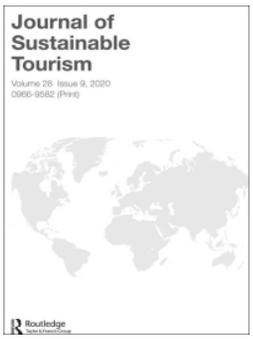

Journal of Sustainable Tourism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsus20

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To cite this article: Paulina Luzecka (2016) "Take a gap year!" A social practice perspective on air travel and potential transitions towards sustainable tourism mobility, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 24:3, 446-462, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2015.1115513

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1115513

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JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, 2016
VOL. 24, NO. 3, 446–462
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1115513

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"Take a gap year!" A social practice perspective on air travel and potential transitions towards sustainable tourism mobility

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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that contemporary tourism mobility, notably flying, is incompatible with sustainability goals. Fundamental changes in travel behaviour are required. Research shows that environmental values have little impact on tourists' travel decisions and that voluntary behaviour change is unlikely. Therefore, policies encouraging transitions to sustainable tourism require a deeper and more context-specific understanding of factors influencing current carbon-intensive travel patterns. This paper responds to this need by adopting a social practice perspective to explore the gap year phenomenon, an increasingly popular activity for the British youth, often involving multiple long-haul flights. The social practice approach positions young people's travel decisions as not being simply individual, but shaped by existing conventions, normative expectations and facilitated/constrained by available resources. The paper draws on the findings from a multi-sited ethnographic study in England, which involved over 30 in-depth interviews with students and other relevant actors, content analysis of gap year materials and participant observation at gap year-related events. Social influences that shape the current long-haul character of gap year travel are examined, and a number of important actors involved in developing, sustaining and reproducing unsustainable behaviours are identified. The implications for policy strategies aimed at changing mobility behaviour are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 November 2014
Accepted 13 October 2015

KEYWORDS
Air travel; gap year; travel destinations; social practices; climate change; structuration theory

Introduction

The continued growth of demand for air travel and the associated increase in greenhouse gas emissions pose a major challenge to climate change mitigation strategies (Gössling, Hall, Peeters, & Scott, 2010; Guiver, 2013; ICAO, 2009; Peeters & Dubois, 2010; UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2008). There are also other factors contributing to the overall climate impact of flying, including contrails and aviation-induced cirrus clouds (Burkhardt, Kärcher, & Schumann, 2010; Lee et al., 2009). Long-distance travel is considered to be particularly damaging due to the length of journey and because some gases (e.g. NOx) are more harmful at higher altitudes, typical for such flights (Chapman, 2007).

In the future, the impact of air travel on global climate change is likely to increase because of demand growth (Peeters & Dubois, 2010). In the UK, it is forecast to rise from 219 million passengers in 2011 to 445 million by 2050, with c.80% of these journeys undertaken for leisure purposes (Department for Transport, 2013). Many argue that unrestrained growth in demand is incompatible with sustainability goals and call for fundamental changes in travel patterns (Dubois, Peeters, Ceron, & Gössling, 2011; Gössling et al., 2010; Peeters & Dubois, 2010), especially because of the findings that

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technological advancements to aircraft, and operational improvements are insufficient to curb emissions from aviation (ICAO, 2009; Scott, Peeters, & Gossling, 2010). Biofuels are associated with major uncertainties (Timilsina & Shrestha, 2011), while emissions trading schemes provide only short-term fixes, not long-term solutions (Lawson, 2012; Peeters & Eijgelaar, 2014). In particular, a shift from long-haul to short-haul travel has been suggested as the most important focus for mitigation strategies, as the growth in emissions is attributed mainly to the increase in travel distance, rather than the number of trips (Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Peeters & Eijgelaar, 2014). In the UK, long-haul flying (>3700 km,) is responsible for 66% of overall aviation emissions (Committee on Climate Change, 2009).

There is a growing body of research suggesting that voluntary behaviour change in the context of air travel is unlikely, documenting the so-called "value-action gap" – i.e. even those who are concerned with the impact of flying on global climate change and are involved in various pro-environmental behaviours at home, are unwilling to change their travel and holiday plans for environmental reasons (Barr, Gilg, & Shaw, 2011a; Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Cohen, Higham, & Reis, 2013; Hares, Dickinson, & Wilkes, 2010). It has, therefore, been argued that stronger and different policy measures are needed to facilitate a societal shift to more sustainable forms of tourism and travel, policies that go beyond encouraging individual citizens to change their mobility choices (Barr & Prillwitz, 2014; Cohen et al., 2013). A deeper understanding of how current carbon-intensive travel patterns are shaped and sustained is, therefore, necessary to inform such strategies (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013). Indeed, there has been calls in recent years for a greater attention to be paid to socio-cultural causes of flying (Cohen et al., 2013; Higham, Cohen, & Cavaliere, 2014; Young, Higham, & Reis, 2014). There is a growing interest in the theories of social practice as a useful theoretical framework for studying (un)sustainable tourism mobility, which emphasizes the socio-cultural underpinnings of air travel, rather than focusing on individual choice and motivations (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Randles & Mander, 2009; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008). Thus, Randles and Mander (2009) explored frequent flying as a component of many celebrations and events, which were previously performed locally, such as birthdays or stag parties. "Internationalization" of such practices can be seen as one reason for the growing demand for air travel, shedding new light on the social mechanisms underlying frequent travel. However, travel practices that lie at the heart of the growing demand for flying still remain largely under-researched.

