**The paradox of mobility for older people in the rural-urban fringe**

**Abstract:** Whilst considerable focus has been placed on mobility in rural and urban areas, there has been little attention to date on individuals’ experiences and practices of mobility in the rural-urban fringe (RUF). This is surprising given that mobility is a defining feature of the RUF, and with such landscapes often experienced at speed. Through a focus on older people living in a RUF locality, the paper makes three important contributions. First, it highlights the range of mobilities and mobility infrastructures that may be available to older residents in the RUF, as well as their ability to access such features. Second, it also identifies the importance of ‘proximity’ in shaping older people’s mobilities in the context of the RUF and how a rural-urban fringe (mobility) idyll may exist for many older people. Finally, the paper illustrates a paradox in that the very nature of the RUF as a transitory and chaotic space may undermine older people’s mobility experiences and practices over time.

**Keywords:** Rural-urban fringe; mobility; proximity; transversal; pointillist; ageing

**1. Introduction**

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the rural-urban fringe (RUF) (for example, see Hiner, 2016; Scott et al., 2013; Gallent and Shaw, 2007; Gallent et al., 2006). However, the RUF has been described as a ‘conceptually chaotic space’ (Scott et al., 2013) where “rural and urban identities are most entangled and rural-urban distinctions most elusive” (Woods 2009, p.852). Whilst traditional perspectives on the RUF as a ‘zone of transition’ between the rural and the urban (Pryor, 1968) have been replaced by character-based definitions that regard fringe landscapes as distinctive spaces in their own right (Scott et al., 2013; Gallent and Shaw, 2007), it remains characterised as a ‘landscape without community’ (Gallent and Shaw, 2007) and as a functional and fragmented landscape experienced at speed (Qvistrom, 2007).

This paper challenges such assertions. It provides important new insights into a relatively neglected space. In particular, the paper explores the experiences and practices of mobility in the RUF given that (hyper-)mobility is one of its defining features. It does so through focusing on older people. Whilst some work has focused on the mobility of older people in both urban and rural contexts (for example, see Rosso et al., 2011; Shergold et al., 2012) little attention to date has been placed on older people’s mobility practices and experiences in the RUF. In so doing, the paper moves beyond typical accounts of inter-city commuting through the fringe from a commuter perspective (Simon, 2008) and which focus on predominantly younger (economically active) age groups.

In the context of our case study area, the paper highlights how the RUF – for older people – is not ‘placeless’ (Qvistrom, 2007; Shoard, 2002) but rather a space offering a range of opportunities – for example, in terms of local services and amenities and the capacity for social interaction. In addition, the proximity of the fringe to both urban and rural areas is also attractive to older people, and particularly in terms of the possibilities for ‘being mobile’. Combined, it is argued that in contrast to notions of the ‘rural idyll’ (Halfacree, 1993; Shucksmith, 2018) such features contribute to a RUF ‘mobility idyll’ for many older people. Nevertheless, a paradox is identified in that it is argued that individuals ‘age in place’ and that the RUF itself continues to mutate and transition. Both features can subsequently serve to undermine the mobility experiences and practices of older people over time.

Section 2 of the paper elaborates the different ways in which the RUF has been defined and conceptualised, as well as the highly transitional nature of such areas. It also discusses the mobility-induced nature of the fringe and how its distinctive characteristics are attractive to older residents given challenges of access in urban environments (Rosso et al., 2011) and also issues of mobility, isolation and exclusion in rural areas (Shergold et al., 2012). In turn, the lack of a contemporary focus on experiences and practices of mobility for older people in RUF contexts is highlighted.

Following details of the methodology for the research and justification of the selection of the RUF case study and participants (Section 3), the paper sets out the results and analysis of the research (Section 4). The importance of ‘proximity’ to mobility infrastructures in the urban and the ‘doorstep idyll’ of the rural, as well as local infrastructure in the fringe itself is discussed. A central argument is that older people have become spatially fixed in the RUF to secure mobility within and beyond the fringe. Following on, the discussion explores the mobility experiences of older people – territorially and relationally – in RUF contexts and how this informs a RUF ‘mobility idyll’ for some. However, a RUF mobility paradox is subsequently discussed and how this can undermine opportunities for mobility. A conclusion (Section 5) summarises the arguments and the implications for existing understandings of mobility in RUF contexts and beyond.

**2. Literature review**

***2.1. The context for mobilities research: from mobility to motility?***

Mobility is a key component of the world today. In an era of intense technological change there has been an “*explosive growth of mobilities research*” (Miller and Ponto, 2016, pp. 266). Elliott and Urry (2010), Adey (2010) and Merriman (2012) have all highlighted how traditional conceptions of mobility involving the movement of an individual from one spatial setting to another – otherwise known as ‘residential mobility’ (Williamson, 2016) - have been replaced by approaches which acknowledge that mobility is movement imbued with ideological and discursive meanings. Indeed, it has been recognised how mobilities are experiential and can transform different contexts and spaces through specific relational practices, feelings and emotions. This means that mobilities mediate and facilitate other mobilities as well as being transported themselves (Adey 2010, pp.14-17; Argent, 2012).

