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Entitlement to concessionary public transport and wellbeing: a qualitative study of young people and older citizens in London, UK

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Abstract

Access to transport is an important determinant of health, and concessionary fares for public transport are one way to reduce the ‘transport exclusion’ that can limit access. This paper draws on qualitative data from two groups typically at risk of transport exclusion: young people (12-18 years of age, n=118) and older citizens (60+ years of age, n=46). The data were collected in London, UK, where young people and older citizens are currently entitled to concessionary bus travel. We focus on how this entitlement is understood and enacted, and how different sources of entitlement mediate the relationship between transport and wellbeing. Both groups felt that their formal entitlement to travel for free reflected their social worth and was, particularly for older citizens, relatively unproblematic. The provision of a concessionary transport entitlement also helped to combat feelings of social exclusion by enhancing recipients’ sense of belonging to the city and to a ‘community’. However, informal entitlements to particular spaces on the bus reflected less valued social attributes such as need or frailty. Thus in the course of travelling by bus the enactment of entitlements to space and seats entailed the negotiation of social differences and personal vulnerabilities, and this carried with it potential threats to wellbeing. We conclude that the process, as well as the substance, of entitlement can mediate wellbeing; and that where the basis for providing a given entitlement is widely understood and accepted, the risks to wellbeing associated with enacting that entitlement will be reduced.

Key words

UK; Entitlement; Public transport; Young people; Older citizens; Belonging; Social exclusion; Wellbeing

Research Highlights

- Young people (12-18 year-olds) and older people (over-60s) receive free bus travel in London, UK.
- The receipt and enactment of entitlement can contribute to wellbeing by fostering a sense of community belonging.
- Where an entitlement is perceived to be ‘earned,’ participants also reported that it improved their sense of self-worth.

Introduction

Recent years have seen growing recognition that access to transport is an important determinant of health, including in the UK NICE guidance (NICE, 2008), The Marmot Review (Marmot et al., 2010, pp. 134-136), and transport policy approaches in cities such as London (GLA, 2011, pp. 196-197). In general, however, the multiple connections between transport and health are still far from receiving the policy attention they merit. Transport is normally needed in order to access health services; the goods necessary for health; the work and education that are determinants of health and the social networks that foster a healthy life. Differential access to transport is one of the ways in which health inequalities between people and places are generated (Macintyre et al., 2008), and age is one social factor that influences the risk of 'transport exclusion'. In the UK, for instance, the Social Exclusion Unit (2003, p. 2) cited transport-related problems as restricting young people's capacity to take up education or training opportunities. Young people's exclusion from participation has been variously conceptualised as arising from immobility (Barker et al., 2009; Thomsen, 2004), disempowerment (L. Jones et al., 2000; Kearns & Collins, 2003) or dependency on adults for transport (Barker, 2009; Fotel & Thomsen, 2004; Kullman, 2010). Older people have also been described as particularly at risk of transport-based social exclusion (King & Grayling, 2001, p. 166) or 'transport disadvantage' (Hine & Mitchell, 2001) and consequently of becoming isolated (Titheridge et al., 2009; Wretstrand et al., 2009), with significant numbers of older people reported to face difficulties in getting to health centres, dentists and hospitals (Audit Commission, 2001, p. 30).

Within the London region, a number of policy initiatives have formed part of a broader transport agenda that has, at various points, been more or less explicitly oriented to public health as well as other social goals including reducing dependence on car travel and mitigating the health effects of transport exclusion (Mindell et al., 2004). Concessionary fares for public transport are one approach to addressing transport exclusion, and in London two specific policies relate directly to age-related transport exclusion through the provision of fare exemptions. First, free bus travel for 12-16 year-olds was introduced by the Greater London Authority in September 2005 (TfL, 2007). This concession was subsequently extended in 2006 to include 17 year-olds in full-time education (TfL, 2006, p. 7) and subsequently all 18 (and some 19) year-olds in full-time education or on a work-based learning scheme (TfL, 2010a, pp. 8-9). On its introduction the scheme was explicitly positioned as a way of addressing transport exclusion with a particular emphasis on improving access to education and jobs: as a means "to help young people to continue studying, improve employment prospects and promote the use of public transport" (TfL, 2006, p. 7). Second, the 'Freedom Pass', funded by the 33 local authorities that make up London, is provided to all of those over 65 (or over 60 if born before 1950), entitling them to free transport at any time of day on all bus, underground and tram services and to off-peak travel on many rail services in the Greater London area (London Councils, 2011).

