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Demanding distances in later life leisure travel

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

While, 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 numbers 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).¹ 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 & Crossman, 2006, Venn et al, 2015 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 & 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, 2016). 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.

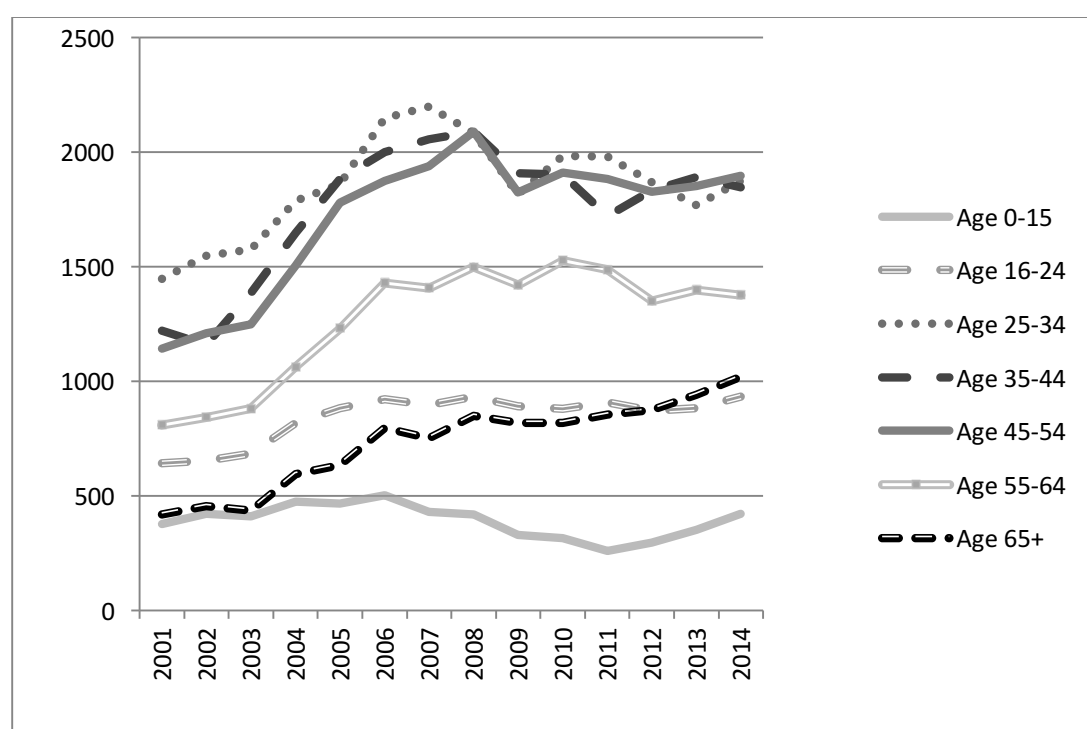
2. The second concerns how *distances are demanding*: how the doing of distance leisure travel places demands on older bodies that are, as a generality, less robust than their younger equivalents. Our interest here is in how the wider demand for distances is reconciled with the lived and expected changes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

Figure 1: International Passenger Survey (IPS) Data on UK residents visits to countries outside Europe and North America*



* Trip numbers are in the thousands

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. 2016). 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 & Levy, 1993; Moschis, 1996; You & 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 may be at least as much an outcome of responding to wider changes in collective arrangements as of the supposed traits of the individual.

2.2 How distance travel can be physically taxing

In line with a wider societal glamorisation of travel, studies of later life travel have often also been relatively silent on the ‘dark side’ of travel (Cohen & Gössling, 2015) with regard to the corporeal stresses of undertaking it. If anything, the above studies have tended to present a cheery picture of new generations of older people who are determinedly indifferent to physical stresses (Patterson & Pegg, 2009). Where it does feature is in the discussion of ‘soft adventure’ tourism, which highlights how, though some see older travellers as increasingly dauntless, older people continue to worry about risk and physical capability (Muller & Cleaver, 2000; Patterson & Pegg, 2009). There have also been occasional medical discussions about how the health of older travellers could be safeguarded by, for example, encouraging them to do certain exercises before long plane journeys (Cooper, 2006) or even

screening them before long haul flights (Low et al, 2002). Yet though the medical concerns that underpin these suggestions are well founded, they have rarely been of great interest to relevant tourism researchers. This is partly because they do not sit well with an upbeat vision of an expanding market of older people who can't wait to start 'zooming' (Hudson, 2010) around the world.

3. Researching leisure travel through the 'field of possibility'

This paper addresses these issues by drawing on aspects of social practice theory as a body of work that places particular emphasis on the practical, corporeal, social and material dimensions of human responsiveness to the world (Schatzki, 1996, 2002; Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al., 2015). This work positions individual action as belonging to a societal system wherein shared social 'practices' - understood simply as recurrent and recognizable activities that are reproduced by groups of practitioners - mutate in response to the circumstances that surround them and their collective performance. Many popular approaches to the study of human action have been heavily critiqued for reproducing an overly individualizing vision of why people perceive and behave as they do and, in recent years, practice theory has been garnering an increasing amount of attention as a potentially better means of appreciating how individual human actions are grounded in relevant social and material contexts (Shove, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Davies et al., 2014, Kuijer & Bakker, 2015).

