Roslan³

¹*Institute for Social Science Studies, Putra Infoport, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

³*Department of Foundations of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

The present paper provides a descriptive analysis of commuters and their families. It also explores gender differences and the impacts of commuting among young families in Malaysia. The study was conducted in the Klang Valley, and the sample consisted of commuters working outside the Klang Valley. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and a descriptive survey. The findings showed that 44.4% of commuters were working away from home because it was requested by their employers. Although there were more men than women who perceived the commuting lifestyle as a positive situation, there were not gender differences observed on how commuting impacted personal wellbeing. Nonetheless, significant differences were found between those with a positive outlook of the commuting life and those with a negative perception of the commuting lifestyle. The emerging commuter family dynamics and its impact on work-home life balance for young Malaysian families need to be further investigated.

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E-mail addresses:

adryortegaro@gmail.com (Adriana Ortega),

lynn@upm.edu.my (Haslinda Abdullah),

samsilah@upm.edu.my (Samsilah Roslan)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

‘Commuter families’ is a term that describes families who combine the work location of one parent on a large national or international scale with the other parent’s work location and the family home on a local scale (Van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). According to Rhodes (2002), these commuter families normally

consist of dual-career marriages that choose to establish separate homes to fulfill their career commitments. Van der Klis and Karsten (2009) suggest two main types of commuter families: (1) the traditionalizing and (2) the egalitarian commuter families. Traditionalizing commuter families consist of a full-time working father and a mother who stays at home with homemaker or housewife responsibilities. Meanwhile, egalitarian is constituted by dual-career marriages with shared household and family responsibilities; and although one partner would remain locally oriented, it would not always be the wife/mother.

Trend in the whole world and especially in Malaysia showed the phenomenon of commuter families and long-distance relationships between husband and wife are becoming more common. It is difficult to estimate the number of commuter families in Malaysia because there are no official figures available and the research in this area is almost non-existent in Malaysia.

According to the international data available, commuter marriages and families are a widespread phenomenon around the world, and have been researched within the mobility and migration and family and marriage literature (Jackson, Brown, & Patterson-Stewart, 2000, Magnuson & Norem, 1999). The figures available indicate that since 1999, the number of commuters in the United States has increased from 700,000 to over a million (Jackson, Brown, & Patterson-Stewart, 2000); and about a million married couples have chosen to become commuter families (Magnuson &

Norem, 1999) and these figures increase every year.

In west European countries, it is estimated that most people between 25 and 54 year old choose to travel long distances daily or weekly to work. However, the exact figures of commuter marriages and families are not available. According to Glotzer and Federlein (2007), the lack in detailed demographic data on commuters has made them an invisible group despite the increase in the numbers of commuters and commuter families. As a result, commuters and their families are still not considered as distinct group in many countries.

The existing data indicate that commuter marriages and families are characterized by one of the spouses living at home with both working and child-care responsibilities and the other spouse working and living away from home for an extended period of time (e.g., 2 weeks, 3 months, etc.). Although the commuter family structure is different from the traditional family model, relevant data are still limited, while there are very few empirical studies on challenges and issues faced by commuter marriages and families (Glotzer & Federlein, 2007).

Earlier studies have reported a number of benefits related to commuting such as increased satisfaction, more autonomy, better self-esteem; absence of daily family constraints and hassle; increased of career opportunities, etc. Authors have also indicated that long-distance commuting not only increases career opportunities and higher income, but also offers an alternative to migration, allows commuters to maintain

social security and to keep their social network (Lungholm, 2008; Lundholm, Garvill, Malmberg & Westin 2004; Green, Hogarth & Shackleton, 1999). In Germany, for example, Fannrich-Lautenschläger (2008) reported that people chose to travel long distances daily or weekly in order to keep their home, school, social environment and personal relationships.