There is a small but growing body of evidence on the positive impact of such concessions on health generally. For older residents, the Freedom Pass was reported to reduce transport exclusion and enhance mental health (Whitley & Prince, 2005), and concessionary bus travel for older people is associated with a reduced risk of obesity (Webb et al., 2011) and with increased likelihood of walking more frequently (Coronini-Cronberg et al., 2012). For young people, concessionary bus travel in London has been reported to contribute to reductions in transport poverty, gains in independence and opportunities for enhancing wellbeing (A. Jones

et al., 2012). In Canada, significant association between transport mobility benefits and quality of life for older Canadians have been identified (Spinney et al., 2009).

However, the relationship between transport and health is not based solely on access to transport. Beyond the instrumental functions of transport for accessing goods and services, which can be enhanced by offering concessionary fares, are the less tangible psycho-social impacts of access to, use of and entitlement to transport. These are mediated in part by the social meanings of particular modes. For instance, in the context of what has been called a 'regime of automobility', in which the private car dominates as the default mode of transport (Sheller & Urry, 2000), those without access to a car report adverse effects on wellbeing from using less-valued alternatives (Bostock, 2001). For older people, driving cessation or lack of access to a car has been widely reported as a threat to wellbeing (Adler & Rottunda, 2006; Davey, 2007). In the UK, as in many other high-income countries, private car use is reported to provide a number of benefits for users, including self-esteem and a sense of autonomy (Goodman et al., 2012; Hiscock et al., 2002). Currently, such benefits are not always provided by public transport access. Bus travel in particular is often positioned as a stigmatised 'other' mode (Ellaway et al., 2003), primarily for use by those with few other options (Root et al., 1996, p. 32).

In this paper, we discuss the relationship between entitlements to concessionary fares, mobility and wellbeing. We focus not on the direct effects of entitlement to concessionary public transport on 'objective' measures of health, illness and disease, but rather on the symbolic meanings of 'entitlement' to public transport, and the implications of this for people's subjective perceptions of their wellbeing in one particular locality (London). Acknowledging that it "may be a somewhat slippery concept" (Cattell et al., 2008, p. 546), we understand 'wellbeing' here as a concept that captures understandings of health "which extend beyond a narrow bio-medically oriented definition of health as 'the absence of disease'" (Airey, 2003, pp. 129-130). Importantly for the present analysis, it is a concept that emphasises the ways that people interpret their own circumstances or social contexts in ways that relate to health (Airey, 2003; Cattell et al., 2008). As Hiscock, Ellaway and colleagues have argued (Ellaway et al., 2003; Hiscock et al., 2002), if policies to wean people off car use are to succeed, the social and cultural associations of public transport need to be addressed. Reducing transport exclusion, and its damaging health effects, entails more than just increasing the provision of or access to transport. In order to optimise use, the mode provided needs to be culturally valued, and capable of enhancing autonomy, self-esteem and social inclusion; providing, in short, the kinds of psychosocial benefits associated typically with private car use. In London, with a relatively good public transport infrastructure, and a policy context in which private car use is actively discouraged, the meanings of public transport, particularly for older people, may be less devalued than has been reported for other settings.

Theoretically, 'entitlement' to a benefit of this kind provided explicitly to address transport exclusion could further stigmatise the groups targeted (Sen, 1995), thus off-setting health gains from concessionary transport with losses from the effects of loss of self-esteem or autonomy. This is likely to be particularly true if the benefit provides access to a mode of transport that is of low relative value. Alternatively, concessionary transport may be intrinsically good for 'wellbeing' simply because it enables participation: a theme echoed in social policy literature that has addressed participation (Jordan, 2012). As well as being a route to social participation, transport also provides a way of *enacting* participation – a theme taken up in recent literature on cycling in particular (Aldred, 2010; J. Green et al., 2012), but

less well addressed in relation to public transport. To explore the symbolic effects of transport entitlement on wellbeing in the context of public transport systems, we examine how two groups entitled to free bus transport in London – young people aged 12-18 and older citizens – understand and value their entitlements, and how this might mediate the relationships between mobility and wellbeing.

Methods

This paper draws on qualitative data collected as part of a larger study examining the public health implications of concessionary transport for young people. Older citizens were included in the study for two reasons. First, those aged 60+ are entitled to a public transport fares concession in London (as discussed above). Second, young people's entitlement to free bus use raised some concerns in the media about possible negative effects on older people's access to bus travel as a result of over-crowding or fear-based exclusion (TfL, 2008). Between February 2010 and April 2012 we spoke to 118 12-18 year-olds and 46 60+ year-olds living in London. Data were generated using a mix of individual, pair and group interviews in order both to access interactions about public transport and also to ensure more private settings. The latter was thought necessary in case participants found groups a difficult place to discuss more sensitive issues such as financial barriers to transport. In-depth interviews (individual, pair or triad interviews) were conducted with 62 young people and 28 older people. These interviews, and 13 focus groups (ten with younger people and three with older people), focussed on the everyday travel experiences of research participants, and their preferences for different modes of transport.

