

Demanding distances in later life leisure travel

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on a serial interview study of later life leisure travel in the UK to question how a wider trend towards holidaying further afield has come to feature in the lives of three cohorts of older Britons. Drawing on theories of social practice that see notions of desirable activity as produced through the interplay of opportunities to engage in relevant activities, collective apprehensions of what doing these activities should involve, and the physical capacities necessarily required to undertake them, we examine their leisure travel in two regards. Firstly, we consider how evolving social and infrastructural arrangements are effectively demanding greater distance travel in the sense that they shape what socially desirable leisure travel is taken to entail at certain points in time. Secondly, we examine how distance travel may be physically demanding in the sense that older bodies may be particularly likely to face certain challenges when they travel. This strategy allows us to examine how broader social expectations regarding distance travel have become part of the lives of older Britons and the manner in which they are currently reconciling them with both the anticipation and the experience of bodily ageing. We end with the implications of our findings for the future of later life leisure travel as a potential hotspot of growing societal energy demand and the further application of social practice theory in view of the evidently variable capacities of human bodies.

1. Introduction

Whilst, on a global level, international leisure travel is still reserved for the privileged few, it has become much more widespread over the last century. In the UK, for example, the number of times people holidayed abroad rose from 2.6 million in 1961 to 36.4 million in 2010 (ONS, 2011: 10). It is also true that Britons are travelling further. For example, at 15.7% in 1990 and 23.4% in 2010 an increasing percentage of all the journeys abroad were to destinations beyond the UK and the rest of Europe (*i.e.* beyond Europe) (ONS, 2011: 10). It seems that an expansion of leisure travel (both holidays and visits to friends and family) rather than business travel explains a lot of this increase and that increasingly leisure travel means going beyond what might be understood as the ‘traditional’ choices of Europe and North America (see Fig. 1) (IPS, 2001–2014).² With tourism’s continuously expanding greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in which long-haul travel has a particularly large contribution (Gossling, 2015; Luzecka, 2016) both these trends are worrying in environmental terms. To give just one

example, one return flight from Europe to Australia produces carbon dioxide emissions equivalent to the global per capita average for an entire year (Hall et al., 2015: 223).

These trends will, however, unlikely be experienced in the same way by all sectors of society and, in this regard, one group particularly worth understanding would seem to be older people – which this paper takes as 60+. Not only are populations in developed economies (and indeed globally) ageing (Harper, 2014), but in countries like the UK, many older people currently have sizeable financial assets and disposable incomes (ILC, 2015). Retirement from paid work also frees up time, potentially leading to more travel opportunities being taken (Nimrod, 2008). Furthermore, as well as having particular resources in terms of time and money, the generation now entering retirement, the much-discussed ‘baby-boomers’, have been heralded as bringing with them a new set of aspirations and expectations for later life fulfilment (Leach et al., 2008). These are arguably quite different from those of preceding cohorts and are, on the whole, expected to involve greater consumption (Street and Crossman, 2006; Venn et al., 2015).

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² Business trips to outside UK, Europe and North America were just 1.1% of overall visits abroad in 2001 and 1.5% in 2014 whereas leisure travel to outside those regions accounted for 8.9% in 2001 and 13.6 in 2014 – total leisure travel was 46million in 2001 and 51.7million in 2014 (IPS, 2001–2014).

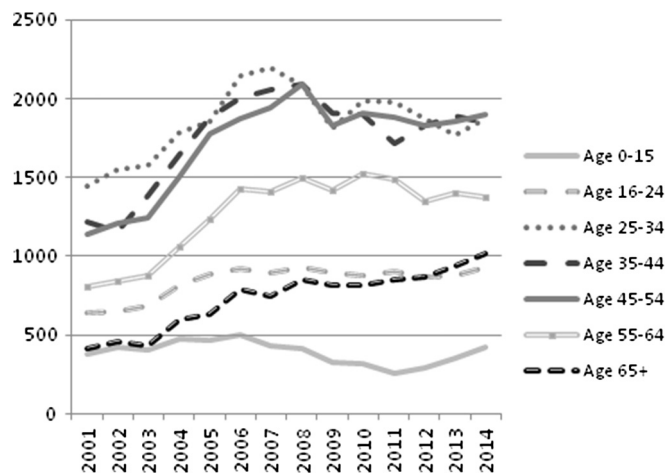


Fig. 1. International Passenger Survey (IPS) Data on UK residents visits to countries outside Europe and North America (trip numbers are in the thousands).

Accordingly, the travel industry has become increasingly keen on exploiting this market by presenting retirement as a time for travel (Hudson, 2010). So, although not yet representing the largest consumers of overseas travel, the leisure travel of older people and especially those who have retired, could easily be seen as a hotspot of growing societal energy demand, and by implication greenhouse gas emissions, in the UK.