Perspectives on mobility have often involved a focus on either nodes or networks. The former perceives the world as sedentarist, and with mobility being required to move between one node and another, and contributing to conceptions of bounded, territorial (and fixed) places (for example, see Sauer, 1952 and Vidal de la Blache et al., 1965). An alternative perspective involves seeing the world as nomadic, and which privileges the network or ‘flows’ of mobility. Yet in reality a more nuanced understanding of mobility involves moving beyond such binary divisions; for example, rural geographers have recently focused on ‘rural stayers’ and highlighted how the (everyday) mobilities and networks of individuals are often crucial in shaping staying processes (Morse and Mudget, 2018).

However, despite the significance of mobility in shaping practices of modern living (Cresswell, 2006, pp. 15-16), there are significant gaps in our knowledge pertaining to both practices and experiences of mobility, multi-sensory interactions associated with the process of being mobile, and those who are included or excluded from such practices (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Indeed, the development of the concept of ‘accessibility narratives’ (Farrington and Farrington, 2005) recognises that different demographic groups may have more restricted mobilities. There has also been a focus on reframing mobility through the concept of ‘motility’, and which describes and analyses the mobility potential of individuals (Kaufmann et al., 2004; Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006; Osti, 2010). ‘Motility’ can be defined as “*how an individual or group takes possession of the realm of possibilities for mobility and builds on it to develop personal projects*” (Flamm and Kaufmann 2006, p.168). It is made up of factors relating to ‘access’ (the range of mobilities available according to place, time or other contextual constraints and bound by the conditions under which available options for mobility can be used, such as cost), ‘competence’ (the skills required to use mobility options, including physical abilities, acquired knowledge and practical and organisational skills) and ‘appropriation’ (what individuals do with access and skills through evaluating the options available to them).

In turn, the ability to actualise the potential to be mobile is differentiated. In the words of Massey (1993, p.61): “*different social groups have distinct relationships to (this anyway) differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it*”. By framing mobility as a function of individual and / or community capital, mobility becomes intertwined with issues of power and social hierarchy, and leading to spatial differences in practises and experiences of mobility. As such, notions of mobility and fixity do not have to exist as different entities. Instead, Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) argue that closer attention needs to be paid to how these different processes intersect and create different experiences of social-spatial living in differing rural and urban contexts.

Nevertheless, the dichotomy of viewing mobility through a rural or urban centric lens is increasingly problematic. The changing nature of mobility and the ease through which space can be penetrated - both physically and virtually - has led many to identify a blurring of spatial boundaries between the urban and the rural (Scott et al., 2013). Such arguments are pertinent to the space of the RUF. Once viewed as a transitional zone between the rural and urban (Pryor, 1968), the RUF depicts a distinctive space in-between the rural and urban, one that encompasses a blurred and highly variable combination of both rural and urban features (Gallent et al., 2006). Hoggart (1990) notes that the RUF can be defined as countryside ‘mutation’ and created by the interaction of the encroachment of the urban into the rural, yet failing to assimilate it as an entirely urban space. In addition, Simon (2008) characterises these spaces as being rural spaces subjected to an urban agenda, though not necessarily ‘suburban’ as some might infer.

Hence given the challenges of differentiating between rural and urban activities, the RUF has increasingly been viewed as a distinctive space in its own right. Crucially, it is a space which incorporates a variety of mobility infrastructures, ranging from residential road networks through to ‘A’ roads, motorways, and in some cases train stations and airports (Scott et al., 2013). Thus mobility underpins the very nature of the RUF: the movement of people and goods is a key component of the functionality of such landscapes, both economically and socially (Gallent and Shaw, 2007). Indeed, the fringe is a highly fluid landscape with the potential for infrastructures and services to change quickly. Moreover, the fringe is often based around mobility infrastructures and logistical services (Gallent et al., 2006). Consequently, a number of commentators have argued that the RUF is experienced at speed and lacks community and a sense of place (ibid). Yet, such assertions require further investigation and substantiation, and in the context of different ‘fringe(s)’ and for different groups of people.

***2.2. Older resident’s mobility: rural and urban contexts***

Above all else, the motility framework draws attention to the need to consider who is included and excluded from mobility and what their experiences of mobility are. As Massey (2005) demonstrates, changing mobilities in the modern world create new power geometries and with different groups differentially experiencing mobility. One such group whom have received prominent attention are older people. The interest in this age group is twofold. On the one hand, there has been an increasing concern with the implications of an ageing population in Western Europe and beyond, and the impact on issues such as transport policy and planning (Bannister and Bowling, 2004). On the other hand, it has also been recognised that many older residents are more vulnerable to isolation, exclusion and alienation when deprived of mobility options (Stjernborg et al., 2015). Ryan et al. (2015) note that whilst this age group are often considered as a singular unit within policy, there are two significant intra-variations within the life course; those in the ‘young-old’ stage whom are adjusting from work to retirement and those in the ‘old-old’ stage whose mobility most commonly deteriorates according to a deterioration in health. This is made more complex by the differential spatialities of rural and urban living which alter the contextual pressures, challenges and benefits of older people remaining mobile. Yet, given the lack of such research into RUF landscapes, there is a need to contextualise the experiences of older residents within such areas.