Having proved a particular source of inspiration for those interested in how increasingly resource intensive lifestyles come about (Shove & Spurling, 2013; Heisserer & Rau, 2015; Strengers and Maller, 2016) it is unsurprising that researchers have started to look at distance leisure travel through a practice theory lens. Gap-year travel (typically involves a year spent on overseas projects and travelling before starting University), for example, has been repositioned through these means as a product of how teachers, parents, university tutors and previous participants collectively create a context in which long-haul travel at this time becomes doable and desirable for younger people (Luzecka, 2016). We have also seen how, as regular flying becomes normalised, it can simultaneously become a constituent part of other practices such as celebrating birthdays or getting married, thereby

“ratcheting” up the frequency with which flying features in customary social occasions (Randles & Mander, 2009). Then there is Hui’s (2013) study of leisure subcultures which reveals how, far from being a straightforward matter of personal desire, more travelling may rather be a requirement of greater participation in identified hobby communities.

Adding to this body of work on travel demand, this paper draws on Schatzki’s (1996) concept of the ‘field of possibility’² (p186-7) as an idea which places particular emphasis on the facilitative and restrictive effects of the social and material arrangements that surround and constitute identified practices (Heisserer, 2013). In this respect, the field encompasses not only all that is possible for practitioners to do, but also how, for some practitioners and potential practice recruits, certain possibilities are more feasible and conceivable than others. Understood in this way, sets of materials, knowledge and ability, rules and customs, and normative and emotive dimensions concerning the practice interact to order and organize, broaden or narrow the possibilities for how and whether a practice is to be undertaken (Schatzki, 1996: 161, 163, 166-7). Together these constituents comprise the “commonalities”, such as road-use in driving, and co-ordinated actions, competing interpretations and multiple settings, such as a holiday’s origin and destination (Schatzki, 1996: p186-7, 190-1), which make practices recognizable and shape our normative and expectative horizons towards them. In this regard, the field could help us to simultaneously grasp the experience of the collective (dynamic but shared apprehensions of what particular practices should entail) and of subsets of the collective (how their circumstances shape how particular groups respond to these apprehensions).

If we start to analyse UK leisure travel in these terms, we immediately see a powerful series of changes that have contributed to transformations in the speed and ease with which places are reached in recent times. Motorways arrived in the 1950s (Roth & Divall, 2015) and since then we have seen quicker and easier access to local airports (ONS, 2011: 12) and affordable overseas package tours becoming much more commonplace through the 1980s (ONS, 2011: 17, 19). Of particular interest in this regard is how the collective doing of travel is itself influential of the practice of travel since more

people engaging in travel can transform the way it is perceived and the sense among a wider public of whether they should do it too. In this sense, as Shove and colleagues (2009) have argued, this is not simply a case of infrastructures dictating practice. Rather the relationship is recursive as practices also impose their presence upon the world and shape the space and time of their own existence.

In terms of the material dimensions that shape the emergence and development of practices, proponents of practice theory have already recognised the importance of equipment (Heisserer, 2013: 81) and infrastructures (Shove et al., 2015). However, a feature of the ‘field of possibility’ concept about which less has been said is the role of competence in terms of how what is conceivable to do rests on the physical capacity for doing it. Shove and Pantzar (2005) have pointed to the importance of “competence” in terms of how practices rely on skills and a relatively tacit know-how that is often embodied in the practitioner. In this sense, participating is clearly corporeally prescribed in terms of what specific bodies are physically capable of doing. Yet, so far in the practice literature, the presumption is often of a mass of able-bodied individuals who make readily available practice recruits, needing only to learn the skills required to carry them out. This is not, however, to suggest practice theory is necessarily incapable of accommodating these features.³ Rather it is to contend that they have not yet been a significant focus of attention for those using these concepts and, in order to address this, the field of possibility idea could be quite helpful through its recognition of how what gets done depends upon diverse competences. In this respect, our aim therefore is to deepen the discussion of physical competence in practice theory by highlighting the role of corporeal restriction, and the negotiation thereof, in practitioner recruitment since clearly not all bodies can ably engage in all practices.

Some recent arguments in this field have started to gesture in this direction. From a social justice perspective, Walker (2015) has discussed the need to integrate ‘capability’ into practice theory by examining how practices can act to include and exclude particular groups. He argues that, despite the conceptual awareness of diversity in practice theory, in empirical application and in attempting to

discern the broader strokes of how practices evolve, this work can downplay the practice-related inequalities of different practitioners and social groups. Wallenborn and Wilhite (2014) have similarly called for researchers to pay more attention to the body in this field. They especially highlight the ‘extended materiality’ of the body in the sense that the ability of bodies to carry out certain practices rests on the facilitative and restrictive effects of the infrastructures that they inhabit. Our contribution is to take this forward through an empirical case highlighting how changes in bodily capacity is anticipated and experienced. In this sense, the ‘field of possibility’ approach allows us to capture how variable physical capacity features in what becomes understood as ‘doable’ for certain people.

