Mobility and transport choices in older adults: the role of emotional interactions with place

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1 Introduction

In Scotland, the number of households headed by people aged 65 and over is estimated to increase by around 54% between 2012 and 2037. There are challenges for both transport and health as the Scottish population ages. Of increasing importance is poor mental health in older age. A 2004 survey on the mental health and wellbeing of older people in Scotland found that 10% of people aged 60-74 had a common mental disorder such as anxiety or depression (Scottish Executive, 2007). Poor mental health in older age has been estimated to cost the UK Health service in excess of £34.7 billion annually by 2026 (Mental Health Foundation, 2009).

Older people have different mobility and transport patterns and behaviours compared to younger people. Older people tend to travel less and are more likely to use slower modes, such as walking and public transport, with mode choice constrained as a result of physical impairments associated with older age (Schwanen et al., 2001, Rosenbloom, 2004, Metz, 2003). Research has generally focused on the ‘problem’ of low mobility amongst older people as a result of lower incomes and increasing frailty in older age (Tacken, 1998, Noble, 2000).

Mobility and transport outside the home has a vital role to play in the quality of older people’s lives as it facilitates independence, social interaction, and bodily and mental health. Mobility in the outdoor environment can also assist in reducing isolation, through encouraging social interaction, which is a key concern in older age (Davidson and Rossall, 2014). Psychological benefits from being ‘out and about’ (Metz, 2000), particularly through ‘discretionary’ or ‘on a whim’ trips (Davey, 2007), potentially have a greater role to play in the prevention of poor mental health. Therefore, everyday mobility choices play crucial roles in the wellbeing of older people, as well as in lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories.

Improvements to mobility have been traditionally concerned with reducing travel time, however, there is growing awareness of the value of slower modes as means of supporting sustainable travel choices and boosting health and wellbeing. Walking as a mode of transport, and form of physical activity, is something that the majority of people are able to participate in. Walking for transport amongst older people is increasingly seen as ideal for this population as it is safe, accessible, and can be built into everyday routines (Van Cauwenberg et al., 2012). It has the potential to help maintain independent mobility, particularly if older people want to ‘age in place’ in domestic environments (Tinker, 2002). Ageing in place is viewed as beneficial to quality of life as it enables maintenance of social networks and independence, and provides a sense of familiarity (Sixsmith and Sixsmith, 2008, Wiles et al., 2011). However, Giuliano (2004) highlights that most older people prefer ageing in place in older neighbourhoods having chosen residences earlier in life, rather than relocating to take advantage of improved access to transport.

Older people with health conditions and physical and/or cognitive impairments can face barriers to outdoor mobility, caused by the design of the physical environments, such as high kerbs, not enough seating and lack of handrails (Marsden et al., 2008, Wennberg et al., 2009, Risser et al., 2010). Much research has considered the causes of a loss of mobility and the barriers that exist in outdoor environments which can impede independent mobility for older people. Design guidance has focused
on overcoming barriers in the environment and establishing minimum design standards. There has also been limited research on the relationship between the physical environment and walking for transportation amongst older people (Van Cauwenberg et al., 2012).

To support and encourage mobility in the older population we also need to understand the positive qualities that encourage older people to go out, remain active and bring pleasure into very old age. Much less attention has been paid to understanding such qualities of the urban and built environment. This paper explores older adults' emotional interactions with place, considers how and why these responses occur and reflects on the role they can play in mobility and transport choices.

This study aimed to identify how mobility choices amongst diverse older adults are influenced by interactions between moods/emotions and features of local built and natural environments. This brings further understanding and helps to unpack aspects of mobility and transport that are positive for wellbeing. With the empirical research complete, this paper presents some of the emerging findings and begins to consider the implications of these findings for policy and planning for future older populations in Scotland.

This remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an outline of the method used. We then present the emerging findings in Section 3. Section 4 discusses the implications of the results and reflect on policy recommendations before concluding.

