

**Our time now?: Entitlement and post retirement leisure travel**

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Paper prepared for DEMAND Centre Conference, Lancaster, 13-15 April 2016

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### **Abstract**

Retirement increases leisure time and with the greater availability of time often comes for many people the possibility of travel of all kinds whether it is for its own sake, as in tourism, or in order to engage in other leisure activities or to spend time with friends. Various surveys seem to indicate that older cohorts are increasing their travel relative to other age groups, although the picture is somewhat fragmented. At the same time the baby boomer generation, much discussed as a generation characterised by unprecedented levels of consumption, is now retiring amid predictions that they will usher in a new era of hedonistic third agers who are anything but retiring.

In this paper we are interested in expectations of retirement and the place of leisure travel in this. Our discussion is based on a qualitative study of three cohorts of older people in the UK - one soon to retire, one recently retired, and one older cohort who have been retired for some time. The research was based around serial in depth interviews about leisure travel of different types through the life course and into retirement and older age. Here, we focus on the aspirations for and expectations of retirement as a particular phase of life, and the place of different kinds of travel within that. The notion of retirement as a time of personal fulfilment and reward is certainly present, but to what extent and with what implications for travel and resultant energy demand?

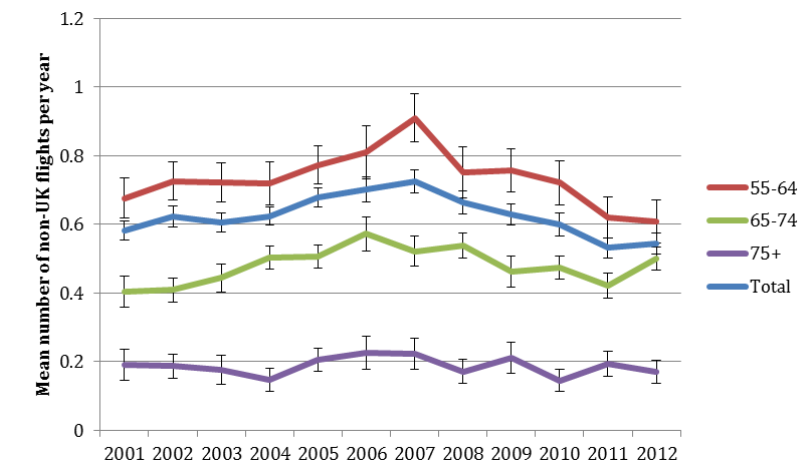
### **Introduction**

Retiring from formal work would seem to increase leisure time; and with the greater availability of time comes for many people the possibility of travel of all kinds, whether for long distance holidays or more local days out, or trips to see friends and family. Our interest in this paper is in the extent to which certain forms of travel have come to take centre stage in how retirement is thought about in the UK, why, and with what implications for future energy demand. We are particularly interested in this topic because many would seem to be of the view that that older people will soon be travelling more than ever before. Much has been said about this particularly with respect to the apparent baby boomer generation whose members have been coming into retirement for the last few years. They are assumed to share a certain view of life that makes them self-pleasing, pleasure seeking, hedonistic consumers and this is predicted to translate into significant amounts of leisure travel for personal fulfilment. At the same time, the numbers of older people are growing in the UK as they are more generally around the world. This would also suggest that, irrespective of generational dispositions, older people will likely be more significant consumers of travel related energy simply by virtue of the fact that there are more of them. Finally, in the UK specifically, there are new concerns that it is now more feasible for older people to realise any self-indulgent travel ambitions that they might have, since new pension arrangements now allow them to 'draw down' pension monies as tax free lump sums that can be spent on occasional things, rather than keeping them locked into annuity investments designed to support regular living expenses over time. So, if the Boomer generation is big and people are living longer we could be seeing significant amounts of future leisure travel on the horizon. This, at least, was one underpinning contention to our study, which sought to examine how and whether later life leisure mobility was being reconfigured as a hotspot of energy intensive social change.

The evidence we found on this topic from quantitative surveys and traces of actual activity presented a more mixed picture, however. The British International Passenger Survey (IPS) shows that in 2012 Britons aged 65 and over made fewer trips (6 million) and spend less (£4 million) abroad than other adults except those aged 16-24. But for those aged 55 to 64 years, the gap is smaller.