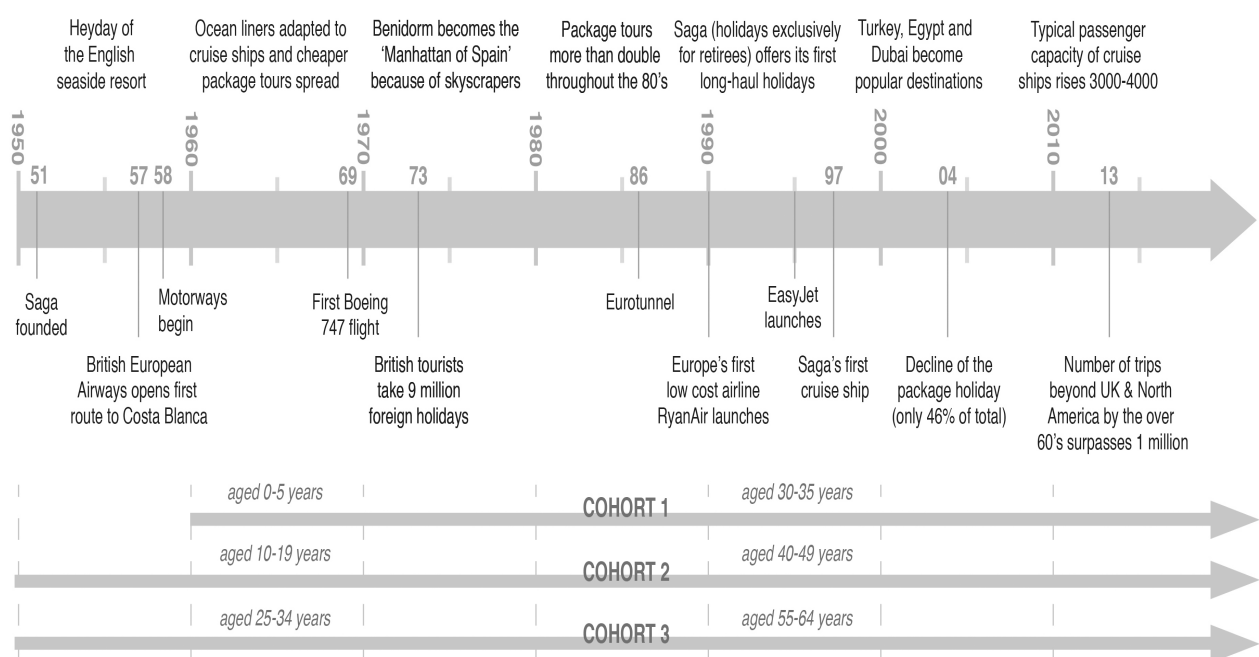
So, in summary, our argument is that the ‘field of possibility’ concept helps us to see how travel desires come about through the production of certain shared expectations, aspirations and other normative dimensions, whilst at the same time being attentive to how responding to these desires requires a consideration of whether that is possible in terms of personal competence and corporeal capacity. In this regard we would argue that this concept gives us the tools we need to address the two oversights in studies of later life leisure travel that we identified in the preceding section, namely the ways in which individual actions are prescribed by collective arrangements and how long distance travel can be physically taxing. So whilst a range of other factors will also evidently shape the future of later life travel (financial resources, the changing location of friends and relatives, the shifting responsibilities of older people at home) these do not provide our focus here (for a discussion of how some of these other factors took shape in our study see Day et al. 2017).

4. Methods

We now turn to our serial interview study. Through a relatively grounded approach, the aim was to consider how and whether the ideas and actions linked to later life leisure travel were changing. 30 older UK households were recruited from London and 30 from Birmingham. This was done through a recruitment agency who used a database of potential respondents. A modest gift voucher was offered

for participation. These 60 participants were stratified into three equal age cohorts: cohort 1 were aged 50-55 and still in employment; cohort 2 were aged 60-69 and less than seven years retired; and cohort 3 were aged 75+ and retired for ten or more years. The purpose of this was to capture changes in expectations regarding travel in later life and retirement, with the younger cohort looking ahead to this. In order to explore a diversity of economic and domestic situations in our research, within each cohort half were from higher (A, B and C1) and half were from lower (C2, D and E) socio-economic groups and a mix of single and couple households were also recruited, with singles including men and women. Each household was interviewed twice, normally in their own home, with interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place in 2015, with a gap of around 4 months between the first and second meeting. The first interview focused on their current travel practices and meanings of travel; the second focused on how these had changed over the years along with their expectations for future travel. One household withdrew. For context, Figure 2 juxtaposes the lifecourses of our 3 cohorts with broader social and material changes to the field of possibility.

Figure 2: Some key changes to the field of possibility for older UK travellers and where they feature in the lifecourse for our study participants



The interviews were semi-structured, to enhance comparability but allowed interviewers to respond to the circumstances of individual participants and dwell on emergent issues of interest and relevance. All interviews were fully transcribed and NVivo10 software was used to support a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure consistency, regular meetings between researchers took place throughout the data collection, coding and analysis period. The same analytical coding framework was used at both data collection sites, and researchers collaborated to ensure the coding framework was uniformly applied.

5. Results

The demanding of distance

“in the ‘60s everything changed... then for the first time people are talking about going to Jersey which wasn’t far away but it was still an aircraft to go ‘oh that sounded exotic!’... but then slowly but surely we’re all doing it now” (Richard cohort 2)

Though relatively infrequent travellers may conceivably have been less motivated to take part in our study, foreign holidaying was nonetheless widespread in our sample. All our respondents had holidayed in Europe and the majority had holidayed further afield than this at least once. Only a small number, mostly from the oldest cohort, no longer undertook any overseas leisure travel. Just over half had recently booked, were intending to book, or had recently holidayed in destinations beyond Europe, and this was mostly to destinations involving long-haul flights.