According to Ferik (2005), among the most common reasons for people to opt for long distance commuting is their desirability of keeping their current job, wanting to stay in a particular occupation; the shortage of job opportunities near home location, potentially higher income and better opportunities for career advancement. However, according to Stutzer and Frey (2007), life as a commuter becomes challenging and difficult to manage due to a range of factors including time spent on traveling back and forth every week, increased expenditure and financial cost, as well as changes in the relationship dynamics with spouses, family and friends. In turn, stress, anxiety, and the burdens related to these and other commuting related challenges will impact negatively individual commuters' health and quality of life. Not to mention that this arrangement of commuting marriages and families entails a unique set of stressors in terms of emotional and financial cost and sacrifices for the commuter and his/her family (Jackson, Brown & Patterson-Stewart, 2000).

Previous research has identified a few challenges related to commuting to work that have negative impacts on commuters and their families. These include, for example,

pressures to divide time and energy between temporarily and family home, difficulties in balancing family and career demands, feelings of loneliness and isolation, poor time management and lack of understanding and social support (Stutzer & Frey, 2007). Similarly, earlier studies reported that long-distance commuting impacts family and their interpersonal relationships, changes the family dynamics and roles, lessens opportunities for socializing and leisure activities with family and friends, as well as increases household responsibility for the spouse that stays home (Hjorthol, 2000; Hanson & Hanson, 1993; Cassidy, 1992; Green, Hogarth & Shackleton 1999).

It is no doubt that long-term commuting changes marriage and family dynamics (Coontz, 2005; Gross, 1980) and these changes may increase the toll of stress and anxiety levels, negative impacts on the quality of life and the relationships within the family, as well as increase living expenses (Stutzer & Frey, 2007; Weiser, 2006; Kiefer, 2000; Lareau, 2003; Elkind, 1995). Hence, it can be argued that although commuting may result in better or higher salaries, it also increases stress, family disruptions and lessen commuter's psychosocial well-being.

In Malaysia, there is a rapid growth of two-earner households, and thus rapidly changing the 'traditional family' where men work and women manage their households and families. As both spouses residential mobility does not often coincide, the long distance commuter marriages and families are also growing in numbers. Thus, family

life where there is a temporary absence spouse/parent is becoming an acquainted setting in Malaysia. Without a doubt, the unique commuter family lifestyle has implications on the quality of family life in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, to the authors' knowledge, there has not been any study conducted in Malaysia that investigates the challenges faced by commuters and their families and/or the impacts of these challenges on commuters and their families' health, wellbeing and quality of life. The study from which this paper is derived is the first research project conducted in Malaysia (Impact and challenges for Commuter families, 2011) to investigate the overall challenges that this emerging commuting family lifestyle may exert upon commuters, their family and social relationships, as well their own personal psychosocial and health profile.

The present paper is a descriptive study based on the first research project carried out in Malaysia to survey the challenges faced by commuters and their families. The paper aimed to: (1) provide an overall description of commuters and their families in Malaysia, and (2) examine the impacts of perception of commuting on positive determination, and health behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies was used in the study. A quantitative descriptive survey was used to gather

general information from a large number of commuters, whereas the qualitative approach was used to get more in-depth information on some interesting patterns. The present paper is based on the data obtained from the questionnaire.

Procedure

The study was conducted in the Klang Valley, Malaysia, where a number of ministries, agencies, universities and private companies are located. Data were collected using a questionnaire that was distributed among the people using the interstate bus services located at Jalan Duta Bus Terminal, Bukit Jalil, Integrated Bus Terminal (TBS) and Kajang to return home during the weekends.

Copies of the simple questionnaire to gather the names and contacts of commuters and a brief pamphlet explaining the intended study were given out to the various bus service providers who were asked to distribute them in their respective buses. Those passengers who fulfilled the criteria of commuters and were interested to participate in the study were invited to give their contacts and to nominate other commuters in their workplace. Based on this information, the respective offices identified as having large number of commuters were contacted to request their permission to engage their staff in the study. Then, trained enumerators were sent to these offices to give out the set of questionnaires to the respondents. The snowballing technique was used to recruit a larger number of participants.

Sample

A pool of 293 respondents were identified. The respondents consisted of people commuting back to Klang Valley from their work. A total 226 commuters completed and returned the survey to the research team.