They still made fewer visits (8.5 million) and spent less (£5.4 million) but the evidence suggests that this younger, baby-boomer, cohort is much more engaged in tourism. The UK living costs and food survey shows a general rise in the figures for over 65s flying out of the UK (see figure 1). While also showing that the over 65s proportionately make up less of the travelling population than most of the rest of the age groups surveyed, their proportion has increased from 2001 to 2012. With retirement, however, it is likely that most of the travel of the older age groups will be leisure related, whilst at least some of the travel of younger groups is likely to be work related.

**From the UK Living Costs and Food survey:**



Though in the above graphic, it would seem that older generations have been slightly less affected in their travel by the economic recession from 2007 onwards, and that their travel is increasing relative to other age groups, based on this measure of international travel there is little indication of a massive increase in later life leisure travel.

Over and above evidence of trends and anxieties about potential change, we should also be aware of how society is talking about the rightful role of travel in retirement. Here we find various discourses which generally see it as a good thing, rather uncritically. Probably chief amongst them is the ‘active ageing’ discourse in which older people are encouraged to stay active to stave off all manner of physical and mental declines associated with ageing. This is also appealing in public policy terms as good public health in older age will potentially cut, or defer the costs of dependency. In any case, the idea that successful ageing means ageing ‘actively’ through various activities including travel would seem to be increasingly entrenched. Linked with this is the notion that mobility is a good thing for older people, which although starting from a focus on everyday mobility, might also underpin a general sense that all kinds of mobility in older age are good (see Hitchings et al. 2016). There is also a sense that retirement is a time for self-fulfilment and reward, as seen in various advertising campaigns. The below, for example, encourages older people to see travel as the essence of a ‘perfect’ retirement (as marketers attempt to tap into the suggestion of the potential boom in later life leisure travel we discussed above):



What we don't really know in all this is the extent to which older people themselves might subscribe to, take up or in some way be influenced by such discourses and how, through those means, energy demand through leisure travel comes about. How do they see the place of travel in retirement for them, and what is it for? To what extent do they see it as a right or entitlement, and what bearing does this have on their practice? Is there an evolving practice of retirement travel, fuelled by such notions and discourses?

### **On norms, entitlement and energy use**

According to the guiding propositions sustaining the DEMAND centre, to which our project belongs, energy is consumed in the course of accomplishing social practices (in our case, we take this to mean leisure travel) and the systems associated with these practices reproduce interpretations of need and entitlement, and of normal and acceptable ways of life. In our paper we want to take a closer look at the relationship between two of these ideas: those associated with 'entitlement' and those associated with what is 'normal' and 'acceptable'. We do so because the relationship between these two seems to be crucial to appreciating what our data has to say. One of this is about what is done, what is normal to do, and what we feel other people are doing as part and parcel of belonging to society. The other is about what people should be allowed to do, what they deserve and what, at an undefined point in the future they should be 'entitled' or permitted to do

### **Our study**

We reflect on this issue, drawing on a study of 60 older person households in London and Birmingham, UK. These households comprised both singles and couples and were in either a higher social class group or a lower social class group. They were in three age cohorts; one in their 50s, soon to retire; one in their 60s and recently retired, and one 75 plus and retired for at least 10 years. All households were interviewed twice for around an hour: the first interview was based around current travel practices and meanings of travel, and the second around how their travel practices

and related expectations had changed throughout their past and what were their expectations and plans for future leisure travel. The point was to run with ideas about the value of a 'lifecourse' perspective on their travel and associated energy demand. How might an in-depth study of how relevant discourses and desires related to leisure travel in later life took shape in the lives of our respondents help us to understand how travel related energy demand comes about?

In the following sections we report on our findings with particular regard to the relationship between 'expectation' and 'action' as our respondents came to travel in the ways they do.

## **Comparing our discussions and wider discourses**

### 1. Active travel in later life

A common theme in our discussions when considering the importance of travel, both to themselves and in general, and the expressed value of travel – of various kinds – related to the value of keeping active and interested in life, and to stave off decline. More generally, if asked, across the board the notion that 'travel' more generally was a good thing for 'people' was repeated to us. Travel helped to broaden minds, to see other cultures and to take people outside of their normal lives. No one was against travel, per se. But for older people specifically, this was clearly bolstered by an acceptance or internalisation of the active ageing discourse, and the sense that mobility is important for older people in particular. The spectre of vegetating at home on front of the TV was sometimes brought up as the opposite scenario, that which might await them if they were not active enough – they could get 'stuck in a rut' and so they probably needed to show they could still 'get out there and do it.' It was therefore particularly recommended for those who were older.