This paper responds to the calls for a more socially situated understanding of flying, by adopting a social practice perspective to explore the gap year travel phenomenon – an increasingly popular activity for the British youth -which often involves taking multiple long-haul flights. The paper is based on an in-depth, multi-sited ethnographic study, which explored how the demand for long-haul air travel is shaped in the gap year context. In particular, the aim was to shed light on the deeply socio-cultural nature of such travels, rather than seeing them as resulting purely from personal motivations, values and aspirations of gap year students. As such, the paper explores how the conventions and expectations related to the typically long-haul gap year destinations are developed and facilitated by various actors, institutions and infrastructures. It is argued here that theories of social practice, and strong structuration in particular (Stones, 2005), provide a useful methodological tool to study air travel practices. The findings of this study, framed within this theoretical perspective, have important implications for aviation climate change mitigation strategies.

Literature review

Social practice theories

Social practice theories gained a lot of interest over the last 15 years in many areas of consumption studies, including water and energy use within households, everyday mobility or eating/food disposal practices (for example Delormier, Frohlich, & Potvin, 2009; Evans, 2012; Gram-Hanssen, 2010; Ryghaug & Toftaker, 2014; Shove, 2003, 2007). In the UK, this interest arose partly as a response to

the psychological models of human behaviour that dominate the landscape of "behaviour change" policies (Department for Environment [DEFRA], 2008, 2011; House of Lords, 2011), and which are increasingly criticized for assigning too much agency and responsibility for change to individual consumers (Barr, Gilg, & Shaw, 2011b; Barr & Prillwitz, 2014; Shove, 2010). Social practice theories offer a rather different understanding of human behaviour, one where the value-action gap documented in tourists' behaviour (Barr et al., 2011a; Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Cohen et al., 2013; Hares et al., 2010) is no longer bewildering.

The questions of why individuals act contrary to their environmental beliefs, for example when they decide to fly to a long-haul destination, only makes sense if we assume that individual actions do (or should) depend on the coherent values, beliefs and morals of that individual (Shove, 2010, p. 1276). According to social practice theories, individuals, rather than acting according to a uniform system of values and beliefs, are seen as carriers of *social practices*, i.e. conventional, normalized ways of behaving and understanding in different situations. The main characteristic of social practice theories is that practices (rather than individuals or institutions) are seen here as the basic unit of the social world, from which both individuality and structure result (Shove, 2007, p. 12). A practice is "social", because it is carried out by different individuals at different points of space and time, but is characterized by the same or similar dress-code, behaviour, rituals, material objects as well as understanding, motivation, expectations etc. (Reckwitz, 2002). As each individual participates in a number of practices, often with contradictory norms and conventions, his or her behaviour is also likely to be contradictory. Consumption of resources, in this perspective, is only a side-effect of participation in practices (Warde, 2005). For example, a study by Shove explored how people use water to perform a variety of domestic practices, such as taking daily or twice-daily showers, which have replaced weekly baths as a conventional, normalized way of keeping our bodies clean (Shove, 2003). Social practice approaches focus on how social conventions such as frequent showering are shaped, rather than seeing them as resulting from individual choice. Similarly, flying is rarely an activity performed in and of itself, but is undertaken to allow participation in various practices, such as different types of holiday and business travel. This is not to say that individuals have no agency or power to make their own travel decisions – but the power to "choose" is constrained by the social organization of practices and, in the words of Rob Stones, "real people are less free to 'do otherwise' than abstract agents" (Stones, 2005, p. 112).

Such understanding of human behaviour has serious consequences for policy strategies, as it generates a different set of policy problem framings to those stemming from the dominant psychological perspectives. If we perceive behaviour as resulting from social practices, rather than individual choice, new avenues for interventions open up – the focus is no longer on changing behaviour, but on reconfiguring *practices*, which are shaped by a variety of actors, institutions and infrastructures, and over which no single actor has absolute control (Shove, 2010, 2014; Spurling, McMeekin, Shove, Southerton, & Welch, 2013). Reducing long-haul air travel will therefore require transforming the practices for which such travel is necessary. A deeper understanding of current carbon-intensive travel practices is therefore needed to inform transitions to sustainable mobility. This paper takes one such practice – gap year travel – as an object of inquiry, to examine how the demand for long-haul flying is shaped in this particular context. Rob Stone's (2005) "strong structuration" has been adopted as a specific framing of the social practice theory, which is an elaborated version of Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, with an improved methodology, and as such better suited for empirical application.

Gap year travel

There are different definitions of a gap year, which in the broadest sense can be understood as "any period of time between 3 and 24 months that an individual takes out of education, training or the workplace" (Jones, 2004). It can be taken at different points of education or career, and even during retirement (the so-called "golden gap years"). This paper focuses, however, on gap years taken after

Year 13 of UK education (normally 17−18-year-olds) and before entering employment or higher education. Due to the diverse nature of gap years it is difficult to quantify the exact number of young people that take a year out (Jones, 2004). A recent report based on a Longitudinal Study of Young People in England revealed that around 13% of students take a pre-university gap year; however, this figure does not include those who might be taking a year out before entering employment or non-university forms of higher education; potentially the proportion of young people on a post-school gap year could be even higher (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

There are many types of activities that individuals can engage in on a gap year, including travel, working abroad (and in Britain), volunteering, training, or retaking exams to improve results (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Jones, 2004). Some forms of gap year fall under the umbrella concept of "backpacking", however, as Sørensen (2003) argues, this concept is too broad to account for the heterogeneity and diversity of backpackers. Not all backpackers are gap year students, and vice-versa. This paper focuses on gap year travel, which is the second most popular *main* activity undertaken during gap years, the first one being paid work in Britain (Crawford & Cribb, 2012). However, it needs to be stressed that various gap year activities are not mutually exclusive and travel is often preceded by, included in, or followed by periods of paid work, fundraising, training and/or volunteering, so even those who identified UK work as their *main* activity can still be involved in periods of travel (Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Gap year travel should, therefore, be understood as "a period of travel during a gap year" rather than "a year-long travel". Indeed, backpacking literature documents the blurring of the traditional division between travel and the everyday, with periods of travel being interspersed with work, study and semi-permanent residence in different locations (Allon, Anderson, & Bushell, 2008; Clarke, 2005).