The study population consisted of 226 married commuters who lived separately from their families, and only went home on weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. More specifically, the sample comprised 136 married men and 90 married women working away from their home, husband and family. The mean age of the sample was 34.10 (SD= 8.21) years old, with 62.6% of them were working in the government sector.

Instrument and Measurements

The data were collected using a questionnaire that was specifically developed to enable researchers to gather information related to the challenges faced by commuters and their families and the impacts of these challenges. The questionnaire consists of eight (8) sections which include social demographic and economic backgrounds, family challenges, psychosocial, relationships, health and children development indicators, assessment of positive communication, moral values, and behavior of children. The researchers referred to previous studies and existing instruments to come up with the items that measured the intended constructs. These items were verified by a panel of experts in the field of this study. Meanwhile, the instrument was validated by a panel of psychologists and sociologists at Universiti

Putra Malaysia. Reliability analysis was conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument. All the items included in the questionnaire met the psychometric standards of a Cronbach's alpha of not less than 0.70; these have also been reported elsewhere (OLEH, 2011).

For the purpose of this study, psychosocial profile (α 0.76 No. Item=18) and personal health profile (α 0.78 No. Item=7) were used. The participants were asked to indicate using a 4-point Likert scale (strongly disagree- strongly agree) the changes they experienced since they started commuting and working away from home. These changes were classified as positive determination at work; general psychosocial profile and feeling of guilt. Similarly, the respondents indicated using a 4-point likert scale their personal health behaviour (strongly disagree; strongly agree) since they started commuting and working away from home. Table 1 summarizes the psychometric characteristics of the 4 scales.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and chi-square test of independence were used. The statistical analyses were conducted using IBM® SPSS® Statistics 21.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistical analysis, summarized in Table 1, indicates that around 60% of the commuters who took part in the studies were men, and that the majority of the sample was Malay (87.6%); Muslim (89.4%); aged below 30 years old

TABLE 1
Subscales' and scale's psychometric properties

Scale	Mean	SD	Reliability test**	No item	N
Positive determination at work	19.67	3.76	α 0.89	7	220
Stress and Anxiety	9.26	2.33	α 0.83	4	225
Felling of guilt	5.61	1.57	r. .99*	2	.218
Health behavior	15.09	2.97	α 0.78	7	90

** Cronbach's alpha; * for 2 items subscale the inter-item correlation (r.) was used as reliability test

(46.6%); and have been married for 1 to 5 years (39.9%).

Table 3 summarizes the respondent's work and home geographical location. Majority of the participants (44.2%) are working in Wilayah Persekutuan. As for the participants' home, where their spouse and family live, while 16.4% reported that they were living in Selangor, 13.8% in Perak, 13.8% in Kelantan and 13.3% in Terengganu.

Table 3 shows that the majority of the participants are working in the government sector (61.6%); have between 6 and 10 years of work experiences (34.7%), have been working away from their family between 1 to 3 years (45.3%), and have been travelling once a week to see their families (46.2%).

Based on the frequency analysis presented in Table 4, 44.4 percent of the respondents are working away from home because they are required by their employer, while the remaining 55.6% are working away from home by choice, i.e. to obtain better job opportunities (14.3%), chance for career advancement (13.9%) or better (20.6%) (Table 2). The frequency analysis showed that 80.6% of the male respondents

and 96.5% of the female respondents perceived commuter life as negative (*Chi-square* (1) = 11.40, $p < 0.001$).

TABLE 2
Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

Gender	N	%
Male	136	60.2
Female	90	39.8
Ethnicity		
Malay	198	87.6
Chinese	5	2.2
Indian	19	8.4
Religion		
Muslim	202	89.4
Hindu	3	1.3
Buddhist	16	7.1
Christian	5	2.2
Age group		
20-30 years old	104	46.6
31-40 years old	71	31.8
41-50 years old	38	17
>50 years old	10	4.5
Year of marriage		
< 1 year	28	14.1
1-5 years	79	39.9
6-10 years	37	18.7
11-20 years	36	18.2
> 20 years	18	9.1