I think you've got to watch yourself because you can get into a lazy routine. Getting up late and things like that. I think you've got to watch that. I do think travel is good for you. I think it opens your mind and it gets you moving and you see different things. So I would recommend it for anybody when they get older.

**Barbara, Birmingham, 75+ higher social class**

Indeed when others in later life did so, they could almost attain the status of a local celebrity. A number of respondents talked of individuals they knew who did great a deal of travel despite being in later life, and there was general approval of this. They were showing their continued capability in a way that set an example to others.

The question that followed was the extent to which this fed through into their actions. Though when respondents were asked whether older people 'should' travel in later life, the answer to be reached for (perhaps in a relatively uncritical deployment of the most socially acceptable position) was generally a clear 'yes'. Yet when we considered the extent to which these wider beliefs about the value of later life travel influenced their own actions, the picture was more varied. There was apparently quite a difference between motivations for the youngest cohort who were not yet retired and those for the older two cohorts. For the younger ones, travel was often about relaxing, destressing, getting away from work; and also spending quality time with their children. Personal circumstances were trumping wider notions of health benefits and public approval. For the older ones it was more about enjoyment, learning, having new experiences and staying stimulated, as well as sometimes keeping in touch with people. In this sense, the active ageing discourse was more clearly present. There's no doubt that for all of them travel was often, just about pleasure and enjoyment, whatever form that took for them. So there was a distinction here that ran along the lines of: other people should do it, but I do it because I want to? The discourse of 'active ageing' was embraced and connected to other older people (who were generally referred to as 'them', rather

than us, as our respondents sometimes implicitly sought to distance themselves from the idea of belonging to age-defined categories of person).

## 2. Reaping retirement travel rewards

Linked with the idea of de-stressing and having a break from work though is the notion that retirement is a release from work and a time when you might reap your rewards. This did come up sometimes; it was an idea that was expressed more by people in the lower social cohorts, although its hard to conclude from our sample that this was a clear relationship – but its perhaps a plausible interpretation that people in lower social classes, as defined by their previous occupation, did not see their jobs so much as being about personal fulfilment, and therefore might have more of a sense of retirement as being a phase of life where reward and fulfilment came.

“[leisure travel] is very important especially when you retire because when you're retired you've got to have some kind of a nice life to make up for all the years you worked.”

**Connie, Cohort 3 lower income**

But again this was often a largely idealised notion that was often removed from how they thought of their own actions. Some even characterised it as something they should remind themselves to do rather than something they prioritised. The idea of this being a time for them to enjoy themselves through travel was not one that connected strongly in the majority to how they talked about their own activities were organised. The same seemed true when discussing the idea of a travel ‘bucket list’ (a relatively recent cultural idea in which people are thought to decide upon, and then tick off, the things they want to do and places they want to see whilst they are still physically able in later life), this led to various idealised notions of where they might like to go. It was almost as if we were saying where would you go ‘if you won the lottery’ and so the response was the rehearsal of places deemed exotic and impressive – Dubai, travels down the Nile, going up Mount Kilimanjaro. These were not things they felt they necessarily deserved – if anything, they were ideals to live up to.

When it came to actual travel, respondents were more likely to travel in the ways to which they had become accustomed or which have emerged as sensible for them in light of the circumstances. Particularly for our older two cohorts (who were already living out retirement and therefore perhaps less likely to think about it in idealised terms), personal circumstances with regard to money, time, family pressures and health loomed large. Similarly, the idea of retirement itself was often rather slippery in our discussions. The idea of a discrete, discernible change that might potentially usher in a new phase of enjoyable travel was not strongly present. This was partly because various activities that seemed to constitute some form of work or obligation were taken to persist (from continued paid employment to voluntary work to looking after family members). It was also partly about a reluctance to embrace the idea that later life was otherwise unoccupied - our respondents had things to do already – there were things still to be getting on with and life was much more than an otherwise empty container to be filled up with new travel experiences. Indeed if the gap between idealised fantasy bucket lists and personal practices was to be overcome, this often came through observations of friends and family members going to far flung places in ways that ‘gave them ideas’ about doing something similar. Sometimes it seemed the idea was stronger with others around our respondents who might encourage them to do more daring travel (such as family members who were keen on older relatives demonstrating they were likely to be around for some time yet through these means), rather than respondents eagerly waiting for what retirement would allow. In any case, some work was evidently required here to bridge idealised notions of retirement as a time of enjoyable travel and how our respondents tended to think about their own actions.