Gap year travel is increasingly popular among British youth and catered for by a growing infrastructure of backpacker hostels, transport and leisure services, bars, restaurants, and clubs directed specifically at this group of travellers (Heath, 2007). While independent travel and backpacking remain popular, a "gap year industry" has developed to provide more structured gap year programs. Jones (2004) found 85 UK-based specialist gap year organizations, which tend to focus on overseas programmes for both post-school and post-university gappers. The same review estimated that there are over 800 overseas volunteering organizations offering 350,000 placements worldwide, and suggested that a large proportion of those may be taken by UK gap year participants. Gap year travel has developed from a marginal activity to become a popular and accepted choice for many young people, a kind of contemporary "rite of passage" (O'Reilly, 2006, p. 998). The "mainstreaming" of gap years (O'Reilly, 2006) is significant for climate change mitigation strategies; long-haul destinations attract the greatest numbers of gap year students. The Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) reports that the most popular gap year destinations are all long-haul, including Australia, Thailand, Vietnam, Peru and USA (ABTA, 2013, 2015). All are dependent on air travel and often require stopovers, which are associated with higher emissions than direct flights (Gössling, 2011).

The gap year phenomenon is attracting increasing academic interest in various fields, including tourism and education studies. Previous research explored the impact of gap years on young people's personal development, identity formation, transitions to adulthood and the educational value of such experiences (see for example King, 2011; O'Shea, 2011). Pike and Beames (2007) questioned how far organized adventure programs are able to deliver their "character building" promises, as risk taking and adventure occur in highly controlled, structured settings. Others highlighted the need for caution in making assumptions about the educational value of gap year travel and its ability to develop a sense of "global citizenship", suggesting that they may perpetuate simplistic imaginations and neo-colonial stereotypes of the "Third World" (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2011; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2013). And gap year travels might be a new way of confirming the class distinction for predominantly white, middle-class "gappers" from affluent backgrounds, to gain privilege in the job and university markets, helping them "stand out from the crowd" in recruitment processes (Bagnoli, 2009; Heath, 2007). Cremin (2007) situates gap years in a broader argument regarding the relationship of the subject to free-market capitalism, discussing the commodification of a "time out" to

obtain career advantage. However, there has been no research to date examining gap years from the sustainability perspective, focusing on the factors that influence long-haul destination choices. Such research is vital, considering the popularity of gap years in the UK and the significant environmental costs of multiple long-haul flights. Moreover, even though a gap year is often perceived as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, it is likely to influence future travel practices and destination choices, resulting in even greater greenhouse gas emissions. Studies suggest that episodic travel experiences can inspire a desire for more travel, which can become a central feature of a person's identity and long-term lifestyle (Cohen, 2011; Richards & Wilson, 2003). It is known that young people often use their gap year experiences as building blocks in the process of identity formation (Bagnoli, 2009; King, 2011). Together, there are, therefore, real issues for the development of sustainable mobility practices. Indeed, a desire to "keep their gap year alive", which can take the form of return trips to the visited countries, has already been documented among some gap year students (O'Shea, 2011).

Research methods

The research findings presented in this paper are based on an in-depth multi-sited ethnographic study, which adopted a social practice perspective to explore the socio-cultural underpinnings of long-haul travel choices in the context of gap years. The object of interest was therefore not the *performance* of the gap year practice itself (i.e. what happens during gap years), but the moment of recruitment, i.e. the planning and decision-making stage, particularly in relation to destination decisions, and on identifying the socio-cultural factors facilitating long-haul choices, rather than individual motivations and aspirations.

The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with A-level students at one of the state colleges in the South West of England. The A-level is a school-leaving qualification required for university entrance in the UK. While researching practices requires tapping into knowledge and understandings that are often taken-for-granted, it has been found that people are able to discuss even their most mundane, habitual practices in meaningful ways, when prompted with the right questions (Hitchings, 2012). As such interviews were considered to be an appropriate method of data collection for this study. Participants were recruited in a face-to-face manner in the classrooms, where, with teachers' permissions, the researcher provided a brief description of the project. The main focus was on recruiting students who were in the planning stage of their gap years. In return for their time, students were offered a chance to enter a prize-draw at the end of the research period, with an opportunity to win one of two £250 Amazon vouchers.

This paper presents the results of the "agent's context analysis"[1] undertaken as part of this study - a form of methodological bracketing, which allows the researcher to temporarily "bracket out" individual agency, focusing instead on the terrain for action (Stones, 2005). This terrain consists of three types of structures that people face when carrying out their social practices – these are meanings, norms, and material, as well as non-material resources (i.e. structures of signification, legitimation and domination respectively). Interviews with college students served to identify these external structures, in particular those that facilitated the long-haul as a natural choice for gap year travel.