This was clearly very different to how they had holidayed in the past. For the two oldest cohorts, childhood holidays were predominantly domestic, involving trips to seaside resorts or UK relatives, and some from the oldest group didn’t recall any holidays at all as children. Many others recalled

being limited to a single annual holiday, often involving a return to the same UK destination. These childhood holidays were often replaced by European destinations in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

In straightforwardly saying “when I was a child people didn’t go abroad” (Irene, age cohort 2) Irene was typical. This is especially the case for those who experienced working class childhoods and for the oldest group (cohort 3) who were children during and immediately after a World War. This is indicative of the weakness of social prescriptions about long distance travel when respondents were younger. Because others were not going, the idea of doing so did not present itself to them, and so no sense of deprivation was felt if they didn’t go. Accounts, however, did show signs of further distance leisure travel starting to enter group consciousness in the childhoods of the younger cohort especially:

...two of my friends who was always quite trendy and their families were what I consider to be better off than us, they started to go to Spain then.... everybody was quite jealous of them, because nobody else had gone... (Janice cohort 1).

In addition to what others were seen to be doing, a shared grasp of distance travel in their younger years was also shaped by the infrastructures of the time. For all three cohorts, many childhood journeys felt much more prolonged than they did today because of the lack of motorways or family cars. At a time when a three-mile bus journey to a park was experienced as a “long way” (Matthew and Joy, cohort 2, speaking of a 50s childhood) these material restrictions suggest an experiential commonality in which domestic destinations had similar meanings as those further away today:

holidays were confined virtually to a trip to Clacton or somewhere on the coast and nothing as exotic as Bournemouth or anywhere like that (Simon cohort 2).

Restricted opportunities reinforced lower expectations about distance and holidays closer to home did not lead to any feeling of being limited or confined in this regard. Indeed, over and above a more general nostalgia about the lives they once led, the locally prescribed nature of their leisure travel at the time was often fondly remembered. The ironic use of ‘exotic’ in the above description of Bournemouth also hints at how the meaning of destinations change. When he was 17 he went abroad for the first time to Spain, which he’d also less ironically “considered to be quite exotic” at the time.

Indeed this shifting sense of the ‘exotic’ was a recurring interview theme. For one cohort 2 participant, the holidaying of some childhood friends in ‘Saundersfoot’ was exotic until she found out it was actually in Wales; in her 20s the ‘exotic’ was peppers and aubergines in Ibiza; and now it was to be found beyond “conventional” European travel to countries like Vietnam and Cambodia (Katherine, cohort 2). Similarly, when Tony (cohort 2) reflected on how early package tours didn’t reach the destinations he (now) deemed exotic, his wife Sandra interjected with: “Well Majorca was an exotic place then.”

The shifting exotic was paralleled by other adjectival changes that spoke of the changing associations attached to distance. For example, yearly childhood trips by train within the UK for several of those in our two older cohorts held enough affective impact to be deemed ‘an adventure’. Later in their 20s a trip to Europe for the older cohorts was also often characterised as ‘adventurous’, such as, for example, a trip to Majorca (Colleen cohort 3). As before, these sensibilities were clearly linked to the protracted nature of the journey and the technological and infrastructural arrangements of the time:

Well what an adventure that was. We had to fly from Southend Airport, so it was such a long journey to go that far. And it took us five and a half hours to fly. I swear that plane was held together with paperclips (laughter) (Colleen cohort 3).

Colleen's Majorca narrative demonstrates how the aggregate doing of European travel shapes the infrastructures associated with it, particularly to popular holiday destinations such as the Balearics. The resultant demand on and for infrastructure such as hotels serves to transform the destination, and its more unique or "unspoilt" selling points:

It was very pretty and when I first went it was unspoilt, there were very few hotels, you had to walk several miles to find a hotel (Colleen cohort 3).

As certain holiday destinations became engulfed by the recognisable features of mass tourism, attempts to reclaim the "unspoilt" required, according to the accounts of some of our respondents, consumption of more and further destinations as people switched their travel to less populated places that felt more exotic. This coincided with the general diffusion of leisure mobility out from the UK.

Though in the above instances, the experience of long journeys, whether by plane, train or otherwise, was deemed exciting or rewarding, this did not endure, with respect to nearer destinations at least. This was clearly related to wider infrastructural change. For example, a further recognised development with regard to closer overseas destinations was the arrival in the mid 1990s of the Eurostar train from London to various cities across the English Channel. This facilitated the effective localization of mainland Europe to the extent that one participant could describe it as:

like going into the suburbs, you don't even notice you're going into a different country (Mark cohort 2)

With increased convenience came decreased exoticness, with nearer European countries now being barely perceived as ‘abroad’. With the challenges of travel to Europe conquered, and with its exotic status in decline, it is unsurprising that Europe now fails to excite in the way it once did:

Well, it's just thinking there's more to life than Europe, there's more to life than, let's try somewhere further afield, you know... (Jackie cohort2)

However, it was not just their own personal accumulation of travel experience but also their impression of the massification of package holidays, particularly to parts of Spain, that reduced the social currency of certain European destinations for our respondents. From the 1980s, the cheapening of travel to places like Benidorm, Alicante or Majorca made them “just the usual” destinations where ‘everybody went’ (Lesley and Geoff cohort 2).