TABLE 3
Respondents' geographical distribution

State where the spouse/family live	N	%	State where the respondents work	N	%
Selangor	37	16.4	Wilayah Persekutuan	99	44.2
Perak	31	13.8	Selangor	34	15.2
Kelantan	31	13.8	Pahang	22	9.8
Terengganu	30	13.3	Luar Negara	16	7.1
Wilayah Persekutuan	23	10.2	Melaka	10	4.5
Pahang	17	7.6	Johor	8	3.6
Johor	14	6.2	Negeri Sembilan	8	3.6
Melaka	14	6.2	Kedah	6	2.7
Negeri Sembilan	8	3.6	Kelantan	6	2.7
Kedah	8	3.6	Terengganu	5	2.2
Pulau Pinang	6	2.7	Perak	3	1.3
Sabah	3	1.3	Pulau Pinang	2	.9
Perlis	2	.9	Sabah	2	.9
Luar Negara	1	.4	Sarawak	2	.9

TABLE 4
Job and commuting profile

	N	%		N	%
Occupational sector			Frequency of travelling back to see the family		
Government sector	138	61.6	every week	104	46.2
Private sector	80	35.7	once a week	72	32.0
Self-employed	4	1.8	once a month	36	16.0
Work experience			every 2 months	8	3.6
1-5 years	70	31.1	every 6 months	4	1.8
6-10 years	78	34.7	once a year	1	0.4
11-20 years	40	17.8			
> 20 years	37	16.4			
Years of working away from home					
Less than 1 year	26	11.7			
1-3 years	101	45.3			
4-6 years	60	26.9			
7-9 years	14	6.3			
> 10 years	22	9.9			
Reason for commuting					
Better income	46	20.6			
Career advancement	31	13.9			
Required by the employers	99	44.4			
Get better jobs	32	14.3			

The respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived their commuter life. About 86.8% of them reported a negative perception of their commuting life. Table 5 shows that 48.1% of the respondents indicated they were required by their employers to work away from their homes (48.1%), while 30% of those who had a positive perception reported Career Development as the main reason for taking a job away from their family for their career development [Chi Square (4)= 10.13; $p=0.4$].

Regarding the family challenges faced after starting working away from home, gender was significantly associated with changes in the way the family decided about leisure, recreation and vacation activities. In more specific, while 71.4% of the male commuters reported no changes in the way they decided with their spouses about leisure and recreational matters, 59.1% of the female commuters reported to have conflicting views with their husband's when taking decisions on recreational and leisure matters (*Chi-square* (1)= 9.32, $p = 0.009$) (Table 6). The independent t-test analysis shows that men have generally been commuting for longer periods of time (4.95; SD= 4.60) than women have (3.08; SD=2.09), (t (213) =3.68; $p<0.001$), but no gender differences were found in the impact of commuting.

Table 7 summarizes the most commonly reported changes linked to working away. The most commonly reported was the impact on family relationship (43.45%) and the least reported was getting better income

(10%).

Significant differences were found between people with a positive perception or outlook of their commuting life and those with a negative perception of the commuting lifestyle. More specifically, those with a positive perception scored higher in positive determination ($M=21.69$; $SD=4.73$) compared to those with a negative perception (19.45; $D=3.48$), (t (211) = 2.94; $p=.004$). Meanwhile, the participants with a positive perception of commuter life reported to have lesser feeling of guilt (4.86; $SD=1.43$) than those with negative perception (5.71; $SD=1.42$); (t (210) = -2.99 $p= .003$); and better general health behaviour (49.96; $SD=7.67$) than those with negative perception of commuter life (48.22; $SD=5.04$); (t (90) =3.17; $p=.002$).

DISCUSSION

The present paper provides a descriptive analysis of the Malaysian commuting marriages and families. In particular, it explored the impacts of commuting among young commuter families in Malaysia. The results indicated that more men than women work away from their home and families. The findings also suggest that in Malaysia, working away from home are more often reason for working away as an imposition from employers than as a voluntary choice.