Mobilities research historically has focused on the urban (Coulter et al., 2016). In many ways, the city epitomises modern mobility, offering considerably opportunities to be mobile through various mobility infrastructures which are increasingly interconnected via multi-scalar transport options (Schwanen, 2015). However, for older people, opportunities to be mobile may be limited by the design of the urban environment itself. For example, Green et al. (2014) outline how many urban transport hubs, such as underground stations in London, are inaccessible for those whose physical mobility is impaired. From a motility lens, the opportunities to be mobile in the urban may therefore not be realised due to issues of urban design and urban planning. This is problematic for older people who are less likely to travel outside of their immediate locality than younger people (Rosso et al., 2011). Moreover, whilst proximity to key leisure and recreational facilities in the urban (such as shopping centres) serve to increase levels of walking amongst older people (Rosso et al., 2011), older people are less likely to leave their home on a day to day basis. This is often due to issues related to the built environment, such as uneven footpaths or high traffic densities (Schwanen and Paez, 2010), and which can subsequently contribute to the alienation and isolation of older people (Green et al., 2014). Proximity to urban services in itself does not guarantee accessibility. Musselwhite et al. (2015) and Mackett (2015) make similar arguments in respect of the ability of older people living in urban areas to maintain their social networks as they age. In sum, there are a number of structural and individual factors – including poor health, physical constraints and socio-economic constraints - which can hinder older people’s potential to be mobile in the urban. Consequently, the archetypal ‘urban idyll’ of mobility is a highly variable concept – practically impossible to engage with for older people whom are constrained by physical or financial barriers, or poorly designed and maintained infrastructures.

A consideration of the interconnectivity and interdependency of urban areas with their rural hinterlands has been evident in academic and policy arenas, and has subverted the traditional rural versus urban divide (for example, see Harrison and Heley, 2015). Nevertheless, under the ‘new mobilities paradigm’, mobility is seen as a product of accessibility (Kaufmann et al., 2004) and with distinct demographic and spatial variations in terms of how mobility is perceived, experienced and practised across the life course (Rosso et al., 2011). Indeed, it is clear that those living and working in urban and rural areas may have contrasting experiences and practices of mobility. Whilst the urban – for some – offers considerable opportunity for doing mobility through a variety of mobility infrastructures (Van Acker et al., 2016; Farrington, 2007), this may be more challenging in rural contexts. For example, “*rural commuters will, on average, commute much further than their urban counterparts*” (Turner et al., 2007: quoted in Osti, 2010, p.300) owing to the continual centralisation of public services in urban spaces (Hodge et al., 2017). This is problematic for older people as it commonly entails driving around less ‘built up’ localities with poorer light coverage at night, using more complex routes and involving significantly longer journeys (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). Similarly, Shergold et al. (2012) have provided revealing insights into the complexities and financial strain of performing mobility in the rural. They highlight how mobility often involves multiple dimensions and infrastructures, the combining of an array of tasks (which often have to be tackled in a logical and specific order) and which may involve a considerable amount of time, as well as forward planning (also see Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014).

***2.3. Mobility of older people in the context of the RUF: a research agenda***

Given that there is a clear spatial context which shapes how older residents practise and experience mobility, and with “*mobility in old age (being) deeply contextual*” (Schwanen and Paez 2010, p. 5), pertinent questions arise in respect of understanding the mobility of older people in the context of the RUF.

The RUF is a product of mobility infrastructure - “*transport occupies a central position in the fringe’s economic history and mobility maintains an essential product of navigating the RUF, particularly by car*” (Gallent et al., 2006, p. 94). Gallent and Andersson (2007, p.2) also identify a “*longstanding concern for the ways in which road-building and other forms of transport infrastructure have ‘made’ the landscape of the RUF*”. As such the RUF – through mobility infrastructures such as airports and railway stations – offers the opportunity for practises of multi-nodal mobility to more distant localities. It has thus been argued that because of such features the RUF remains ‘placeless’, lacking community and identity (Shoard, 2002). However, there have been calls to redefine such assertions about the RUF, and to account for the experiences of those living in such spaces in order to move beyond accounts of inter-city commuting and / or a focus on the provision of transport infrastructure *per se* (Hiner, 2016). For example, Lord and Luxembourg (2007) identify that older people in suburban regions of Canada and France are deliberately choosing to age in such places and are adapting their mobility practices as they age. Yet, whilst suburban areas encompass part of the fringe and ‘suburbanisation’ is a process that is occurring within the fringe, the fringe is more extensive than this urban-centric perspective. It has a both a sense of rurality to it, as well as its own unique (and often uncontained) assemblages of land uses (Simon, 2008). Thus approaches to conducting mobility research in the fringe require a more relational approach and which give less prominence as to whether the fringe is rural-led or urban-led. In contrast, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the complex interwoven webs of rural and urban hybridity that exist *within* these landscapes, as well as the more prominent rural and urban landscapes that exist *outside* of the fringe.