Past experiences of both engagement in, and normalisation of, European leisure travel were pushing the more vibrant adjectives such as ‘adventurous’ and ‘exotic’ beyond Europe. In other words, if you were to experience exciting travel, increasingly you really did need to go the distance. Certainly Europe was now no longer enough for many, who described European travel as variously ‘conventional’, ‘nothing spectacular’, ‘limited’, ‘only Europe’, ‘nothing exotic’, ‘a step away’ and ‘easy’. This was also seen in how those who go the distance were liable to be singled out as achievers:

You know I think he's probably been to every continent, he's amazing (Joseph cohort 2 in reference to his son-in-law).

This distinction between a relaxing but nothing special Europe and an ‘adventurous’, ‘exciting’, ‘fantastic’, ‘exotic’ and even ‘amazing’ world beyond it was strongest among the youngest cohorts.

Conversely it was possible to find participants from the oldest cohort still using words such as ‘incredible’ to describe European destinations. With the expansion of European travel happening much later in life for them, it seemed to retain its status as wondrous and exciting. By contrast, the youngest age cohort - those in their 50s - were much more likely to experience European travel in their teens, especially package holidays to Spain, and thereby they seemed more susceptible to normative declines in novelty or trophy-based valuations of much of Europe before becoming senior travellers. They also were more likely to experience beyond-Europe earlier than the older two cohorts, but not so early or frequently that a similar devaluation occurred as with European travel. In fact, they exhibited some of the strongest aspirations and expectations towards future travel beyond Europe. This contrast between generations was not lost on one cohort 3 couple who described the societal transition by contrasting their older perspective with that of their children and grandchildren:

When we were young we used to go around Europe and think that's great....and now you go much further afield. I mean our daughter has been to Vietnam twice I think. (Michael and Francis cohort 3).

The demand for distance in leisure mobility depended partly on a shifting contrast between the UK, Europe, and places further away. With the diffusion of leisure travel abroad, many medium and long-haul destinations came to replace those that were closer in terms of providing novelty, difference, wonder, and achievement. Closer destinations, while losing the prestige of the explorative traveller experience, meanwhile often became spaces of nostalgia, re-connection and relaxation. The distinction widened the affective spectrum of holiday destinations, encouraging many participants to include both near and further distances in their travel. Such a spectrum could potentially encourage mutually inclusive hypermobile aspirations, which appear to be especially resonant with cohort 1 such as Janice and Graham who had quite clear ideas about the role of travel after retirement:

“what I’d like to do when I retire, to see all of England and see the rest of the world”

(Janice and Graham cohort 1).

From this section we can see that the enhanced opportunities to travel further distances and the general uptake of foreign leisure travel are transformative of the understanding of leisure travel distance and destinations. Significant and enduring changes to the field of possibility occurred throughout the lives of our participants, from restrictions of war and class, to arrival of cheap flights and new infrastructure. But, as we argued, the field of possibility is not just material, but also has normative dimensions. In this case they related to how aspects of Europe became redefined as less exciting or prestigious in a way that further served to increase demand for more distant destinations. The wider collective was effectively demanding distance travel in the sense that the successful, or at least normatively dictated, engagement with the practice of leisure travel literally meant going the distance. However, the three age cohorts did not experience this uniformly. The timing of field of possibility changes appear to restrain beyond-Europe travel demand for the oldest cohort. In contrast the expectative horizons of the younger two expanded much more quickly as is evident from their particular appreciation for ‘beyond- Europe’ destinations. This could be taken to mean that their holiday futures might continue along a path towards travel of ever greater distances. However, the picture was clearly more complicated than this and, as we now discuss, bodily capacity was key here.

Distance as Demanding

“to travel really serious travel, I’m not talking about you know popping down to Bournemouth but sort of proper, proper international travel, there’s really that window of about ten years ... where before your health, or your insurance, or you’re just not so mobile” (Evan cohort1).

Whilst the above analysis presented expectations for distance as an outcome of both infrastructural and normative ‘field of possibility’ changes, responding to these changes may not always be so straightforward, and that may be especially the case as the bodies of potential travellers come to age. With this in mind we now turn to the effect of both anticipated and experienced bodily change in later life, and what this meant for how the field of possibility was differentially configured across cohorts. Cohort 3 frequently commented on their reluctance or inability to spend hours flying. Cohorts 1 and 2 commonly spoke about their travel becoming increasingly restricted as they age. Either way, bodily limitation was an important consideration when contemplating the doing of distance leisure travel.

The sheer arduousness of long-haul travelling was keenly felt by those dealing with declining bodily capacity, leaving some older participants who saw themselves as “not being able to fly the distance” (Anne cohort 3 referring to her husband) having to contemplate an alternative relationship with the field of possibility. As our older participants had aged, some returned to the comforts of ‘just’ Europe. Others felt that it was now acceptable to act on their pre-existing preference for nearer destinations. For some, however, the normative expectations of travelling further were so strong that they simply persevered, regardless of their many complaints about long-haul being physically taxing. One even scolded herself for doubting her capacity to keep pace with wider expectations:

...being stuck on a plane for 14 hours is no fun for anyone, but I did wonder if I was losing it, yeah, when I come back from Vietnam I thought, I'm not doing that anymore, that's too far. You know, I was on two planes, I left there at one o'clock in the afternoon and I got here 11 o'clock the next morning, and that does take it out of you.... and then I sat and gave myself a talking to and thought, you know, we sit and watch the telly for hours, what difference is it sitting on a plane? (Jackie cohort 2)

Being able to persevere - both in terms of frequency and distance - as one gets older was commonly accorded the status of achievement by our respondents from all three cohort groups. On several occasions older family members who are still travelling far (and/or often) were referred to admiringly. Octogenarian Wendy, for example, appeared pleased to distinguish her further distance mobility from her friends who are limited to the UK and the “nearby places in Europe”. Whereas endurance of distance was itself part of the glamour in their earlier years - a point seen in the previous section - in their later years it was the continued capacity to endure that was admired.