Both younger and older people were recruited primarily from four local areas across London, selected to include a range of public transport provision. Two were inner London areas ('Hammersmith & Fulham' and Islington), with typically denser housing and more abundant public transport options, and two outer London (Havering and Sutton), where public transport is both less abundant and less used (TfL, 2010b). Areas were sampled in this way in order to include accounts from a range of inner and outer London communities characterised by different levels of public transport provision. Within each area participants were recruited purposively to include a range of participants by age, gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic status and typical mode of transport, with recruitment continuing until saturation.

Younger participants were recruited primarily via education and activity-based settings (including schools, academies, youth clubs and a pupil referral unit) with 22 participants also recruited from among young Londoners engaged in the 'Young Scientists' programme at the institution leading the study.¹ Excerpts from these accounts are tagged with the identifier 'YS'. Older residents were recruited mainly via community groups, charitable organisations and a local authority event. Harder to reach individuals such as those with visual impairments or aged 90+ proved difficult to recruit, and in these cases (n=3) we used personal networks from within London but outside the local areas listed above. Excerpts from these accounts are tagged with the identifier 'Other'.

Analysis was largely inductive, drawing on principles of the constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987), but informed by concepts from theoretical literatures on entitlement and the determinants of wellbeing. The authors collectively developed coding frameworks and coded data for analysis. When quoting directly from the data we have anonymised all names and other potential identifiers and have tagged all extracts with an identifier for gender (M or F),

area (Inner London [I] or Outer London [O]) and age or age range. Where quotes from two or more participants in a given interview or focus group are given, numbered identifiers for gender (e.g. 'F1') are given before each quote to help the reader differentiate between the individual participants quoted. This study was approved by the LSHTM Ethics Committee.

Findings

Two sets of narratives around the theme of 'entitlement' were evident in the accounts that we generated. In the first set, which we term '*formal entitlements*', the narratives relate to the receipt of statutory "welfare benefit entitlements" (Moffatt & Higgs, 2007, p. 450) – in this instance the entitlement of young and older citizens in London to travel without charge on particular public transport modes. In relation to this theme, participants talked about how and why they considered themselves to be 'entitled' to concessionary use of public buses. In the other set of narratives, which we term '*informal or perceived entitlements*', respondents discussed an interrelated set of ideas relating to their own personal sense of entitlement. Entitlements of this kind have been conceptualised "as a stable and pervasive sense that one deserves more and is entitled to more than others" (Campbell et al., 2004, p. 31; see also Lessard et al., 2011, p. 521). In the present study participants described the ways they understood their and others' 'rights', for want of a better term, to occupy particular, contested spaces on the bus, such as the 'priority seating' areas or the space near the door. Accounts of informal or perceived entitlements were organised by participants primarily in a categorical way – in particular according to age, disability, pregnancy and being accompanied by young children.

The significance of concepts of entitlement to respondents, and the degree to which these were linked to facets of wellbeing, arose inductively from the analysis, rather than being anticipated as an effect of, or explanation for the effects of, free bus travel. The notion of formal entitlements emerged without prompting in interview and focus group discussions with older people as an *in vivo* code, whereas 'informal entitlements' was a useful analytical code to make sense of some otherwise contradictory accounts of the role of bus travel in wellbeing (such as experiencing a bus ride as socially inclusive, but also potentially generating conflict with other passengers). In this sense, 'entitlement' is an explanatory theme which helps make sense of some of the more direct effects of free bus travel reported by younger and older passengers, such as providing accessible transport, enhancing social participation and providing a space for social interaction (J Green et al., in press; A. Jones et al., 2012).

Formal entitlements earned: Older citizens' understandings of their right to free bus travel

Older study participants, discussing why they thought they received free bus travel via their 'Freedom Passes', gave clear and consistent explanations. These revolved around the 'dues' that older Londoners reasoned that they had paid over their lifetimes (cf. Moffatt & Higgs, 2007, p. 458), with free public transport in turn conceptualised as a 'repayment' of sorts. On occasion, this was explicitly framed as an entitlement. As one respondent put it succinctly:

[W]e're entitled to them. We've worked all our life. (F, I, 75-89)

Notably, the Freedom Pass was generally understood as something that older people rightfully 'deserved', even on the odd occasion where people reported feeling 'lucky' to have it:

I know we've paid...our taxes and our dues and all the rest of it, but I still think we're very lucky to have this pass. (F, I, 65-89)

The primary understanding that travel concessions were a return on previous societal contributions was evidenced in some participants' explanations of why others did not deserve the same entitlements. These explanations often mirrored those for why older people did get free travel, in that free bus travel was described as less justified when granted to those they felt had 'not paid their dues'. One group mentioned on occasion was recent immigrants to London (who are eligible for the scheme on the basis of their age):

F1: What I can't understand is...the people who come in [migrate], and they've not paid any of the taxes or insurances like we all have done during my years... And they get bus passes.