Nevertheless, and though a broader societal ‘glamorization’ of travel encourages us to downplay these aspects (Cohen and Gössling, 2015), long distance travel can evidently be physically taxing. Furthermore, older bodies might be particularly likely to face certain challenges in this regard, as medical researchers have emphasised (Cooper, 2006). In view of these alternative considerations, presenting older people as a boundless market for distance leisure travel suddenly appears rather naïve. Echoing existing arguments regarding the marketing of retirement villages (McHugh, 2003) and the broader societal impact of ‘active ageing’ agendas (Walker, 2002) that may be putting older people under undue pressure to be demonstrably leading ‘active’ lives (Pike, 2011), it is worth recognising the tendency of tourism scholars and the travel industry to gloss over the bodily limitations that for many are part of the reality of ageing (Hitchings et al., in press). The anticipation and experience of bodily change in later life could quite possibly act as a brake on the expansion of leisure travel in this demographic.

This is the tension that we explore in this paper – how a trend towards more distance leisure travel by UK residents has been responded to by older people in this country and how they are reconciling this with the lived realities of physical ageing. Empirically we do this by drawing on a study with three cohorts of older Britons: one group approaching retirement, another relatively recently retired, and a third that has been retired for some time. Conceptually we do this with reference to aspects of social practice theory as a body of increasingly influential work which attempts to fully embed human action in its social and material circumstances. In particular, we draw on Schatzki’s (1996) notion of the ‘field of possibility’. This concept particularly highlights how notions of personally desirable activity are produced through a process of change that is at once cultural (in the sense that broader societal ideas and expectations serve to create and sustain them) and material (in the sense that acting on them requires certain infrastructural arrangements and physical capacities). Using this concept, we argue, puts us in a position to consider distance leisure travel in two ways:

1. The first relates to the *demanding of distance*: how wider changes in the manner in which society defines desirable destinations are effectively serving to demand greater distance trips. Here we

examine how new opportunities for, and broader social participation in, longer distance leisure travel has acted to influence the travel of our study participants.

2. The second concerns how *distances are demanding*: how the doing of distance leisure travel places demands on older bodies that are, as a generality, less robust than their younger equivalents. Our interest here is in how the wider demand for distances is reconciled with the lived and expected changes in physical capacity that generally accompany ageing.

In response to the suggestion that many older people could be travelling more and further for leisure purposes, we provide an appreciation of how distance leisure travel has already come to feature in the lives of older Britons. We do this as part of a broader research agenda that situates energy demand as ‘part of’ the ways in which recognisable social activities – in our case, leisure travel – come to change over time (Shove and Walker, 2014: 51). Undertaking this exercise allows us to speculate on the future of later life leisure travel and how, in response to suggestions of its growing energy demand, it may be influenced. It also prompts us to argue for greater attention to the variable capacity of human bodies in further studies that draw on theories of social practice.

2. Understanding the trends and trials of distance travel in later life

In the UK, there has been a clear increase in trips beyond Europe and North America by those aged 65+ since 2000 (see Fig. 1). Whilst they make up less of the travelling population than most other age groups, their overall trip numbers beyond those regions have increased at a greater rate for the over 65s than younger adults and these figures were less negatively affected than most other age groups by this country’s recent economic recession. We might also assume that a greater proportion of the trips taken by over 65s will be for leisure purposes since retirees are less likely to be travelling for work.

This is not, however, to start by confirming the existence of a later life leisure travel boom. Other sources would suggest the picture is much more mixed. The UK Living Costs and Food Survey, for example, produces a much flatter trend in numbers of flights for holiday and leisure purposes taken by older cohorts over 65 (ONS, 2001 to 2012/2013). As the LCFS surveys the general population (rather than just the travelling population) it suggests that the rising IPS figures, linked to the numbers passing through UK air and sea ports, might be skewed by some older travellers who are travelling particularly often. Nonetheless, having recognised these features, it is still clearly the case that we have seen a trend towards greater distance leisure travel amongst older Britons. In understanding this apparent trend, we argue that the two features on which this paper focuses deserve more attention.

2.1. How collective arrangements prescribe individual actions

Most research on the experience of distance leisure travel in later life has been undertaken in tourism studies. The objective of this work has commonly been defined as providing a better understanding of this market so that it can be better exploited by those in the industry (Hitchings et al., in press). Though some tourist marketers have been reticent about targeting older people because of broader societal age stigmas (Hudson, 2010), much of this work aims to help them reposition leisure travel as ‘the essence of retirement’ (Weiss, 2005). Some of the research strategies that have been most common here involve survey studies and segmentation methods that serve to badge imagined groups of older travellers with distinct sets of attributes that marketers can exploit (Morgan and Levy, 1993; Moschis, 1996; You and O’Leary, 1999). Whilst a number of important features of later life travel are necessarily downplayed by this approach (Sedgley et al., 2011), in this paper we want to particularly highlight how travel desires

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