So although there was a sense of general entitlement on behalf of retired people, ideas of personal entitlement were thin on the ground. That's not to say that people didn't feel entitled to travel if they could afford it and wanted to. If retirement was to be understood as 'their time now' (an idea that some had good reason to resist), it was 'their time' in terms of it being matter of individuals doing what they personally wanted to do, not simply embracing the idea that this was time to travel.

### 3. Travel rights and personal requirements

I don't see that it's everybody's right actually. It's just something nice to do. It's not everybody's cup of tea and no, I don't think that people should be raiding their pensions to go travelling such that they then find themselves having used up their whole pension pot irresponsibly.

**Hannah London C1 higher Income**

The idea of travel as a retirement 'right' was rare in our study. Though 'older people' (as discussed above) should ideally do it, if they can, there was no sense that they should be facilitated in doing so, over and above what was possible in terms of their own financial means and individual circumstances. This was a sentiment that was strongly evident in our interviews. And, with regards to the former, a sense of financial responsibility was on the whole quite strong. Some felt that they were entitled to spend their money rather than leave it to children for example, or without worrying too much. But wider worries about people taking money out of their pension pot since the new laws allow it, and spending it irresponsibly on travel and other things, were not largely borne out among our interviewees who were not so inclined to be, as they saw it, irresponsible. So based on our participants, wider anxieties about profligate pensioners spending their retirement monies on travel at the outset irrespective of the consequences would seem to be unfounded. Over and above how such spending sprees emerged as idealised constructions in the discussions detailed earlier, there was also a widespread sense of the importance of being sensible with personal finances.

Building on the point about rights, when we discussed what it would be like to go without significant amounts of leisure travel it initially seemed that respondents had a strong sense of this being crucial to their lives – perhaps not quite a right, but a requirement of a happy retirement life. But, on close inspection of their responses, it seemed that 'travel' was here being framed as getting out of the house (in something of an inversion of how leisure travel was often taken to indicate holidays that were often further afield in other discussions). This related as much, if not more, to days out and less distant travel. The thing that was feared actually on the whole was being housebound, not being able to really go out at all, rather than restriction in more distant travel. There were some individuals and households (and actually couples didn't always agree on this) who felt they would find it very hard to give up further holidays and longer distance travel, but many felt that they would adapt reasonably well to restricted travel, but not to being housebound

I: And what would it be like if you couldn't travel as much as you do now?

R: I would go off for days. I couldn't stay in and not get... I love the outdoors, as I say I used to do a lot of walking, I love the outdoors. And really in the past if I'd got nobody to go with I'd take off somewhere for the day, go to a village and park and have a coffee and have a walk round.

**Gerry, London C 3, Higher Income**

Several older respondents had in fact already found they didn't feel like longer distance travel so much, as they found it tiring and a faff. Some just didn't get around to travel of greater distances for various reasons. Most when asked more specifically about whether they could cope with reduced amounts of leisure travel (in terms of weekends away, day trips and holidays) approached this suggestion in a relatively sanguine way.

### **Conclusion: On entitlement and action**

In this paper, we have started to explore how two key ideas from the DEMAND centre – those of how later life leisure travel is thought about and how it is lived – found form in our discussions. We saw how wider suggestions of travel being important in terms of 'active ageing', travel being reframed as the 'essence' of an ideal retirement, and travel being seen as 'right' for older people took shape in our discussions. The point we now want to emphasise in conclusion is about attending to the subtleties of how these various wider discourses do or don't organise the lives of our respondents. For example, entitlements, it would seem, may be all well and good, but life after retirement is often different from the ideal, as well as diverse among different people and recognising this helps us to understand how changes in later life leisure travel (and their associated energy demand) do, or do not, come about. The commentators might be saying that later life travel could be important and to an extent our respondents would agree with them. But the extent to which that translates into action is another matter entirely. Through these means we start to see how our data is in a position to feed into and help us understand the relatively equivocal picture of a boom in later life travel that began our discussion.

Hitchings, R. Venn, S. and Day, R. (2016) Assumptions about later life leisure travel and their implications: pushing people around? *Ageing and Society* (forthcoming)