Nonetheless, whilst few participants had been on cruise holidays when they were younger, more of them saw switching to cruises as an option for their later years. Some younger participants expressed reluctance due the curtailed autonomy of being on a cruise and an ageist resistance to holidaying in a way that was associated with the ‘elderly’ (as a category to which they did not see themselves as belonging). But more generally, the ability to reach desirably exotic destinations through comfortable cruise ship travel was viewed favourably. Accordingly, we saw a notable take-up among the retired participants, particularly in cohort 2, of long-distance cruises, for example to Caribbean destinations or to Alaska. Here the cruise was seen as a valued facilitator of continued distance leisure travel:

...if you got older you see that [reluctance to do cruises] might change, because then a cruise is easier as you get older because you're sort of taken in hand, and everything is provided for you... (Matthew and Joy cohort 2)

Another cohort 2 participant, Katherine, had the pragmatic notion of using a cruise trip for the return leg of her long-haul holidays to recuperate from the exertion of the earlier long-haul flight. Coach tours to Europe, similarly viewed as inhibitive of independence - “you’ve got to stick to their itinerary” (Kim cohort 2) - and associated with ‘the elderly’, are another alternative considered by cohort 3 participants as a means of maintaining European distances when more ‘independent’

travelling starts to conflict with increasing bodily limitation. So though efforts were made to distance themselves individually from forms of travel associated with being 'old', as individuals aged their perceived capacity for physical exertion meant many eventually succumbed to them. Relationships with the broader practice were mutating as they negotiated the possibilities associated with age.

Some of this negotiation is already being facilitated by field of possibility changes in infrastructure and assistance technologies through the arrival of features such as airport disability support and wheeled suitcases. Some less mobile participants were particularly delighted with airport wheelchair assistance - "the best thing God ever invented" (Irene, cohort 2) - and "speedy boarding" (Grace, cohort 3) which meant they could continue to visit close family living overseas. Others from cohort 2 and 3 talked about just 'slimming down' their luggage to make travel easier. In other respects, though, participants were also aware of the ways in which infrastructures of travel provision are unsupportive of senior travel, most obviously in the higher insurance costs that were a particularly common complaint amongst cohort 3, and which acted to limit their travel distance:

A lot of my friends who have relations themselves in Africa and places like that they're well into their 80s they can't afford to go because of the insurance. The insurance is so high that it stops a lot of them going. (Frank cohort 3).

Another response to the physical stresses of long distance travel was to stay longer. Retirement made this much more feasible. Apart from the greater freedom for off-season travel which can lower the costs of further and more frequent travel, those in the youngest cohort hoped the potential to stay would help them recover from the bodily toll of long-haul travel after retirement. A few older participants, who still travelled longer distances, were already doing this. Staying longer was a means of recuperating after the journey and of more fully experiencing a harder to reach destination:

But if you want to go outside of Europe and see all these fantastic places, well you'd have to have a long holiday (Bruce cohort 2).

However, a predominant concern across the cohorts may have also encouraged further and more frequent travel. This emerged from the tension between the demand for foreign holidays and the prospect of future decline. The threat of declining bodily capacity for older travellers could serve to concentrate their plans for engaging in leisure travel in response to the widespread recognition of an apparently closing window of opportunity for distance travel:

Kim: somebody said to me once when I was working, I didn't take much notice, he said, 'You should try and enjoy yourself between 60 and 70 as much as you can because you don't know what's going to happen after that' and it's true really because you know,
Joseph: Yes. You start to deteriorate (laughter) (Kim and Joseph cohort 2).

There were therefore some who responded to their own anticipated ill-health by making further distance travel a greater immediate priority. Jenny from cohort 1 spoke of doing “the bigger things” (such as Japan and South America) whilst “fitter and younger in case I can't do them later”. Building on our previous empirical section, this shows how it was easy to park an un-‘exotic’ place and let others take centre stage in early retirement both because more far flung locations were more exciting and physically more demanding. These ‘travel-while-I-can’ sentiments were common across cohorts 1 and 2 - although more so in cohort 1. One of the more obvious examples of this, however, can be seen in Katherine's (cohort 2) comment on the prioritizing of non-European destinations, as Europe becomes the safe distance for those of diminishing capacity:

“...there’s no way that I’m averse to Europe but I just think while I can travel long distance I need to be doing these long distance ones. Europe, more of Europe can wait”

Cohort 3 sometimes redirected discussion of future travel to what they have done or what they “would have” or “would like to have” done. Miranda added the conditional, “if I was younger”, to her foreign travel aspirations that will remain unfulfilled. Now further distance travel was hardly worth “the effort” (Miranda) or “too chaotic” (Cynthia) for many of these cohort 3 participants. In this respect, departing from the broader practice was seen as relatively unproblematic, not the end of the world. Though there were some regrets, when a sense of diminishing physical capacity triggered a personal decoupling from the wider idea of distance travel as desirable, this was accepted with relative ease. Though, cohort 3 participants who have taken up cruising still harboured further distance ambitions, we saw a relaxed resignation in which the going further ‘while-I-can’ idea no longer applied.