Hence in the context of researching mobilities in the RUF, a number of considerations emerge, as well as new conceptual questions which warrant further investigation. For example, it has been argued in the mobilities literature that older people have a significant dependency on private transport, regardless of context. But to what extent is this true in the RUF and in what ways do ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ influences impact upon older resident’s mobility experiences and practices within and beyond the fringe? What features of the RUF act as facilitators or barriers to mobility? What are the implications of ageing in the constantly evolving and mutating RUF?

In order to respond to these questions, we extend the motility framework of Flamm and Kaufmann (2006) in order to explore how access, knowledge and appropriation shape the mobility of older people differentially in the RUF. In addition, Bissell’s (2013) work on the importance of ‘proximity’ is also utilised and further developed. Bissell notes that traditional understandings of both physical and virtual mobility involve a focus on the requirement of individuals to be in proximity to points of significance in order to be connected, and with proximity ‘worked towards’ and actualised through mobility. But he subsequently offers an alternative perspective. This focuses on how mobility itself gives rise to different kinds of proximity, and with proximity more passive, emergent and shaped and re-shaped through evolving practices of mobility. In respect of this latter approach, proximity is seen as more ‘transversal’ and non-linear, reflected in mobility as a ‘loop’ rather than a line and with exposure to others being a key outcome of mobility, rather than connection to others (Bissell 2013, pp.351-352; see Figure 1). Thus for older people living in the fringe we also analyse the importance of different types of proximity to the urban or rural, and the implications for older people’s mobility experiences and practices within and beyond the RUF.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

**3. Methods**

The research adopted a qualitative research design in order to explore the experiences and practices of mobility by older people in the RUF. Those interested in mobilities have employed qualitative methods widely because they add a layer of depth to the findings, rather than attempting to generalise complex phenomena (Lord et al, 2011). Whilst quantitative methods have their own strengths within mobility based research - and particularly in policy making (Shliselberg and Givoni, 2018) - the objective of this study was to unpack individuals’ experiences and practices for being mobile in the RUF. Therefore such statistical generalisations would not have provided depth to the findings, nor would they have answered the research questions explicitly.

A case study approach was utilised in order to collect research data. This approach was selected for a number of reasons. First, there have been a number of arguments that *“underline the need for further case studies of fringe landscapes*” (Qvistrom, 2007, pp. 269). Second, a desire to contextualise mobility as a function of living within a fringe landscape also informed the adoption of a case study approach being that it “*supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena (such as mobility)*” (Baxter and Jack, 2008, pp. 544). Nevertheless, there are limitations of using such an approach including the multiplicity of fringe landscapes – and which are highly variable, non-uniform and contextually created (Gallent et al., 2006). As a result, the research presented in the paper is certainly not reflective of all fringe locations (Bertaux and Thompson, 2017); rather we have simply sought to extrapolate modern ideas surrounding mobilities and explore their relevance in a particular RUF location. As such, the research provides new insights into the mobility experiences and practices of older people in a fringe landscape, but with further research required to explore the resonance of our findings in other RUF contexts.

The case study site that was selected was located in the fringe of a post-industrial city - Stoke-on-Trent in the Midlands of the UK (see Figure 2). The process of case study selection involved using a number of GIS approaches to identify RUF localities, including the 2011 Department of Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Rural-Urban Classification (RUC) of “rural town and fringe” localities. However, this classification was limited in that rural towns are considerably different from fringe locations. Hence land use data from the Centre for Hydrology and Ecology (2015) were also utilised, and which provided data on urban, rural and suburban land uses. Hence around the periphery of Stoke-on-Trent, localities were observed that had a clear mix of different land uses that could serve as a broad proxy for the RUF. Maps produced by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) were additionally drawn upon to consider areas that lay on the boundary between local areas assigned with either an ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ classification (and as defined by the 2011 RUC). Overlaying each of these approaches subsequently led to the identification of a potential case study area in the North Western region of Stoke-on-Trent. However, given the limitations of all three approaches, the ‘character based definition’ of the RUF suggested by Gallent and Shaw (2007) was also employed. This affirmed the selection of the case study site in a number of ways. For example, in terms of the physical and historic fringe, there were a number of land uses in the case study area based around small commercial activities and degraded farmland (and with the latter reflective of previous mining activity defined as a characteristic of fringe locations). In economic terms, a number of small businesses – or ‘economic survivors’ also characterised this particular area of the fringe, whilst from a social and cultural perspective, the area had recently been subject to fragmented residential development, including the construction of a new housing estate consisting of around 300 houses – a palimpsest overlain over the historic industrial heritage area of the community. Mobility infrastructures were also variable – for example, a main B-road, intersected by a considerable number of residential road networks was evident. However, the road infrastructure into the surrounding rural area was more limited, and with public transport restricted to the arterial main road, although this was historically more extensive.

**INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE**

The research methods adopted for the study involved conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with older residents (defined as over 60 for females and 65 for males). A maximum diversity sampling framework was adopted to select participants (Patten, 2001). The commonalities identified offer the opportunity for generalisations since they emerged despite a diverse sample. Given that the emphasis was on generalising the mobility experiences and practices of older people in the fringe, the recruitment process sought to engage older people with varying socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, family and socio-economic status, access to private transport, length of time in the area etc. (see Table 1 for a summary). Individuals were asked a series of questions around their experiences and practices of mobility both within and beyond the RUF, how and why their patterns of mobility may have changed over time and the implications emerging for current and future patterns of mobility.

In total, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted with older people. Each interview lasted for about one hour. Individuals were approached to participate in the research at a variety of locations within the local community including the local library, local churches, local supermarkets and at age related support groups. Due to the demographic make-up of the area, all of the interviewees were from the same ethnic group (White British). This limitation is reflected upon further in the conclusion. Full ethical approval was also secured for the study. The results of the study were analysed using inductive, thematic analysis (through NVivo).

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

**4. Results and analysis**

*4.1 Motility, older people and a RUF mobility idyll?*

In the context of our RUF case study, many interviewees – both ‘young-old’ and ‘old-old’ - who owned their own car highlighted how the RUF provided a range of mobility infrastructures, and which extended beyond their own private vehicle ownership (and usage) *per se* (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006). Hence whilst interviewees highlighted how living in the fringe “*allows you to get in and out quickly in the car*” (Interviewee 5, female, aged 62), individuals also made reference to the importance of public transport infrastructure. This is important given that other studies have highlighted how public transport may be less important in the lives of older residents given that they are using their own forms of private transport for longer (Ryan et al., 2015). Indeed, such infrastructure was viewed as providing a ‘safety net’ as individuals ‘aged in place’, and as the ability to drive declined over time:

*I used to drive but not anymore. I’ve got a bus pass so I’m quite happy! They (buses) arrive about every 20 minutes. And once you get used to it you know when they’re coming. I go to X (nearest urban area) and I sometimes go to Y (another local urban area). You can get to the retail park there which is handy if you want anything extraordinary* (Interviewee 2, female aged 88).

Moreover, fringe landscapes have often been depicted as spaces which offer a variety of typically ‘suburban’ features, such as shopping malls and recreational centres (Gallent et al., 2006), but lacking any ‘sense of community’ (Gallent and Shaw, 2007). In this respect, whilst our interviewees highlighted how the fringe offered access to local centres and facilities, (including other mobility infrastructure such as railway stations and motorways located in the fringe), they also identified how the availability of such mobility infrastructures meant that they were able to both develop and maintain social networks with others in and beyond the fringe. Consequently there was i) little evidence of a direct dependency on major urban centres in order to complete basic tasks, and which has been reported more widely in respect of rural areas (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014); and ii) no requirement for individuals to compromise or ‘trade off’ their social networks at the expense of having access to local services, and again which has been argued in a rural context (see Farrington and Farrington, 2005). Thus the potential to ‘get out’ and socialise with others within the fringe was important to many interviewees:

*Your mobility changes as you get older…the guy I’ve just been to visit, he’s just had his driving license taken off him. And ok, uh, he isn’t fit to drive now, but, you can have your car taken off you here and (still be able to access) all the amenities just down the road. So you can get about a lot easier. The older people have bus passes too…… If you live in a more rural area you haven’t got the bus services* (Interviewee 1, male, aged 68).

However, the above quote importantly draws attention to a number of issues which further shape the potential to be mobile for older people in the fringe. These relate to the *conditions* that shape access to different forms of mobility, as well as the *skills* necessary to (continue to perform) and use certain infrastructures of mobility in the fringe. In terms of the conditioning of access, the provision of bus passes and the perceived affordability of public transport was conducive to its use: “*I’ve said this all along, living (here) as an old age person on a pension is quite good because you can get out, you can do things, say I pay £2 to get to keep fit on a Monday”* (Interviewee 6, female, aged 87). With reference to skills, holding a driving license was an obvious critical factor in maintaining an ability to use private transport, but which was also coupled with individuals’ physical abilities, acquired knowledge and practical and organisational skills. As such, the majority of our sample had lived in the area for a considerable period of time. Therefore they felt that they had sufficient knowledge to negotiate the fringe landscape through a variety of mobilities – for example, by car, public transport or by walking. In the words of two interviewees:

*I would say it is pretty easy (to use the car) in the fringe* (Interviewee 4, male aged 69)

and

*….buses are around 20 minutes. And once you get used to it you know when they’re coming* (Interviewee 2, female aged 88).