"How practices travel" (Sustainable Practices Research Group [SPRG], 2012, p. 7) was another key question: i.e. how students learnt about gap years and which actors were involved in teaching them and providing resources. The reason behind this strategy was that in a social practice perspective the context of action is not "methodologically given" as is sometimes the case in more structural understandings of the social world (Stones, 2005, p. 123). Instead, it is continuously shaped, reproduced and re-configured by a number of actors, and as such the "agent's context analysis" involves identifying those actors and their relevant practices (Stones, 2005). A multi-sited ethnographic method (Falzon, 2009) was employed to trace the connections identified during interviews with the students, to further examine gap year meanings, norms and resources, as well as to identify the important networked agents involved in shaping them. That stage of data collection involved participant observation at six gap year-related events (mainly industry fairs and gap year/travel talks), but also events

less directly linked to gap years, such as a careers fair and a Christian summer youth festival, where gap year opportunities were also being showcased. It also involved analysing gap year material distributed at those events, as well as the websites and other resources identified by interviewed students as being influential in their decision making. Some of the relevant actors were then interviewed to provide an insight into a variety of views, concerns and interests at play within the gap year context. Interviewed actors included college staff (teachers, tutors, an events organizer and a progression officer[2]), industry representatives and university recruitment and admissions staff.

Altogether, 33 in-depth interviews were carried out, 23 of which were with students, and 10 with other relevant actors. 18 students took part in the study and 5 were interviewed twice to account for changes in their gap year plans. Interviews were mainly conducted in coffee shops, with several taking place in participants' offices and one at a careers event. Interviews were carried out in an informal, conversational manner (Spradley, 1979), in order to establish a better rapport with participants. Interview recordings (lasting between 30 and over 60 minutes) were then transcribed, coded and analysed according to agent's context analysis (Stones, 2005), with the focus on identifying external structural clusters of norms, meanings and resources that facilitate gap year travel. Repeated readings of the interview transcripts resulted in reducing the empirical material into categories, guided by structuration theory and participants' narratives, which allowed for identifying emergent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Content analysis of gap year promotion materials, websites and other resources was also carried out in the same manner. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to preserve participants' anonymity.

Findings

The meanings and norms related to distance in the gap year context

The vast majority of the interviewed students planned to travel to long-haul destinations in their gap year and most talked about wanting to visit several countries, often on different continents – if closer locations were considered, this was normally *in addition* to the faraway journey. This section explores the norms and meanings (or: structures of legitimation and signification) identified as contributing to the normalization of long-haul travel in the gap year context. These norms and meanings are part of the context faced by active agents when performing social practices, according to strong structuration (Stones, 2005). They are what Stones (2005) refers to as "irresistible causal forces" – theoretically, agents can always "do otherwise" and choose not to follow the accepted social conventions and interpretations, but real people are less able to do that than abstract agents. They might lack critical distance, adequate knowledge of alternatives or *feel* that they do not have the ability to resist. As highlighted in existing literature, a gap year is perceived as a constructive time out, associated with numerous benefits for participating individuals (including personal development, improving employability, learning about the world and other cultures etc.), which are seen as important for young people at the moment of transitions to adulthood, employment and higher education (Cremin, 2007; King, 2011; O'Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2005). This study found that in order for a gap year to fulfil many of its promises, travel to long-haul destinations was often seen as either necessary or preferable to UK or European locations. These understandings were found in students' own narratives; present in promotion materials distributed by various gap year organizations, guidebooks, leaflets, websites and other information sources; and expressed by teachers, career advisers and other important actors.

Distance and difference in the gap year context

One of the perceptions and understandings related to gap year travel is that it is seen as a reward for hard work that students undertake for their A-level exams and a well-deserved break before entering employment or higher education. All interviewees expressed excitement and anticipation in relation to their gap year plans. Lily, an A level student, described how she thought about it "literally every

day". However, the desire to travel did not always come from student themselves. Katherine, an A level teacher, recalls a student of hers who was persuaded to take a gap year despite having a preference to go straight to university:

> She just works and works and works, and I can see that she's getting jaded. She's just, you know, she's looking for four A*'s at A-level, that's what she wants. And she looks tired now. And I'd like her to have a gap year before she goes to university… Her mother's been trying to persuade her to go, to do a gap year, but she's… it's strange. She's just driven; I think she loves her subject.

The above quote provides an illustrative example that taking a year-long break is now one of the widely accepted choices for young people, one that parents and teachers are likely to approve of, or even encourage. Indeed, most interviewed students reported support they received from teachers, tutors, parents and other authority figures. In Katherine's account, it is considered unusual, "strange" even, for someone to resist this opportunity, when given a chance. This idea was referred to by Cremin (2007) as "the injunction to enjoy" (p. 532).

Most importantly, this study found that a break from education and anticipated enjoyment were often linked to visiting long-haul destinations. A desire for physical distance and associated cultural difference as a motivation to travel has already been identified in tourism research (Larsen & Guiver, 2013). This was also the case for many interviewees, who expressed excitement about the anticipated encounters with cultures very different to their own. Susie, a student, planning to go to India, Southeast Asia and Australia on her gap year, talked about her destination choices in the following way:

> Like, staying in England, there's not much that goes on here [laughs]. And I'm so used to it here as well. So being somewhere else and trying new food and trying like, different cultures, like, seeing these different things is just really exciting… I think experiencing it is so exciting. And so different.