F2: Yeah, well that's what I'm against. That's not fair. (I, 75-89)

Criticisms by older respondents of the entitlement of young people to free bus travel were more implicitly articulated in terms of a lack of contribution. Sentiments that young people's concession is undeserved were framed either in terms of a generational unfairness (for example, older participants did not benefit from this concession when they were children themselves or when they were parents of young children) or in terms of the ways in which young people choose to use concessionary travel:

[A]ll my children had to...walk to and from school... I could have killed Ken [Livingstone, former Mayor of London] for giving kids the right to travel on the buses, really and truly... They [young people] do abuse it [free bus travel] they get on, they get off [the buses]. (F, I, 70-74)

Well I used to have to walk to school...now, they get on for two bus stops (F, I, 75-89)

In summary, therefore, older citizens shared a strong and coherent sense of entitlement in relation to their own receipt of free public transport, which was evident in an unproblematic acceptance of their rightful entitlement, and a consequent questioning of that of others. It was understood as part-and-parcel of a wider set of benefits to which they are entitled on the basis of the taxes, insurances and 'dues' that they have paid over the course of their lives.

Formal entitlements as conditional: Young people's understandings of their right to free bus travel

Young people offered a more disparate, and in general more tentative, set of explanations for why they felt they had been granted their free bus travel. For some, and dovetailing with the official rationale for the scheme (TfL, 2006, p. 7), it was about increasing young people's capacity to "stay in education longer" (F, I, 16) and to pursue "extra-curricular activities" (M, O, 14-18). However, there was less consensus across young people's accounts than among the older respondents, and a range of other explanations were given by young people as to why they thought they were granted free bus travel, including the scheme being a means to cut transport-related pollution and it coming into force to help relieve financial pressure on working mothers. The lack of consensus was overtly played out in many of the group discussions, with some explicitly debating both the rationale and the likely effects of the scheme:

M1: I think it [the granting of free travel] could be because some people are lazy, tired, if they're tired they won't go to school. So then the government try and encourage them to go in, and they've got free travel...

M2: But then wouldn't that...defeat the point of...the government fitness thing? Because if they're trying to encourage people to get fit, why encourage them to take the bus then?

M1: True. (I, 15)

Thus, unlike the explanations given by older people, those from young people as to why they are granted free travel were more varied and were offered with uncertainty, with young people challenging, debating and altering each others' assumptions about the rationale for the concessionary bus travel they received. In addition, nothing in the accounts of young people suggested that, like their older counterparts, they felt that they had *earned* the right to travel without charge. However, as a universal benefit (Goodman et al., in press), entitlement was still understood as *relatively* unproblematic, given it was legitimated largely through socially valued ends such as fostering access to education, rather than as a potentially stigmatised benefit for those in particular need. Young people thus displayed a weaker sense of being entitled to free travel – and did not once conceptualise it explicitly as an 'entitlement' in the way that older people did – but they valued it all the same, with accounts of its benefits universal across our data set.

The fragility of formal entitlements to travel

The weaker sense of entitlement articulated by young people is perhaps most evident in accounts of what happened when they did not have the pass with them because it had been stolen or confiscated (for breaches of the 'Behaviour Code' (TfL, 2010c) – a code of conduct linked to receipt of concessionary bus travel which applies to young people but not to older citizens). As this young man's account of a journey following the theft of his 'Oyster'ⁱⁱ travel pass implies, apart from the transport exclusion that results from a stolen card, there are social risks that can arise from negotiating their rather more fragile entitlement:

[T]he day I was robbed I lost my Oyster. I had a missing [glasses] lens, ...buttons ripped off my shirt and a bruise on my face. And then I tell him [the bus driver] I don't have my Oyster, I got robbed, and he's like 'I've heard all these excuses...' and he was actually swearing at me...and then he kicked me off (M, I, 15-16)

Enacting entitlement, as Sen (1995) describes, can be difficult, and in situations where participants were without their pass, entitlement to use the bus could not be assumed as a 'right', but had to be negotiated. As one respondent put it, if you "just lost it [your pass] that same day you'd have to find a nice caring bus driver or they'll just be like, sorry mate I can't help you" (M, O, 15).