2 Method

2.1 ‘Go-along’ walking interviews

Walking interviews, or ‘go-alongs’, are interviews that are conducted ‘on the move’, and are a form of ethnographic enquiry, which combines observation with interviewing (Carpiano, 2009). This method was used to gain a better understanding of older people’s emotional interactions with the routes that they walked as such methods allow for richer accounts of perceptions of the environment than conventional, static surveys (Kusenbach, 2003, Miaux et al., 2010). This method has been used in several studies with older people, exploring different aspects of mobility in the everyday environment (Van Cauwenberg et al., 2014, Curl et al., 2015).

As this study is concerned with everyday walking, walking interviews enabled the researcher to join the participant ‘in place’ for a deeper understanding of their subjective ‘experience of the body in movement’ (Miaux et al., 2010), as well as their motivations to choose a particular route. Using this method also captures the participants’ real-time responses to place and therefore provide more meaningful understandings of everyday journeys in comparison to static settings.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 19 diverse older people (defined as being aged 65 and over). Table 1 provides the age groups of the participants, by gender. They were healthy volunteers, able to walk for at least 15 minutes in the local urban environment unaided by another person. Participants were recruited from across Edinburgh in order to provide a variety of different walks in different local contexts with variations between environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total (age group)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65 – 69</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>70 – 74</td>
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<td>75 – 79</td>
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<td>80+</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total (gender)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
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Table 1: Participants by age group and gender
Participants were asked to undertake a ‘typical walking journey’, defined by them, which they would usually make in the course of a week. Walks lasted from 20 minutes to 2 hours and were highly varied. They included trips to the shops, strolls around the neighbourhood, journeys to the bus stop and visits to favoured parks and places of interest.

The walks all took place within Edinburgh, spread across the city. These walks broadly took place across three different types of area. Six took place in the urban city centre, six were in green spaces e.g. encompassing parks and woodlands, and seven of the walks were in locations where blue space e.g. rivers, were a prominent feature. Photographs were also taken during the interview of environmental aspects of the route. The route was also recorded using GPS. The GPS recordings of the different walked routes are presented in Figure 1. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the transcripts. Emerging key themes have been identified and are presented in the following section.

3 Results
Emerging findings from the interviews fall under three key themes: memories and familiarity; colourful wildlife; and social interaction. These themes relate to interactions between emotions/mood and the environments and are considered to be important in mobility choices in the local environment. These themes are addressed, in turn, more fully in the following section.

3.1 Memories and familiarity
Older people sought out routes for walking journeys in familiar places that held strong memories, particularly positive and more poignant memories. In particular, some of these environments supported welcomed periods of reflection. For example, Figure 2 shows a bench in a park that was visited by a 76 year-old female participant. She mentioned:
“You’d walk around and you can sit down. We used to go and sit at the benches at the top where you can sit and look down, which has memories. Happy memories. Sad memories, because he’s not there any more to do it. But it was always a nice place to come, and it was always...we’d come and sit peacefully and contemplatively. It’s a very nice quiet place. A good place if you’re feeling miserable, because it’s soothing”

There were a few instances amongst the participants where similar places were visited, particularly if they had visited an area with a partner that was no longer alive. Such places appeared to be sought out to provide comfort, due to the memories that they invoked.

![A place for reflection for a participant](image)

Figure 2: A place for reflection for a participant

Further, ‘knowing’ an environment, e.g. knowing who lived there, when particular landmarks were developed, gave areas a sense of place and a memorable narrative. For example, a 74 year-old male participant commented:

“I often think back at what we used to do here when we were kids. I mean, again, you’ve got to remember, there was no way you were allowed to cycle in the Meadows then, you had to walk. If you were caught cycling, you had to pedal like blazes, to get away from the park keepers. Aye, it’s a lot of happy memories here. I remember when they planted those trees [Figure 3].”
Familiarity also helped participants with wayfinding and navigating through the changing city even with new developments. A 66-year-old male participant illustrates this point, having moved away and then returned to the city:

“There’s a few new places, new building schemes that have went up. Generally you can find a landmark, like Craiglockhart, you can find the canal and that’s a landmark. So you know where you are from that, things like that. And the water of Leith. And then certain pubs or certain buildings registered like the Slaughterhouse around the corner. There’re always these sort of places that register. And you see a plaque on…maybe it’s closed and moved on, but they put a plaque up to say this is the original site of such and such, and that tells you something. And you think right okay, I know where I am now.”