However, there is ongoing research in tourism exploring the ways in which tourism destinations are "made" and place imaginations socially constructed (e.g. Hughes, 1992; Iwashita, 2003; Urry & Larsen, 2011). As Larsen and Guiver (2013) found, the perceptions of difference and distance are relative, and do not always directly translate into overcoming physical distance. They argued that because of climate change challenges, the tourists' desire for cultural difference could be potentially satisfied by visiting closer destinations. This study found, however, that in the gap year context the imaginations of difference were linked to traditional colonial representations of the "Third World", where members of local populations are perceived in a simplistic and romanticized way as "the Other", where difference from European culture is emphasized and similarities downplayed (Said, 1978). Existing literature documents that such perceptions are still alive in contemporary tourism encounters (Favero, 2007; Salazar, 2013), including gap year and youth travel (Desforges, 1998; Lyons et al., 2011; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2013).

This study found that the imaginations of "the Other" served to justify the choice of some long-haul destinations as appropriate for gap years. In particular, facing cultures very different to their own, were found to be of value for a gap year as an "introspective journey" (Bagnoli, 2009), i.e. a time for personal development, learning about the self, discovering talents, making career and university choices, realizing full potential and becoming an adult. Indeed, many interviewed students, as well as other actors, expressed expectations that gap year travel experiences will impact on their knowledge of self and the world. As Amy, an interviewed student, put it: "I guess it's the kind of cliché of 'finding yourself'". In particular, witnessing hardships in less developed countries was considered to have a transformational value for young people. Katherine, the A-level teacher, believed that such encounters can make young people more appreciative of the privileges they enjoy in the UK:

> I do believe gap years are really good for students… If you have this wonderful life you also assume that other people in the world have the same privileges as you do… I don't want people to see the horrible side of life, but I do want them to see that life is very hard for some people. And most people, when they do a gap year, they choose to go somewhere that is very different. And, you know, that's one comment they make, that "I'm really, really grateful for what I've got" when they come back.

Mostafanezhad (2013) found that in the context of volunteer tourism, popular also among gap year students, poverty is often aestheticized as more "authentic" than Western materialism, while those experiencing hardships are perceived as happy and content with their fate. Similar sentiments were used to advertise gap year programmes, such as this participant testimony from a "Rubbish Dump Children's Project" in Mexico found in the Outreach International (2012) brochure:

> It has opened my eyes to a way of life so different to our own, where families live beside rubbish dumps, earning their living by collecting bottles and other useful rubbish thrown out by tourists. And yet these families are amongst the happiest I have ever seen.

The overall picture is, therefore, one in which witnessing poverty can be an important aspect of a gap year journey of self-discovery, making young people rethink their own life situation and appreciate the privileges they enjoy. These understandings arguably contribute to the perceptions of some long-haul destinations as appropriate for gap years.

Moreover, encounters with different cultures were also believed to provide a form of civic education, building tolerance and developing a sense of global community, particularly in relation to engagement in volunteering work. Some of the teachers I spoke to were very passionate about developing those qualities in their students, not only in terms of supporting them in their gap year choices, but also through organizing school trips to places that are culturally very different to the UK. John, an A level teacher, said:

> I know long distance travel: ooh – carbon dioxide, ooh – that sort of thing. But for the sake of humanity, the fact that you meet a Muslim and you begin to think: I lived in a Muslim village for a while, I've got friends who are Muslim and they're not terrorists, so it's breaking all that down.

Whether gap years can in fact deliver genuine appreciation of other cultures is open to question, with researchers adopting polarized positions (Lyons et al., 2011; O'Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2013). From the environmental point of view, however, the importance of such discourses is that they justify the necessity of travel, often to faraway locations, and usually flying. It could be argued that in light of climate change challenges, the value of long-haul travel for educational and personal-development purposes should be re-assessed, not only in relation to gap years, but also to overseas trips organized at schools and universities. Later in our conversation, John questioned the necessity of travelling to distant locations, suggesting that at least some of the pedagogic principles could be achieved through volunteering projects in closer destinations. He reflected not only on gap years, but also referred to school trips to different African countries organized by his college:

> There's a bigger question there. Because we think, and this is me contradicting myself in a sense, because we think we've got to go abroad to discover community and things we've lost, but we can help build them here. There are so many projects in the UK to work for the National Trust, voluntary work, working in disadvantaged communities… Because for me community is what it's all about, there's a global community if you like. We go and live in a Muslim village, we work with them, and get to know people, but why aren't we doing that in North Devon? Why do we have to do that in some remote place? Are they more deserving?

The above extract illustrates the often taken-for-granted nature of the pedagogic value of community work in distant locations – the interview served as a moment of reflection and re-evaluation of these taken-for-granted assumptions.

It was not only encounters with other cultures that were believed to bring tangible benefits for young people's personal development. Additional benefits were associated with being faced with challenging, often dangerous natural environments and exploring off the beaten track destinations. Indeed, previous studies found that facing "the Other" or "unspoilt" nature, were crucial for backpackers in developing adventurous identities (Elsrud, 2001), and that companies organizing youth expeditions use the imaginations of danger and risk (interestingly, often alongside safety) as a selling point for their programmes (Pike & Beames, 2007). This study found that part of the appeal of some long-haul destinations were the perceived dangers and their associated character-building qualities.

For example, Raleigh International (n.d.) had the following description of their expedition to Borneo in a brochure picked up at one of the gap year fairs:

> A tough physical and mental challenge, venturers trek across some of Sabah's most rugged terrain. You'll learn to survive in one of the harshest environments on earth – the jungle.

Similarly Charlie, one of the students, talked about his interest in "geography that can kill you", which resulted in his plans to visit places with active volcanoes (Hawaii) or during a tornado season (US), and enthusiastically described the expected dangers and his "disregard for personal safety".