Young people conveyed the fragility of their entitlement in accounts, therefore, in a manner that corresponds both to the conditionality of their particular entitlement (on 'good behaviour') and to the lesser extent to which they felt they had actively earned their passes. While the substance of the entitlement conferred to young people and older citizens is comparable (bus and public transport fare exemptions respectively), it is clear that the conditions in which these entitlements are conferred mediate the status of the entitlement (and how this is in turn enacted) for each group.

Affective formal entitlements: riding the bus and belonging in London

When entitlement was unproblematic, and users had the capabilities to enact that entitlement, a salutogenic function was conferred not just by the receipt of that right, but also the enactment of those rights. Entitlement to free bus travel not only brought an

understanding of the operation of entitlements to the fore for young and old people but also, in turn, this understanding impinged on the sense of belonging (to London as a community or polity) experienced by our participants. The concessions informed the place-based identities (or sense of belonging) that our study participants construct for themselves. Specifically, the concessions engendered an enhanced and significant sense of ‘being a Londoner’. As one older person put it:

I guess some other thing that is quite good [about the travel concession], it makes you feel a Londoner. For what it’s worth. (F, I, 70-74)

For younger users, often aware that their concession was unusual to their city, this sense of belonging to the city was often stronger, and more explicitly framed as having an effect on wellbeing through fostering pride:

It [the Zip Card scheme]...makes you feel proud [to be a Londoner] because you’re at the front of everyone, because you’re the ones who have brought in these new schemes that are working and making your life easier... (M, O, 15)

And also you have this mutual understanding of [being...] a Londoner, you’re the same as me now. ...And there’s...this sense of community in this huge, huge [city.] (F, O, 18)

In part, the enhanced sense of ‘being a Londoner’ that participants derived from concessionary access to public transport stemmed from the capacity these concessions afforded them to “get to know” (M, I, 12-13) or “learn about” (F, YS, 17) London by travelling widely in it. As one young person put it:

I like it [having the Zip Card] because you feel kind of unique..., and it’s only in London. [Y]ou can travel around London because you’re a kind of a Londoner, but other people can’t. (F, O, 17)

In this respect, many of the younger aged study participants, in particular from the outer London boroughs, recounted exploratory bus journeys they had conducted “up London” (M, O, 13-16) to “the West End” (F, O, 15-16) or even to destinations unknown on account of their being able to travel by bus without charge. Concessionary bus travel, therefore, affords young people a topographical engagement with their urban surroundings which enhances their familiarity with the city by rendering them “more aware of where you’re going, how to get to places” (F, O, 14-15).

Beyond evoking a feeling of belonging or a sense of community, the receipt of a transport concession was important to recipients because it indicated to them that they resided in an innovative polity – in a city that is “at the front of everyone” as the young man quoted earlier puts it. Some recipients valued the concession, that is, not only for the belongingness that it implies, but also because it indicated to them that they live in a progressive society:

I’ve just taken it [concessionary travel] for granted... That’s what a civilised society would do (M, Other, 90+)

On occasion, this distinctiveness of London was described in comparison to other settings, in particular by young people. For instance, one focus group participant described how her “cousin [who] lives really far away...just wishes she could have more buses and the free travel...to get around more” (F, O, 14-15). By contrast, for older passengers who shared concessionary fares with other older people in England (Department for Transport, 2012), the referent for ‘belonging’ was typically more generic than just the city, and instead encompassed a broader sense of societal belonging. Specifically, this was articulated in terms of entitlement to a Freedom Pass being a sign of ‘recognition’ from the wider polity, and as therefore a positive affirmation of social worth:

[I]t's like [being] an old army veteran or something, you sort of feel, oh, well, I've got a free pass and I'm recognised. [P]eople say, that people who are, women who are older are invisible. And there's a sort of thing, well, I'm being recognised, acknowledged. I'm not being shunted, for once I'm not being shunted I'm being acknowledged. So I think in this way it's...quite important... The Freedom Pass isn't just, I've got a free pass. It does mean a lot of things. (F, I, 70-74)

Thus, entitlement to concessionary bus travel, if understood as resulting from valued, or at least unproblematic, social attributes or needs has potentially beneficial effects on wellbeing through the positive symbolic meanings that attach to that entitlement. Entitlement can, that is, contribute to a user's sense of belonging to a place or society.