Furthermore, many individuals highlighted walking as an alternative to using the car or public transport given the availability of nearby services and their knowledge of the local area, but also arguably reflecting socialisation processes and the earlier life-course experiences of older people in respect of walking as a key mode of mobility (and when ownership of private forms of transport was less proliferate; see Madre, 1997). In the words of another interviewee: “*I’m ok, I can’t walk far, I’m huffing and puffing by the time I get home. But I can do it - it’s all doable!*” (Interviewee 6, female aged 87). Nevertheless, the physical ability to use different infrastructures of mobility had – for some – declined as they ‘aged in place’ and was therefore impacting on their mobility potential, although in overall terms the fringe was perceived as still offering more favourable conditions for mobility than other contexts.

A further form of mobility that has been reported of increasing relevance in shaping mobility in rural contexts is virtual mobility (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). However, in our case study only three interviewees made any reference to the use of virtual mobility, and that this was undertaken in conjunction with others, namely family members, to order on-line groceries and to ‘keep in touch’. Again, this may reflect broader socialisation processes in respect of the more recent rise of virtual technologies, as well as the extent to which individuals were able to draw on their extended family: “*my grandson is into computing, and he sets up these things for Morrison’s and Ocado, and he does all the technical side of stuff. So he’s quite pleased I have a go*” (Interviewee 7, female aged 67).

Reference to challenges of ‘the technical’ in the above quote highlights how there is also a need to focus on the way in which individuals *appropriate* and organise their mobility as a function of access and skills. For example, the extent to which individuals were prepared to plan or work towards securing particular forms of mobility in the context of the fringe became apparent. Interviewees perceived that whilst options to use public transport existed in the fringe in order to access local services and to facilitate social networks, such infrastructure was felt to be more limiting and less flexible than when they were able to use their own private transport. This finding is not wholly unexpected given that mobility infrastructure occupies a central presence within the functionality of the modern fringe: many arterial networks (for example, railway lines and major roads / motorways) run through the fringe into the urban and out into the wider rural hinterland (Gallent et al., 2006). Consequently, interviewees noted how it was often more difficult to travel across or within the fringe via public transport, as well as the time to complete such journeys by public transport (also see Broome et al., 2012):

*You know, the other bus doesn’t come until 1 o’clock. You could be there and back... (if you used the car) … it’s the convenience really* (Interviewee 13, male aged 78).

Those who participated in the research also highlighted how their mobility was significantly dependant upon the extent of their networks with friends or family, and the ways in which they drew upon such networks to remain mobile. In essence, a number of respondents identified how they used their local networks to both facilitate mobility, as well as to benefit from the mobility of others. This was particularly apparent for those who were widowed or whose physical abilities were deteriorating as they aged in place:

*We’re pretty fortunate, we formed a little group a few years back and it’s stayed the four of us. But you’ve got people whose husbands have passed away and they’re stuck in. They can’t get out* (Interviewee 2, female aged 88)

and

*Well I give lifts in the car. We live in a cul de sac where there are quite a lot of elderly people* (Interviewee 7, female aged 67).

Thus given the range of mobility infrastructures in our fringe case study area, and relative access to such infrastructure through the skills and knowledge of those interviewed, it could be expected that mobility for our sample of older people would not require extensive appropriation. However, it was apparent that this was not always the case, and especially in relation to the challenges of undertaking mobility by public transport across or within the fringe, as well as the ability to perform mobility with others. Such considerations move beyond issues of ‘reliability’ or ‘safety’, and which have been reported in other contexts as being key to processes of appropriation (Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006)

Over and above the intersection of issues relating to territorial access, skills and appropriation, older people also described their mobility beyond the RUF in a distinctly relational sense and with patterns of mobility being shaped by the importance of different forms of proximity to the ‘urban’ and the ‘rural’. In terms of the urban, the RUF was perceived by many older residents as a space that provided opportunities to access shops and services beyond the fringe, and which, for example, were either located in or close to the nearby city centre. As a result, their mobility practices were informed by ‘pointillist’, rational (and often planned) decision-making and with proximity (to shops and services) being an active requirement in facilitating their mobility. As such, they viewed the urban as having more opportunities than the RUF, including those that were more *‘extraordinary’*, and which in turn meant that they also became mobile and travelled beyond the fringe when seeking to access such opportunities:

*…what I do in the morning….. I drop my granddaughter off at X and then I’ll go into town to go to do some shopping or to go to the gym or swimming baths* (Interviewee 11, Male aged 68).