Familiar environments also provided a feeling of safety for some participants. As one female participant (70 years-old) illustrates, it meant that she was able to be mobile without worrying:

“You may think, right, it’s boring to do it [the walk] each time, but I don’t know, familiarity helps sometimes.

In what way?

Well, it makes you…I think it gives you…you don’t have to really worry about anything because you know the area. Yes, things can happen, things can be different, but I think really…it’s good sometimes to have familiarity, yeah”

Environments that have particular memories associated with them that are also familiar may encourage outdoor mobility amongst older people by invoking positive emotions and feelings of safety and security. Such feelings have been found to be important in travel to different places (Sixsmith and Sixsmith, 2008, Pain and Townshend, 2002). Familiar environments, then, may encourage mobility in later life.

Figure 3: ‘The Meadows’, a park in Edinburgh
3.2 Colourful nature and wildlife

A strong theme that has emerged is that natural colour in the environment was highly pleasurable amongst older people. Colourful environments with varied points of interest such as wildflowers or bright planting in a garden brought great pleasure, with individuals enjoying moving through such settings. Most of the participants commented on areas where there were wildflowers. Older people chose routes that led them past particular environments and private gardens where they could observe such environments. As one 79 year-old male participant noted, the colour in an environment has the ability to raise positive emotion:

“There’s a lifting of the spirit when you see that sort of combination of colours [Figure 4], it’s almost like a Monet painting as far as I’m concerned.”

![Wildflowers along a participant’s walking route](image)

When participants were asked what they would change about their walking environments, the addition of natural colour and wildflowers were frequently mentioned. There was a consensus that these provided positive feelings. As one 70 year-old female participant responded, when asked what she would change about the environment:

“Maybe a wee bit more colour in it. We’ve got our greens, we’ve got whatever, but even just a few wild flowers would make it easier to…easier on the eye, sort of thing. That’s what I like about the coastal path because you’ve always got flowers, and I think they cheer you up and make you feel better.”

Other nature found in urban environments was also important, and interestingly, some participants favoured quiet environments seeking out walking routes that offered little possibility of encountering others but that offer wildlife. One 68 year-old female participant chose a route that was longer but passed a garden with lots of bird feeders [Figure 5]. She explains:

“So, there’s a woman round here that has loads of…I’ve got loads of bird feeders out in the wee garden, and opposite me is a nursery, and I’ve got three or four bird feeders there that I fill up every week, and see robins and blackbirds, blue-tits, but she has loads of bird feeders, and there’s…oh, look at all those sparrows, and not one of [them] come to my back garden. Not one. But I just love…they’re just gorgeous, seeing them all. It makes me feel good. I like birds, and animals, sometimes, more than humans. So, yes, you can also walk through the
flats, and you come through here, but that way I’d miss all the sparrows on that corner so that’s why I do that.”

Figure 5: Birdfeeders in a private garden

Where the walks went past private gardens, these gardens provided an opportunity for social interaction between people. A 71 year-old female participant described how a garden offered an opportunity for social contact:

“There’s ladies in the block of flats here, and they do this wonderful gardening, and I always stop and admire their gardens and take pictures of their gardens, and we chat and they have animals, and we talk about their animals.”

The interviews revealed strong preferences for wild flowers and more colourful environments. Whilst all nature was appreciated, vivid colours in the environment invoked particularly strong positive emotions and feelings. Making simple adaptations to urban environments to include colourful nature and facilitate wildlife could encourage mobility amongst older people.

3.3 Social contact and interaction

When moving around the built environment, social contact was also important. As previously mentioned, private gardens enabled such interactions. However, there is another aspect of social contact and interactions that affects the places and journeys that people can visit. As people age, health conditions can affect their mobility or that of their partners, which in turn affects their ability to move around their local environments. A 79 year-old male participant mentioned that:

“Pavements and kerbs, with eyesight problems are difficult for her [his partner]. If we go away from the house I have to be with her.”