However, when entitlement is understood as deriving from less valued social attributes, its enactment may have less positive implications for a sense of self worth. One rare example from accounts of formal entitlement to concessionary public transport suggests this, describing the discomfort felt at times by a Freedom Pass user in the course of using the bus:

[Y]ou do get this impression, from people, that you haven't paid, so you don't deserve a space of your own, you know? I don't take it to heart, I really don't...I just pick that up as...you can see the look on their [other passengers'] faces (F, I, 70-74)

Although such accounts are rare, they do indicate that an understanding of how group-specific entitlements such as concessionary bus travel are perceived by others (and how in turn this shapes attitudes towards recipients) is crucial to the likely health promoting effects (or otherwise) of transport entitlements. Whether the entitlement is constructed as based on valued attributes (contribution to society, ability to take part in education) or on less valued attributes (such as not paying one's way) is likely to change the symbolic meaning of enacting that entitlement, and in turn the psycho-social implications of that enactment. To illustrate, we turn now to the category of less formal or perceived entitlements to particular spaces or seats on the buses discussed by the study participants, which were more likely than formal entitlements to be open to contested claims to legitimacy.

Informal entitlements: Contested claims to occupy space on the bus

Informal entitlements included those to sit at crowded times of day, or to sit in 'priority seats', or to board the bus ahead of others. For older participants, accounts often focussed on the normative expectations these participants hold about getting or being offered a seat on the bus, and on the Goffman-esque social interaction strategies (Goffman, 1966) they employed to signal that they were entitled to a seat:

[T]he schoolchildren.... They're so noisy and well they do give you your seat now because the look we give them, they decide they'd better give you the seat. (F, O, 80-84)

There was no straightforward and mutually-recognised hierarchy of spatial rights on public buses. Rather, a cross cutting hierarchy based on the one hand on 'needs', and on the other 'rights', was articulated through stories of contested claims and difficulties in identifying whose access should be prioritised. A number of scenarios were brought to our attention in which rights to seating and to other passenger space on buses (and here the term 'rights' was often explicitly used) were disputed. These accounts often pertained to the section of the bus opposite the rear (exit) doors where seats are not provided. This is a clear space that is usually occupied by standing passengers during peak travel periods, and by infant buggies, passengers in wheelchairs, pieces of luggage or stowed shopping trolleys belonging to older/less mobile passengers at other times of the day. It is at these non-peak times that

reported problems in terms of a clash of perceived entitlements to space on the bus were repeatedly reported to arise, as in the following example:

Because... people are so unsociable on buses I tend not to get on with my trolley. ...Not because I'm shy, but you get these mums, with their great big four-by-four [wheels] prams and I have been told, "that [her trolley] needs to go!" I have got a letter... from [TfL – London's transport authority] to say that I have as much right as them to be on the bus. (F, I, 70-74)

Given the policy concern that offering concessionary bus travel to young people would reduce older passengers' ability to use the bus, one somewhat surprising finding was that the most frequently reported tension when it came to competing rights claims on the bus was between mothers with buggies and others (including older people with shopping or mobility trolleys and those using wheelchairs) in need of non-seating space. The recourse to external legitimisation for a rights claim, as in the example above of the "letter from TfL", was rare, but it does illustrate the potentially contestable nature of the entitlement to such space. More typical as a way to negotiate disputed rights was a range of subtle gestures deployed by fellow bus passengers to communicate their perceived superior entitlement to space on the bus. While many young people talked about their willingness to offer their seats to "whoever is deserving" (M, I, 15), their accounts on occasion highlighted how the occupation of space on the bus could be a source of dispute. Thus, two young focus group participants described their experience of such interactions between passengers as follows:

F1: [I]t's when you're on the bus and you're sitting down and the old person comes along and they look at you expecting you to stand up.

F2: Yeah, they give you that dirty look.

F1: They give you the look...as if you're supposed to stand up for them. But sometimes you're tired. ...And if that little area...chosen for them [the priority seating area] is full up [then] they come to the back and then start expecting other people to get up.

F2: ...I feel old people feel they have the right to the whole bus. (O, 15-16)

Here again the language of rights, and rights that are perceived as applying in an unequal way, is used explicitly when disputes over space on the bus is discussed. In this instance it is clear that these young people do not share the view that older people should be offered a seat automatically if there is nowhere else to sit: the 'right' derived from a social attribute (age) does not necessarily trump that derived from a 'need' (being tired).

In the abstract, users could construct a hierarchy of claims to space on the bus. Thus, in one interview two of the interviewees articulated their understanding of the hierarchy of bus users that they would give their seat up for – old people, disabled people and pregnant women (M, I, 15) – and similar hierarchies were provided in other accounts. However, in discussions, and in accounts of actual experiences of contested claims, what becomes clear is that this hierarchy is mutable. For instance, in one discussion, some of the participants argued that they "don't feel like [an overweight person] should have a seat as much as...an elderly person or someone with a small child" (F, O, 14-18). At the same time, however, some of the young people we spoke to expressed how they felt very much *subject to* these entitlement claims, rather than in a position to assert their own claims.