But in contrast, the drivers for mobility in relation to rural areas beyond the fringe were rather different, and with more passive forms of engagement evident. Interviewees noted the importance of the ‘rural doorstep idyll’ and the aesthetics of the rural as informing their mobility, and with their practices considerably more emergent and less planned. Through movements into the rural from the RUF to engage in a variety of consumption activities – visual; but also through consuming food and drink and through touching and feeling the fauna and flora of the rural - a more passive form of proximity was evident in respect of the opportunities nearby rural spaces offered for leisure and recreation, as well as for socialising. In sum, proximity to the rural was more marginal in shaping mobility; rather movements into ‘the rural’ were transversal (rather than pointillist). Mobility involved ‘loops’ (Bissell, 2013) whereby older residents residing in the RUF were not necessarily orientated towards any specific points of the rural but instead adopted forms of mobility that were rather more experiential in terms of ‘getting to know the rural’ (Halfacree, 2007), and subsequently engaging in different aspects of consumption through emergent proximity to such activities. These findings are in contrast to those reported in the rural literature. For example, Burholt (2006) identifies how older residents often decide to remain *within* the rural and ‘age in place’ due to a strong place attachment to the physical environment. Yet, for those interviewed in our study, the fringe offered the opportunity for selective engagement with the rural, rather than full immersion: the relational, proximal opportunities provided by the fringe outweighed the importance of the ‘rural idyll’ *per se* (Halfacree, 2007).

However, it is fundamental to highlight that the potential to engage with both the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’ was underpinned entirely by having sufficient access, skills and forms of appropriation, and as discussed earlier. Thus whilst skills such as the ability to use public transport were important in relation to accessing urban services and / or coupled with access to their own vehicle, the ways in which they ‘consumed’ the rural were much more dependent on the capacity to drive.

Based on a relational view of mobility and proximity in respect of RUF environments, it is therefore possible to argue that a mobility/proximity driven ‘rural-urban fringe idyll’ exists for those interviewed in our study. The (spatial) positioning of the fringe relative to the urban and rural, the proximity of local services (for example, supermarkets, local health services etc.), the opportunities for social interaction and the different mobility infrastructures in evidence within the fringe are arguably conducive to older residents ‘ageing in place’, even for those more restricted in respect of their mobility.

Indeed, whilst declining services in rural areas have informed fears of ageing (Shergold et al., 2012), the RUF conversely appears to alleviate such fears. Critiques of the RUF as ‘a landscape experienced at speed’ (Hough, 1990; Qvistrom, 2007) and / or as being ‘placeless’ (Gallent and Andersson, 2007) were either less evident or indeed seen as a positive element of residing in such areas by many interviewees. Mobility and sense of place combined to offer an idyllic space for some:

*Well we’re semi-rural perhaps? That’s what we like about it. It convenient for the town, whatever, with or without a car, and we’ve got all of this [points to countryside] outside the front door! So, we’re chuffed. We made the right move!* (Interviewee 13, male, aged 78).

*4.2 The paradox of the RUF*

Whilst we have discussed the complex territorial and relational practices of mobility and proximity for older residents in the RUF, we are not suggesting that the RUF is ‘the perfect space’ for older residents to reside in. Already we have illustrated that there are distinctive variations in the mobility experiences of older residents as a function of their respective motilities. But perhaps more crucially, we seek to draw attention to the ways in which the transitional nature of the RUF itself serves to undermine the concept of the mobility/proximity driven ‘rural-urban fringe’ idyll over time, and as individuals ‘age in place’.

Fringe landscapes are transitional in nature (Gallent et al., 2006). Planning regulations are frequently less stringent. Nor do they commonly obtain enough attention to have long-term plans of development (Scott et al., 2013). Thus, the RUF is often a chaotic and rapidly changing landscape - it epitomises a space whereby development is continual, a factor which has contributed to notions of ‘placelessness’. Where industries change, or where urban demands grow, so too do the features of the fringe. For example, Qvistrom (2007) discusses how degraded farmland areas in the fringe landscape of Bernstorp, Sweden were re-purposed for a mixture of industrial and waste based services. Ultimately, such changes increase the demands for mobility and other forms of infrastructure in fringe landscapes.

Hence, from conducting interviews with older residents we were alerted to the paradoxical nature of being an older resident in such spaces. Many interviewees identified how as they had ‘aged in place’, the fringe itself was continuing to evolve and mutate. As such, the ‘messy’ and unorganised nature of the RUF was – over time – impinging (and often disrupting) their potential to be mobile through the appropriation of access and skills.

In terms of access, the continuing evolution and transformation of the RUF (and in the context of our case study issues relating to housing development, and an associated increase in population and traffic congestion) was making access progressively more difficult for some older people over time:

*Well at the moment the only problem we have is that they’ve built that new estate which is about 350 people, well they’ve done nothing about the infrastructure! The roads haven’t been widened, the roads in or out, so they all use the village, because they can’t get out the top! So the amount of traffic through the village has, well, doubled really* (Interviewee 15, female aged 68).

