

False expectation determines if return journey feels shorter than outward one

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Just back from holiday? The chances are you felt that the journey home by plane, car or train went much quicker than the outward journey, even though in fact both distances and journey times are usually the same. So why the difference? Now it has been scientifically demonstrated why the return journey appears to be shorter than the outward one. Our expectation about the duration of the journey was found to be the determining factor.

That the return journey is often considered shorter than the outward journey depends on the extent to which [travellers](#) assess the outward journey as longer than expected. 'People often underestimate how long the outward journey takes and this is therefore experienced as long,' says Niels van de Ven from Tilburg University (Netherlands). 'Based on that feeling the traveller expects the return journey to be long as well, and this then turns out to be shorter than expected.' An overoptimistic prior [estimation](#) of the journey time therefore leads to the [illusion](#) of the return journey being shorter.

This conclusion was based on a study in which almost 360 people were interviewed. Some of these were visitors to the Efteling amusement park and the Dutch equivalent of the ideal home exhibition, who made their outward and return journeys by coach via the same route. Others were students who made the same outward and return journeys by bike. A final group of students were shown videos of outward and return journeys made by bike that had the same distance and [duration](#). When the duration estimates were compared, respondents stated that on

average, the return journey felt 22% faster than the outward journey.

Up until now, a popular explanation for the return journey feeling shorter was that it was better known and so more predictable than the outward journey. However in their study, the researchers have demonstrated that this explanation is unlikely. They established that the 'return journey effect' also applied to [respondents](#) who made a different (unknown, but not longer) return journey. Therefore, you do not need to recognise a route to experience the effect.

Ultimately, the researchers hope to be able to explain more than just this return journey effect. Niels van de Ven: 'With this research we can also make new predictions about how long things feel. For example, I predict that if the same film is seen twice then the second occasion will feel shorter, even though most people would expect the second time to feel longer because it is more boring.'

The results from the study were published this week in the journal *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*. The article can be consulted [online](#).

More information: Van de Ven N, van Rijswijk L and Roy MM (2011) The return trip effect: Why the return trip often seems to take less time. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*. DOI 10.3758/s13423-011-0150-5

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