The findings also suggested that where entitlement is based overtly on need (rather than rights), enactment of the informal right is recognised as carrying a certain risk of disrespect for either party involved in a given negotiation of space on the bus. For instance, as the discussion above shows, both older and younger respondents referred to the "look" that older

bus users would have to give on occasion in order for a young person to give up their seat. This bore the risk for the older person of having to assert themselves in public, but also for the younger person of having to defer to another passenger in front of their peers, in particular if they were not thanked for their actions:

F1: The elderly people completely disrespect somebody just because they're young. ... [A] lot of the time...there's no verbal abuse but you can just see them looking at people like, you're in my seat...

M1: And then what annoys me is you give up your seat and...they don't even say thank you... They believe they have the right to sit there, that you should just get off, in a sense. (O, 14-18)

Elsewhere, in a group interview conducted with young people, uncertainty around whether or not a fellow bus user was pregnant was described as a potential source of disrespect:

M1: When I do sit down I'll give it up for an old person, a... paralysed person, or disabled [person]

M2: And pregnant people ... because that's the issue. ...If they ask for it [the seat] I'd jump up straightaway but...if I see someone I think is pregnant, I just try and figure it out. ...I just try and study [the person's figure], if you know what I mean, to make sure I don't end up insulting someone. (I, 15-16)

The ambiguity of entitlements based on need and vulnerability implied above meant that less mobile study participants on occasion indicated the important role of outward signifiers of entitlement to their everyday use of public transport. For instance, in an exchange between two older study participants, both over 90, one of them described how:

[E]specially because I've got a walking stick, people are extremely kind, and the kids help you down if necessary, they certainly give way to you once you get on the bus. And ... I don't even have to show my pass sometimes, [even though] I'm supposed to (M, Other, 90+)

Our findings also suggest that the potential for negotiations of space on the bus to generate disrespect and disharmony on occasion became visible when hierarchies of social difference intersected with those of vulnerability, as in this discussion between older bus users in outer London:

F1: They will not move, they will not move.... They don't move, schoolchildren do not *move*...

F2: I've always found they will move...

F3: *I'd have thought* that they would move but it's interesting, I wonder if they would give it to a white woman but not to [a non-white woman]

F4: Yes that's it, that's it. (O, 65-89 [emphasis in speech])

These accounts demonstrate that buses, as a constituent part of the urban public realm, constitute important 'sites' for the enactment of citizenship (see Isin, 2009, p. 370). Within this, they show that a complex set of norms and informal dicta are deployed in the course of everyday bus travel as a means to try to negotiate competing attitudes towards entitlement to sit, or occupy particular spaces, on buses. Importantly, these norms and dicta are mutable and so are contested, with the risks incumbent to this, in the course of bus travel.

Discussion

It is increasingly well established that access to transport is an important determinant of health, and emerging research findings suggest that concessionary fares have a role to play in fostering wellbeing. In this paper, we have explored an important mediator of the relationship between concessionary fares and wellbeing, namely how entitlement to that benefit is understood. We also discuss the conceptual significance of entitlements in relation to public bus travel by younger and older people. In doing so, we have shown how these understandings and deployments of formal and perceived entitlements can be ‘affective’, by which we mean that they can impinge on recipients’ sense of wellbeing as broadly conceived.

Where entitlements are understood as arising from valued aspects of the self (such as contributions to society) they straightforwardly constitute a route to enacting ‘belonging’ and deriving a sense of self-worth. When the rationale for a given entitlement is less easily understood via recourse to societal contribution, and the enactment itself is more fragile (as with entitlements granted to young people), there are possibilities that enactment can be fraught with risks of ‘disrespect’. The main implication of this study is that concessionary public transport has a set of effects on wellbeing that go beyond its effects on levels of physical activity through the elimination and generation of ‘active travel’ journeys (e.g. Besser & Dannenberg, 2005; Webb et al., 2011) and its capacity to mitigate the social isolation that may result from transport exclusion (e.g. King & Grayling, 2001; Spinney et al., 2009; Whitley & Prince, 2005). Though hard to measure, this set of potential health effects warrants attention as it relates to the degree to which often-marginalised groups (here, older citizens and young people) hold and report a sense of belonging (to a place or society) and perceive themselves to be recognised as valued and deserving citizens.