I’d like to have gone to New York to be honest with you, and I often think about, if my leg is all right, would I go? But I don’t think so, no. I think it’s too late, I think, really (Grace cohort 3).

6. Discussion

The above discussion highlights how both shared but also differently negotiated social and material circumstances and meanings have played a powerful role in configuring how older Britons currently relate to certain distances and destinations for leisure travel. Drawing on Shatzki’s account of how the expectative horizons of people towards a practice are shaped through the ‘field of possibility’, we explored two ways in which social and material circumstances serve to influence distance leisure travel in later life. Firstly, we explored how certain infrastructural arrangements and the actions of others produced certain ideas about what destinations were attractive and, secondly, we explored how the bodily challenges typical of later life served to complicate this picture in terms of how they were

anticipated and experienced. Both features played a significant part in shaping how our respondents organised and understood their leisure travel, and they did so in different ways across the cohorts.

Building on the first finding, the implications for those who would curb the expansion of carbon-heavy distance leisure travel are that broader circumstances, rather than individual preferences, should be the priority focus. As many others have argued as a justification for taking a practice theory approach to understanding human activity, it is little wonder that appeals to individual values appear to offer limited traction when all these collective circumstances are acknowledged. This is why relevant researchers have argued for ‘deep interventions’ (Randles & Mander, 2009) that take on the challenge of influencing the processes by which shared apprehensions of desirable leisure take hold as expectations for travel are generated by the arrangements surrounding identified groups, such as the hobbyists of Hui (2013), the gap-year students of Luzecka (2016), and now our older participants.

In our study, we found many destinations have become sometimes unwittingly ranked by our respondents according to how distant they appeared and how great a sense of achievement can be garnered from getting to them. There are, of course, other dimensions to this - different destinations are granted different status to others through a whole range of material and symbolic power relations such as, for example, the Western othering of countries exhibiting non-occidental, less modernized or supposedly ‘primitive’ qualities as ‘exotic’ (Bruner, 1995: 224; Staszak, 2008). Nonetheless, in our study shared experiences linked to the changing possibilities for distance have evidently played an important part in shaping our participants’ plans and aspirations for trophy tourism (i.e. collecting destinations to add to one’s mental list of places visited during one’s lifetime (Randles and Mander, 2009)) and distant destinations. Furthermore, and linking back to concerns about how the broader encouragement of later life ‘activity’ might compel older people to travel (Hitchings et al, 2016), this process may particularly apply to older cohorts in the sense that the acquisition and display of such trophies can serve as an effective means of demonstrating a commendable continued capability.

Challenges to such destinational hierarchies might gain strength from embedding the recognition that novelty is enjoyed, and capability displayed, not only by going to more distant destinations. There may be some institutional role here for the various promoters of ‘Staycation’ holidays or other less distant activities to strengthen and legitimate possibilities towards the benefits of staying closer to home and redefining how going the distance may not necessarily be so enjoyable or impressive. Whilst this implies a contracted ‘field of possibility’ in distance terms, this doesn't necessarily imply hardship or self-denial as the field can expand in more ways than spatially. Rather this is about identifying and fostering less distance demanding ways of finding the exotic and the unusual in the practices of leisure travel. Though it is easy to see how the desirable and the distant have become entwined for our participants, this link is far from a done-deal. Recognising this could be a key part of fostering less energy intensive futures.

Our data further supports this suggestion through the evidently changeable and varied nature of how our respondents related to distance. Elevated notions of further distance are not destined to continually expand or trump European or domestic travel in terms of prestige. Indeed if further distance leisure travel for older Britons is increasingly normalised, it may rather lose some of its allure. We could therefore imagine a world where future generations of older people, already well travelled in their younger years, find it easier to reject the suggestion of distance travel as desirable. Conversely, if younger generations don't travel so much in the future we might see enhanced excitement about further distance travel after retirement should circumstances make this more possible. Either way, the attraction for our participants undoubtedly partly stemmed from how distance leisure travel was beyond the realms of possibility during earlier phases of their lives when the necessary facilitators in terms of money, social cues and infrastructure were absent. In this sense, we could venture that the above analysis may be depicting something of a ‘perfect storm’ moment in the carbon-heavy energy demand history of later life leisure travel as shared biographies that hitherto lacked distant experiences come into contact with the recognition that such experiences are now within the realms of possibility. Whatever their response, however, we argue that relevant energy demand management

strategies would need to place a heavy emphasis on the material and normative or hierarchical possibilities that underlie the furthering of later life leisure travel.

In turning to our second set of findings, our study complicates this picture further. Here we saw how perceived and experienced bodily decline has the power to transform the field of possibility. Yet the ways in which our respondents dealt with the anticipation and experience of declining bodily capacity was evidently not straightforward. It could equally be paradoxically understood as accelerative of the doing of further distances (travelling more ‘whilst you can’ out of fear of future decline) and also as decelerating (doing less because the ideas and actualities of bearable travel in later life provide a reason for exiting the practice). Adding to this was the varied ways in which respondents drew on ideas of declining capacity. Ideas of ageing bodies could be used to justify their personal decoupling from the wider life of the practice when participation no longer held the same charm, but participants could also be stoical about how they could no longer engage in the practice of distance travel.