In particular, more negative impacts of changing routines were voiced, which occurred due to deteriorating health conditions of partners. Another male participant (87 years old) notes that:

“When she [his partner] was more agile, we used to walk down here … She finds it very difficult to walk these days, and she’s lost confidence in going out on her own.”
Such changes in health that affected mobility also meant that daily routines and walking routes are changed to mediate these changes. Mobility patterns also change with the death of a partner. A female participant (76 years old) highlighted that her mobility changed when her partner died, although acknowledged that it had actually occurred before this, when he was ill:

“I walk far less these days than I used to anyway. It’s three years since my husband died, so I’m three years older than I was then. And actually we walked less since he wasn’t well anyway. Nobody else that I know seems to like to just walk.”

Whilst the deteriorating health or death of a partner caused mobility to change, for some participants, particularly women, walking groups offered an opportunity to meet and socialise with people, also enabling exercise and providing new routes and places to walk. Walking groups were joined after there had been a change in their circumstances. A 91 year-old female participant highlights why she joined a walking group:

“Just because I like walking. And I had need of company, because my husband was dead, and my sister died, the end of November. I have no family, no children, and my closest relative in Edinburgh is my cousin, who is ten years younger than me.”

Walking groups also offered further opportunities for social interaction outwith the group. As a 70 year-old female participant describes:

“Well, usually I’m walking with a group, so therefore it can be chatter, there’s a lot of chatter, and especially amongst women. The men aren’t quite as chatty, but I’ve met a lot of lovely people, people with interests that actually…you can actually join, they ask you if you want to join them and it’s openings that you maybe wouldn’t find yourself, so yes, I think the company of people are good on a walk, it is fine. You know you’re going to meet up with these people and you feel quite happy about that.”

Whilst changing life circumstances can change, and potentially limit, mobility as outlined, walking groups offer some people an opportunity to be mobile, by providing new routes and facilitate socialising, an increasingly important element of combatting social isolation that can be experienced in older age.

4 Discussion and conclusion: implications for practice and policy

Using walking interviews, we discovered three key themes which include: the importance of memories and familiarity; the attraction of colourful visual experiences; and the importance of social contact and interaction. These appear to be most important in mobility decisions and behaviours amongst older people.

Encouraging and maintaining outdoor mobility might be supported by helping people to remain in their familiar home and neighbourhood environments for longer. For this to be successful though, it is important to ensure that the walking environment facilitates mobility, with barriers removed and items that encourage individuals to go outside, such as those discussed above, included.

By understanding the emotional responses to place and the qualities of these places that enable and encourage older people to be active, design modifications can be promoted. Of particular significance is the presence of wildflowers and natural colour in the urban environment. Such modifications could have benefits for healthier living in older age by improving mental wellbeing whilst walking.

If older people like to walk locally and in familiar places, as cities change with new developments, policy makers, planners and developers need to bear in mind that older people may use historic landmarks to navigate their way through urban environments. Local areas should not be changed so
drastically that people cannot continue to move around familiar settings, particularly people with dementia or cognitive impairment. Neighbourhoods also need to be walkable, with local services easily accessible for older people to encourage walking for transport, a theme which has also been echoed in other studies (Van Cauwenberg et al., 2012).

It is also important to note that not only the physical aspects of mobility of the outdoor environment, but also the social dimensions of mobility should be considered. Walking groups appear to provide older people with new mobility opportunities as well as improving social contact. Perhaps there are greater roles for other services, such as doctors, to encourage older people to be active through walking. Providing information about such groups may be useful. If walks are prescribed, then healthcare professionals may need to be more thoughtful about where the walks take place.

Due to the fact that the participants self-identified as healthy adults, they generally did not face problems walking in the environment and the majority of them were keen walkers. Their experiences could help to understand why they continue to be mobile in older age. One aspect that might help explain this was that many of the participants had always walked, therefore starting to walk earlier in life may help with staying mobile in later life.

Designing inclusive pedestrian environments, that are bright and colourful, will help to facilitate walking amongst older people. Quality spaces that include colour and are supportive public spaces provide inviting environments for older people. Incorporating an ‘age-friendly ethic’ into regeneration strategies is important. Developers and decision-makers should be sensitive to changing places and be mindful of the local community and history as there may be aspects of the environment that are meaningful to older people and play a role in everyday mobility. To understand these there should be greater involvement of older people in the process to understand such nuances in relation to particular places.

References