The expected benefits of travelling to challenging, long-haul locations go beyond personal gains, but are believed to translate into a better university performance, more confidence, and better life skills in general. For example, the UK's Royal Geographical Society offers scholarships "to enable students to undertake some meaningful overseas travel before going to university" and provides testimonies of previous scholars on their website (Royal Geographical Society with IBG [RGS-IBG], 2014a). One student described how her four-month gap year journey through New Zealand, Chile, Peru and USA contributed to her personal development and made her more ready for university:

> My confidence is so much better, and I think I have gained a lot of people skills. My organizational and planning skills have improved. I also find it easier to manage my finances, which will be a big help at university. (Royal Geographical Society with IBG [RGS-IBG], 2014b)

Long-haul education

Another set of relevant social meanings and norms related to the value of experience in the process of acquiring knowledge. This is a long-established approach in the field of education, where engaging in and reflecting on physical experiences serve to complement more traditional forms of learning (Dewey, 1938; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981). European Grand Tours of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are cited in the literature as a precursor to the modern gap year, which served as an extended educational experience for young British aristocrats through exposure to classical culture (O'Reilly, 2006), even if such experiences were not always strictly educational and involved entertainments and pleasure pursuits (Inglis, 2000). Modern gap years have also been identified as complementing more formal types of learning and even referred to as "a gap year education" (O'Shea, 2011). This study found that in many cases, access to different environments, cultures, processes and phenomena of interest was dependent on long-haul travel. For example, Charlie believed that witnessing various meteorological and geological phenomena will make a positive contribution to his geography degree. He recalled that this idea was first proposed to him by his aunt, a university lecturer, who advised that "if you target it [gap year] on certain things, like, I want to go do geographical things, it will help in your studies, if you want to do writings around the things you've experienced". Similarly Sarah wanted to "tailor" her gap year to be "medicine related" and she believed that "a wider perspective on medicine worldwide" and "experiencing other healthcare settings" will be beneficial for her medical degree. Charlie's choice of the US (tornadoes), including Hawaii (volcanoes), and Sarah's desire to experience Africa "from a health point of view and the poverty there", can be therefore seen partly as a consequence of the societal perceptions of gap years as another stage of education and the established value of experiential learning. Again this underlines the point that social meanings and norms are an important aspect of the "terrain for action" faced by gap year students in the moment of recruitment, when destination decisions are made.

Interestingly, the notion that first-hand experience of various phenomena and objects of interest is desirable extended to the topics of sustainability, climate change and conservation. Lily, for example, talked about visiting Cuba alongside her main trip to South America, because of her interest in their "sustainable ways of growing food" and "the effects of the hurricane on their sustainability". At the time of our conversation, she was actively involved in local volunteering projects, which focused on climate change and food waste, and saw her gap year plans as an extension of that interest and learning. This was despite her awareness of the negative aspects of flying that she expressed

elsewhere in the interview – a prime example of the value-action gap. While her interest in sustainability could potentially be seen as an excuse to justify her carbon-intensive flight to Cuba, this choice also sits within the broader societal values of experiential learning, which arguably contribute to the perceptions of long-haul air travel as acceptable and often unavoidable.

This study found that students, teachers, careers advisers and other actors were very aware of increasingly competitive job and university markets, and additional experiences gained during gap years were understood to be a predominantly positive addition to a CV. For this reason, various agents were involved in providing support and advising students on their gap year choices. Caution was sometimes expressed in relation to some university disciplines such as maths and medicine, which were seen as not always treating gap year applicants in a favourable way, but the dominant perception was that a constructive gap year (with the emphasis on "constructive") would increase the chances to secure a place at a university and a good job in future.

University of Birmingham, UK, have even created a video, in which university staff and students talk about the advantages of taking a gap year (University of Birmingham, 2014). While the video advised prospective students to always consult relevant admissions tutors regarding their views on gap years, the opinions presented in the video were predominantly positive, further promoting the view that taking a year out to travel can serve as a preparation for the university course and have an educational purpose. Dr Julia Lodge, Admissions Tutor for Biological Sciences says:

> I'm a big fan of gap years… a lot of students who want to study a biology degree actually want to go off and travel and perhaps work on a conservation project and of course that's all very good, it will contribute towards your degree and your preparation for that and then when you come to us you'll be ready for your studies. So if there's something you really want to do then my advice is to go for it.

The overall picture is, therefore, one in which students are encouraged to gain practical experience in a chosen career prior to university and complement their text book knowledge with a first-hand exploration of the world. For many interests, such perceptions arguably necessitate travel to long-haul destinations (to witness, for example, tornadoes in the US or sustainable agriculture in Cuba).

Conventional destinations

While taking a gap year to Europe or Britain was not completely excluded as a possibility, there was a sense that faraway locations were preferable, and students were often surprised by questions about considering Britain or Europe for their travels. In some cases, destination choices were made explicitly in relation to what was considered to be a "normal" gap year behaviour, following the accepted convention, as this extract from my interview with Lauren, an A level student, illustrates:

> I think that kind of side of the globe is way more common for gap years [talking about Australia, New Zealand, South East Asia and India]. Than, say, like America. I don't know, but I'd prefer to go that way. Go, like, east, instead of west. Because I see that America is more like a kind of family holiday or something. Yeah. I don't know why, I just do.

Amy expressed a similar sentiment when talking about her decisions to go to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, stating that "it's just kind of the classic backpacker route". While the above quotations can be considered as rather simplistic accounts of destination decision making, and both Lauren and Amy were able to provide more details and personal motivations when prompted with additional questions, they nonetheless suggest the existence of a gap year convention in relation to destinations. In some cases this "script" for action can be appropriated without much critical reflection.