Either way, we should recognise how the ‘field of possibility’ arrangements surrounding distance travel are generally developing in ways that help travellers overcome the physical challenges of ageing. “Inclusive mobility” agendas, for example, incorporating both Government regulations and guidelines aimed towards ensuring travellers with disabilities have access to continued travel (DfT, 2005, 2008) have played a part here. They have pushed for improvements in disabled access to transportation - such as improved facilities for wheelchair users and the airport facilities of which some of our respondents were so enamoured. Though the more inflexible stance of insurers should also be acknowledged, the wider climate is moving towards supporting later life travel. Finally, though these are evidently cross-cut by the complexities of class, health and longevity, we should acknowledge that human bodies in the UK themselves are getting better at withstanding the tests of time (or at least have better access to healthcare to stave off the restrictions to life associated with particular problems) such that the ability to travel may be yet further extended.

All these circumstances mean that, whilst a common refrain amongst our respondents was that they should ‘travel while they can’ in the earlier phases of retirement, it may well be that many of them still ‘can’ for quite some time. In this sense, if current levels of older person affluence continue, the prospect could be much more travel and energy consumption going forward. While the material from the first section of analysis could be used to suggest a temporary appetite for distant leisure travel amongst generations that have only just been granted access to far flung destinations, we now see how, in contrast to this passing ‘perfect storm’ argument, if desires for distance don’t prove easily sated, the future of later life leisure travel could indeed be highly energy consumptive and GHG emitting. This may be higher still if future older travellers resort to negotiating the possibilities of prolonging leisure travel through high energy strategies such as cruises, which for longer distances and duration often have higher emissions than those associated with long-haul flying (Howitt et al., 2010; Gossling, 2015).

In addition, the free time that comes with retirement could also combine with ideas about arduous travel to encourage an increase in long-haul distances and associated energy demand. We already know that Britons have a tendency to stay longer if the distance is greater (ONS, 2011: 12). This obviously relates to attempts to compensate for higher costs and longer flight time, and more generally make the most of harder-to-reach destinations. But those older retirees who have the necessary financial means, with the likely absence of formal paid work, are in better position to linger for longer than most. This may at first suggest quite a different ‘staycation’ energy reduction solution in which older travellers stay overseas instead of at home. However, a person would have to remain for several years before the associated emissions of their long-haul travel are matched by the emissions produced by annual flights to Europe (Gossling, 2015: 473). Nevertheless, the potential for older travellers to stay longer could still shape an energy reduction strategy of decreasing “trip frequency”. This would require encouraging them to stay for longer once they have undertaken only shorter-haul journeys (Ram et al., 2013) in the hope of reducing energy consumption by encouraging

older travellers to make the most of the temporal patterning of their lives by travelling less often but staying for longer. This would also help them to avoid the fatigue and bodily disorientation that can accompany distance travel and of which our respondents were, on the whole, very well aware.

7. Conclusion

In response to the suggestion of a highly energy consumptive future of later life leisure travel, this paper sought to understand how the travel of three generations of older Britons had changed, how they imagined it will change in the future, and the potential impact of these expectations on their leisure travel. In view of how social research on this topic had neglected both the ways in which wider societal arrangements may effectively be demanding greater travel and how travel itself can be especially physically demanding for older bodies, we developed an approach that trained our attention on exactly these aspects. Ideas from social practice theory helped us to do this by directing our attention to how the leisure travel of our participants was shaped by changes to its field of possibility wherein wider participation, shared apprehensions of what this travel practice entails, and material dimensions that include variable physical capacity both facilitate and restrict the performance of distance leisure travel. Doing so revealed how our three cohorts had lived through significant changes in terms of how leisure travel is more widely done. Yet, it also showed us how, in terms of what is doable and desirable for them now, they also took part in an active negotiation with the implications of their own physical ageing.

In our discussion, we provided some suggestions about what that means for the reality of how later life leisure travel may change, and potentially be influenced in pursuit of less energy demanding social futures. With that in place, we now end with a more conceptual conclusion for others who may also be interested in the potential of social practice theory for dealing with the societal challenges of the day. In this regard, what our approach and findings particularly highlight is the need to be mindful

of the limits to the development of social practices in terms of what different human bodies are capable of. Otherwise we run the risk of making individual practices seem more powerful than they are when key influences to their development may sometimes be found in the detail of how people are able to respond. What bodies are capable of and how practitioners are engaged in negotiating bodily limitations will clearly play a huge part in the future of senior leisure travel. But this relatively underexplored dimension of practice theory will likely have similar impacts elsewhere especially as populations age or even where rising levels of obesity and allergies might mean that increasingly, related practice possibilities have to be negotiated. So whilst social practice theory concepts are capable of accommodating these features, those who are developing this theory should therefore be careful of homogenising the potential capability of would-be recruits in their attempts to delineate the broader strokes of practice emergence and development. In checking this tendency, the ‘field of possibility’ concept has been particularly helpful to us in this paper. But the broader point with which we want to end is that clearly not all human bodies can easily fall into line with the demands of a developing practice. Exploring how people respond to this situation could add a useful subtlety to the analysis provided by this expanding area of research and also help us to discern useful new ideas about potentially necessary intervention.

Notes

1 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).

2 It is not our goal to map the field of possibility, which Schatzki (1996) considers empirically difficult, but rather to use it to direct our attention towards the dynamics of possibility.

3 As evident in Shove and Pantzar’s (2005) minor reference to the good physical condition required to play the more vigorous floorball matches.

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