According to the literature, long distance commuting and/or working away from home is usually a decision and a choice made by commuters to improve their lifestyle and/or to peruse better opportunities and obtain higher family income (Glutzer & Federlein,

2007; Ferk, 2005). In contrast with what have been reported in the international literature, however, the majority of the commuters that took part in this study reported that working away from their home and families was not a choice they made, but rather an imposition from their employers. In Malaysia, for those working as government servant, it is normal to be instructed to transfer to different locations as part of their work. Particularly in this study,

majority of the respondents are government servants, and hence, commuting is perceived as an imposition.

Consequently, most people who took part in this study reported to have a negative perception of their commuting lifestyle. This finding might be explained by the fact that the majority of these commuters not only did not choose to work away from home and their families, but also that they did not receive any financial incentive or

TABLE 5
Reasons for working away from the family by those with positive and negative Perceptions

Negative perception	N	%	Positive perception	N	%
Getting a better job	25	13.2	Getting a better job	6	21.4
Better income	39	20.6	Better income	6	21.4
Career Development	22	11.6	Career Development	8	28.6
Required by employers	91	48.1	Required by employers	6	21.4

TABLE 6
Gender and perception of commuting and the challenges associated with it

Perception of commuter life	Deciding about leisure, recreation and vacation activities				
	Positive	Negative	Conflicting views	No change	Agreement
Male	26 19.4%	108 80.6%	9 40.9%	65 71.4%	62 55.4%
Female	3 3.5%	82 96.5%	13 59.1%	26 28.6%	50 44.6%

TABLE 7
Changes Reported by commuters

	N	(%)
Impacts on family relationships	63	43.45
Too many challenges and conflicts	50	34.48
Emotional Stress	19	13.10
Increased of living costs and spending	13	8.97
Improvement on quality of Life	5	16.7
Getting Experience	4	13.3
Becoming Independence	4	13.3
Getting better income	3	10

stipend to cover commuting expenses such as accommodation, transport or food while working away from their hometown. Most of these commuters also reported that they have been working away from their spouse and young children for more than half of their marriage life, and this might be another reason for their negative perception of commuting and/or working away from home. Interestingly, although most changes associated to commuting and working away from home were perceived as negative, there were no significant negative implications for commuters' family challenges, psychosocial profile or well-being.

An interesting finding, however, was the fact that only significant gender differences were found in this study; decision regarding leisure, recreation and vacation activities. Commuter women reported to have conflicting views when taking decisions on recreational and leisure matters, that is, they did not agree with their husbands' choices or decision. This suggests the possibility of resistance, from these women working away from home, to accept changes in their traditional gender roles at home. Conventionally, women are the ones who have the responsibility of making decisions about household matters, childcare and maintaining the emotional and organizational functioning of their families (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Williams, 2000; McGoldrick, 1999; Walsh, 1999; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Therefore, in societies where traditional gender roles are fundamental for women's social identity, they may find it difficult to let go of their

care-taker role and/or their status as the decision maker in their domestic life.

Although there were not significant gender differences on the commuting impact of individual's well-being, there were significant differences between those with a positive perception of their commuting life in comparison to those with a negative perception. That is, people with a positive perception of commuting have a significantly better scores in positive determination at work and in health behaviour scales than those with negative perception of commuter life, and reported less feeling of guilt than those with negative perception of commuter life.

Nonetheless, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow examining whether these differences might be a product of the negative or positive affectiveness of commuters, or if, indeed, their perception of commuting impacts their overall wellbeing. Furthermore, although in this paper the financial constrains of commuting were not examined, it seemed plausible that these commuter families might be facing financial turbulence due to the extra expenses that commuting brings to their family.

According to the literature, commuting is chosen when it compensates either family or job situation. However, the findings of this study suggest that commuting benefits neither of these two important spheres in a person's life. Moreover, it can be argued that overtime these young commuters will experience health problems, unbalanced

well-being and financial burden as a result of their imposed commuter lifestyle. Therefore, the emerging commuter family dynamics and the extend of its impacts on work-home life balance demands for dual income commuter families and migration patterns among young Malaysian families represent new areas of research that need to be further investigated. Furthermore, future research could focus on how the family members adapt to the changes that emerge from being a commuter family/marriage. This is another related topic that can be a longitudinal survey of the changes overtime in commuter families and marriages and the implications for family dynamics and children positive development.

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