Following traditional routes facilitates encounters with other travellers, which are considered to be part of the gap year experience, as this extract from my interview with Susie illustrates:

> Everyone says you will meet so many people there… Apparently you keep running into the same people because it's people travelling at the same time as you and they are doing the same places.

Binder (2004) has previously observed that backpackers tend to establish an (imagined) community by positioning themselves as distinct from the local "Other" as well as from the non-travellers at home. Travelling to distant locations can be, therefore, as much about encountering the "Other" as meeting those who are the same. This study found that some of the prospective gappers were aware of the existence of such community and expressed a desire to meet other travellers. The implication here is that the typical (long-haul) gap year destinations are likely to continue to attract new cohorts of gappers, as tales of the friendly travel community and camaraderie are passed on to the new recruits.

Ethical issues, positive impact

The environmental impact of long-haul flying was usually overlooked in the mainstream gap year discourse. If it was considered, it was thought to be outweighed by the positive influence of gappers' volunteering work on the communities and environments they visit, and by the personal gains for the students themselves. Ian, a representative of a non-profit organization promoting ethical gap year programmes, explained:

> I wouldn't want to discourage anybody from doing a gap year because of the environmental damage. There are much, much bigger environmental impacts than young people travelling – industrialization in China, and things like that… We are very conscious of the environmental cost of some gap year opportunities, particularly the travelling ones, but we hope that also a lot of the projects are working in the opposite direction and are involved in conservation work and conservation awareness and so on.

Real Gap Experience (2014), the UK's largest gap year travel company (according to their website), dedicated a section of their website to "Responsible Travel", but this did not include any information about flying-related emissions, instead focusing on the positive impact of conservation projects:

> Our conservation projects make a positive contribution to the preservation of natural and human heritage, biodiversity and wilderness across the globe.

In other cases, the positive influences of gap year programmes were related to people, rather than environments, and environmental considerations were absent in such accounts. David, a representative of a Christian gap year organization, perceived environmental issues as important, but secondary to human needs, and in his view the positive impact of short-term gap year missions on both gappers and local communities alike outweighed the environmental costs associated with flying. It can be argued that the widespread understandings of gap year experiences as ethical and sustainable, contribute to the perceptions of flying as an acceptable "green sin" in this context.

Gap year travel resources

The study also identified various material and non-material resources (or: structures of domination), which are power relations in the form of control over economic/material resources and control over people (Stones, 2005). They constitute "independent causal influences" in structuration theory, i.e. those parts of external structures that are completely autonomous from individual agents they affect (Stones, 2005). These are in contrast to "irresistible causal forces" discussed in the previous section, i.e. norms and meanings, where agents at least theoretically have the physical ability to resist. Resources identified in this study included infrastructures, institutional arrangements and various sources of support and information that often made long-haul destination choices easier and more accessible than opportunities closer to home.

Promotional events and information sources were dominated by professional gap year organizations which tended to specialize in long-haul opportunities, with only a small number of European or UK-based programmes being promoted (an exception being The Year in Industry, an organization offering UK gap year placements in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics). As an example, Royal Geographical Society with IBG (RGS-IBG, 2015) included 77 profiles of ex and

prospective scholars on their website: only two of the gap year itineraries presented did not involve flying to long-haul locations. Gap year fairs were hosted at schools and colleges, representatives of gap year organizations were invited to parents' evenings or to give talks to students, they were present at career events for students as young as Year 9 (i.e. ages 13−14), and advertised their programmes during official UCAS conventions (Universities & Colleges Admissions Service events where universities, and a limited number of non-higher education organizations, are invited to showcase their courses and opportunities). This was in addition to a breadth of information available on the websites of such organizations, which were among the top results for Google searches related to "gap year". The study found that college staff and teachers sometimes drew on those resources in order to advise students. This was often seen as part of their role to provide support in transitions to higher education. While a previous study by Heath (2007) suggested that private sector school pupils might be getting more institutional support in their gap year planning, this study identified concerted efforts by some actors within the college to ensure that those from less wealthy backgrounds can also participate. Some were able to draw on their own travel knowledge and skills; others, like Elizabeth, a lead tutor for one of the faculties in the college, relied on gap year promotion materials from professional organizations and invited them to talk to students:

> In the same way as we are obliged to send students progression information about how to start applying for university, so I see it along those lines, it's just doing a service if you like. Without wishing to promote certain organizations over others. But, you know, naturally some come to your attention and others don't.

Jones's (2004) review of gap year provision suggested that the supply of UK-based volunteering opportunities is higher than current demand. Equally, he contested that apart from the small number of dedicated UK-placement schemes for gap year students, the provision of work placements in various companies is likely to be substantially higher. However, this study found that such opportunities were not being promoted in the same fashion as overseas placements and were largely absent in the mainstream channels of gap year information, which arguably reinforced ideas about appropriate destinations being long-haul.

The study also identified a number of resources which allowed gap year students to overcome financial constraints normally associated with long-haul travel in other contexts. Many gap year websites and information distributed to parents and students during gap year and career events offered help and tips on fundraising and budgeting for gap year travel, making it more accessible to less well-off students. As pre-university gap year students tend to live with parents prior to their travels, they are also more able to save money through work than other types of travellers. The study also found that there were gap year scholarships for overseas travel available through different organizations and charities (see RGS-IBG, 2014a). In some cases, the scholarships determined the gap year location. Lily, an A level student, said that the organization that offered to partially fund her gap year gave her a choice between Nicaragua, Tanzania and India as potential destinations.