Study participants reported that the entitlement they received was important to them not only because it provided concessionary travel (and in turn facilitated participation in a range of social activities) *but also for symbolic reasons*. Our research suggests that for young people and older citizens alike, receipt of fare concessions on public buses and on the wider public transport network in London respectively signified a belonging to a conurbation (London in this case) and to the citizenry of that conurbation. The concessions were seen to bolster any ‘sense of being a Londoner’ that the recipient might construct for her- or himself, and to contribute “to the strengthening of people’s belonging to and perception of place” (Kearns, 1991: 530).

At the same time, for older recipients, receipt of the concession also brought a valued sense of societal recognition. The concession was understood to be, and presented to us as, a reflection of the entitlement to which older London residents were due on the basis of the contribution that they had made to society over the course of their lives so far. Notably, this sense of earned entitlement was not shared by the younger cohort of study participants.

In terms of outcomes for wellbeing (and in turn health if we see these two concepts “as part of a continuum” (Cattell et al., 2008, p. 546), these two concepts, belonging (or ‘solidarity’) and recognition (or ‘significance’), are component parts of the psychological sense of community construct outlined by Clarke (1973) and reframed in the context of ‘wellbeing’ by Young et al (2004). As Young et al (2004, p. 2629) put it “[s]ense of solidarity refers to sentiments such as feelings of belonging, togetherness, cohesion, and identification

[and...s]ense of significance entails members feeling that they are appreciated as important contributors to the group, thereby developing a sense of achievement, fulfilment and worth.” More recently, both concepts have been identified as key indicators of wellbeing – for example in the New Economics Foundation’s (2009) *National Accounts of Well-being*, ‘trust and belonging’ is included as an indicator of social wellbeing while ‘self-esteem’ is included as an indicator of personal wellbeing.

Critically, what this paper suggests is that it is not only the *substance* of entitlements that generate health outcomes, as has previously been demonstrated in relation to concessionary travel schemes (Coronini-Cronberg et al., 2012; A. Jones et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2011). In addition, the very act of entitling (or being entitled to) benefits can shape feelings of wellbeing (that can determine health) in and of itself. The very process of entitling individuals and groups impinges upon the wellbeing of entitlement recipients. In this instance, then, we argue that public transport concessions not only mitigate the particular transport-related barriers to social inclusion faced by young and older people discussed in the introduction to this paper, but more broadly that the act of entitlement can serve to mitigate wider forces of social exclusion faced by these groups. In this way, entitlements directed towards younger and older members of the population can act to reduce the feelings of exclusion, disenfranchisement and isolation felt by these groups, and might also act to improve their sense of self-worth.

Conclusion

The provision of concessionary transport is identified as a policy intervention that can support wider strategies to tackle social exclusion. In the UK context this is understood to be primarily by ensuring “that bus travel, in particular, remains within the means of those on limited incomes and those who have mobility difficulties” (Department for Transport, 2012). If the effectiveness of a free bus transport scheme resides in (say) its ability to promote access to goods and services or social inclusion, we suggest that its ‘affectiveness’ relies on how far it shapes the meaning of access and entitlement for its users. Here, where entitlement was understood as based on rights, it could enhance wellbeing. Where it was based on needs and vulnerability, it was more problematic, with social risks of underlining social marginalisation rather than fostering inclusion.

In this paper, we have sought to understand, through qualitative enquiry, the ways that recipients of such transport concessions understand and value the entitlements that they receive. This has suggested that beyond the substance of the entitlements themselves, the process and conditions of entitlement are also important when it comes to considering the effects of a given entitlement on recipients’ wellbeing. In particular, we have found that the relationship between entitlements and wellbeing is mediated by the sense of belonging that receipt of an entitlement confers on the individual. This, in turn, is a function of the nature of a given entitlement: where the entitlement has an ontological fit with a sense of personal entitlement then wellbeing can be enhanced, but where the entitlement is conditional or based on needs, rather than rights, then the rationale behind it is negotiable, and a recipient’s sense of wellbeing can be marginalised in the process of trying to enact that entitlement. This finding suggests that to reduce the risks to wellbeing that can come with enacting entitlements, policy-makers should pay attention to communicating a cogent rationale for a given entitlement so that the wider public better understand why that entitlement has been conferred.

Conflict of interest

None

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ⁱ The 'Young Scientists' programme offers work experience in an academic setting to young people aged 14-18 from schools in deprived parts of London. For further information see: <http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/aboutus/introducing/volunteering/ysp/index.html>.

ⁱⁱ 'Oyster' refers to the plastic card used to access London's transport system; as here, young people often used the term 'Oyster' to refer specifically to their free pass (the 'Zip Card').