The study also identified that knowledge and skills associated with independent gap year travel, such as booking flights, finding accommodation, getting visas and various place-specific travel knowledge were provided by a number of blogs, travel websites and guidebooks. Moreover, some gappers were a second generation of gap year students in their families, such as Susie, who planned to volunteer overseas with the same organization as her mother did many years back. The preference for certain destinations was often passed on by those who participated in previous years. Amy, for example, identified her brother's gap year stories as the greatest influence on her destination choices.

Moreover, available budgets were found to limit destination options in many cases, with some of the long-haul locations simply being cheaper or easier to reach. Susie's initial plan was to travel on land across Europe, from Spain to Turkey, and then fly to India, go through Indonesia, and so to Australia. In our second interview, she had changed her plans:

> I'm not going to go across Europe, I don't think. I'm just going to go straight to Asia. Because, being in Spain, I just saw how expensive Europe is. I don't think it's really going to be worth it when my priority is Asia that I really want to go to.

David, a representative of a large gap year and student travel organization, also recalled practical considerations being important for his customers: Australia and South East Asia were considered easy choices, while China more difficult, due to getting visas being "a bit of a nightmare". The ease of getting employment in Australia and the relatively high wages made it an obvious choice for the working stage of Susie's gap year.

Moreover, some of the available flight deals, particularly the "around the world" gap year opportunities, were found to enforce more travel than sometimes desired. In her second interview, Lily told me about her friends who recently returned from their gap year:

> They said that they really didn't like LA… they just went there because that was part of the world trip. And they didn't like it and they had to stay there for two weeks.

While university entry requirements did not necessarily favour those with overseas travel experiences, there was anecdotal evidence that some forms of relevant experience might be easier to get in less developed countries, although it was beyond the scope of this study to verify such claims. Kyle, a representative of a gap year organization offering medical gap year projects overseas, said:

> Some universities look for experience. And this is something hospitals in the UK wouldn't let you do here because of the Health & Safety regulations… They [partner hospitals overseas] wouldn't of course allow students to carry out open-heart surgeries, but here our students wouldn't even be allowed in hospitals because of the Health & Safety measures.

Finally, even though it was not the main focus of the study, several interviews suggested that school trips are also evolving towards longer haul destinations. There was evidence to suggest that these practices can, to an extent, overlap with gap years, with several students reporting gaining confidence and being inspired to travel through school trips. In some cases, the link between school trips and gap years was even more direct, through establishing links and contacts in overseas destinations, as in the case of Charlotte, who planned on going to Nepal because of her college's involvement in charity work there.

Conclusions

This paper examined the social norms, meanings and resources that influence long-haul destination choices as the most appropriate, natural or convenient for gap year travel. When flying is positioned as an integral part of travel practices, such as gap years, it becomes clear that destination and transport decisions are not truly "individual". This paper demonstrated that adopting a social practice perspective, and strong structuration in particular (Stones, 2005) can bring interesting insights into how such decisions are shaped in specific contexts.

The study identified a variety of socio-cultural factors that make long-haul destinations a natural choice for gap year travel, for example: socially shared perceptions of difference and distance; the perceived value of travel-related challenges and learning for young people's development and career prospects; or more practical issues, such as some long-haul destinations being easier and cheaper to travel to than those located closer to home. Students developed travel skills, acquired necessary resources and learnt about appropriate gap year destinations from a variety of networked others. These actors adopted different orientations towards gap years as they carried out their own social practices and performed various roles. They included concerned parents and teachers equipping young people with what they believed were the best set of skills and experiences for the future; gap year organizations oriented towards generating profit; volunteering, ethical, church and other non-profit organizations, with an interest in delivering help and support in distant parts of the world or providing education for young people; previous cohorts of gap year students who shared their experiences and tips with the new recruits; or admissions tutors who considered gap years as beneficial to prospective students. This paper revealed a variety of concerns and interests at play, situating gap

year travellers and their destination decisions in the midst of position-practices of numerous networked actors.

Finally, considering the efforts of several actors in this study to widen participation in gap year travel to include students from less wealthy backgrounds, its popularity may only increase with time. Cairns and Newson (2006) warned against the potential of a socio-cultural lock-in of air travel, with flying embedded in our lifestyles in a similar way to car usage. With climate change looming, it is questionable whether the potential benefits of gap year experiences justify the normalization of long-haul travel as an accepted stage in young people's personal development and education. Considering that gap years are associated with fewer time constraints than many other travel and tourism practices, there is arguably a potential for a greater use of slower, less-energy intensive transport modes and making the journey itself part of the travel experience, often suggested as a potential tourism adaptation strategy to climate change (Dickinson, Robbins, & Lumsdon, 2010).

The points discussed above have important implications for policy strategies aimed at changing mobility behaviour. This paper argues that the social organization of travel practices should be taken into account when designing sustainable mobility strategies, especially when assessing the likelihood of voluntary behaviour change, as well as the risks associated with postponing decisions about curbing aviation growth to the future. In the light of the findings presented here, those wishing to facilitate transitions to sustainable gap year mobility will need to understand and consider the socio-cultural forces which shape its current, long-haul character.

Notes

1. The concept of an "agent" relates to active agency, i.e. to human subjects producing practical action.
2. A progression officer was a member of college staff responsible for assisting students with career planning and university applications.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers whose detailed comments helped improve and clarify the first draft of this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council doctoral studentship [grant number ES/J50015X/1], as part of the South-West Doctoral Training Centre (SWDTC) strategic partnership.

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