In addition, specific features that characterise the RUF, such as landfill sites (Gallent et al., 2006) were also seen as further contributing to disruption and impinging on mobility practices:

*Where X was is now the landfill site. So the volume of lorries has increased in the last 10 years… Arctic Lorries that go to the landfill site* (Interviewee 17, female, aged 68).

Challenges of access therefore relate to various forms of mobility: private transport in terms of increased congestion and walking in respect of perceptions of safety due to increased traffic in our fringe case study location. Public transport infrastructure in the case study area was also argued to have changed in response to new residential development. According to many interviewees, this had impacted on the (re-)routing of public transport. The restructuring of bus routes had meant that many older residents who no longer had access to a car were increasingly immobile given that public transport provision was now a considerable distance away:

*The bus used to come down that road to XXXX and up that way. And I thought that was fair. But they changed it and the people up there [in the new development] have only got to walk down, whereas I have to go up. Coming back they get off nearer to home. We have to walk both ways. So it was better [for me] when it came down our way* (Interviewee 15, female aged 68).

A further issue of relevance relates to transversal proximities in the context of rural areas. Individuals discussed how a combination of congestion, the re-routing of public transport and the progressive withdrawal of some bus services into the rural was having a negative impact on their engagement with surrounding rural areas: “*you lose touch with that sort of thing, country places you’d visit……. there’s no access there anymore*” (Interviewee 3, female aged 88 years).

Such patterns of mobility were also being undermined as individuals aged in place, and as some of the skills of older people to negotiate mobility within and beyond the fringe diminished over time. For example, a number of participants noted how it was becoming more problematic to access and use public transport as they grew older: “*when you are older you do not want to be getting on and off buses*” (Interviewee 10, male aged 74). Others pointed out that an increasing reliance on private transport in order to access surrounding rural (and urban) areas was also being undermined by their ability to drive as they aged in the fringe. In addition, many argued that that it was becoming more difficult to negotiate and understand public transport timetables as the fringe mutated and public transport services evolved – both temporally and spatially: “*I don’t know what the timetable is like now*” (Interviewee 10, male aged 74). Knowledge of the fringe was also being destabilised as a result of new development, and this was also impacting on individuals’ confidence to be mobile in and beyond the fringe, thus disrupting their respective abilities to organise their mobility potential within these spaces.

In summary, processes of ageing and the continual mutation of the fringe were forcing individuals into more complex forms of appropriation, such as when and where to go out, with whom and through what means. In addition, given that we have indicated how many interviewees were reliant on the presence of others to engage in practices of mobility, a key concern that was expressed related to ‘compositional’ (who is there) changes in the fringe, as well as ‘contextual’ features (what is there; see Robinson, 2010). Thus many of the social networks that individuals relied upon were perceived as becoming more difficult to foster and maintain given the continual addition of new housing in the area and which was perceived negatively in respect of opportunities for social interaction, as well as individuals’ sense of ‘reversibility’ (i.e. the capacity to maintain relationships and the attachment of individuals to particular places; see Osti, 2010):

*You come down now and you don’t meet anybody that you know. Such a lot of strangers. That’s because there are 3 or 4 new estates. Everything is changing too fast*. *They’ve overwhelmed us really* (Interviewee 6, female aged 87).

**5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we draw attention to three wider implications of the study. First, in contrast to discussions of the RUF as being ‘placeless’, (Qvistrom, 2007; Shoard, 2002), through a motility lens the paper has illustrated how many older residents have designed their lifestyles around the perceived mobility benefits such spaces offer, including the opportunity to develop and sustain social networks in RUF localities.

Second, through reference to Bissell’s (2013) work on ‘active’ and ‘passive’ proximity, the paper has highlighted the importance of active proximity to urban facilities and passive proximity to rural areas and the importance of the ‘rural idyll’ in shaping decisions to move to, and remain within the RUF. Such an approach - and which confirms the need for a more relational and networked perspective on fringe landscapes - is also consistent with recent work by Higgs et al. (2018). This identified the importance of ‘floating catchment area models’ in respect of access to services in rural areas.

Moreover, the desire of our older interviewees to remain in close proximity to rural spaces is a particularly important finding in this study. Rather than residents wishing to live in the rural and actively act out traditional fallacies of rural lifestyles (Heley, 2010), individuals identified how they could selectively engage with aspects of the ‘rural idyll’ by living in the RUF. We argue, therefore, that more attention should be given to exploring the relational nature of the rural idyll, particularly for older residents who prioritise mobility opportunity: the pull of the rural idyll for older residents was superseded by the mobility opportunities of the fringe. Interviewees perceived the RUF to be a distinctively different area, with fewer concerns about isolation and immobility, exclusion and service deprivation. Nevertheless, when questioned as to why they did not wish to live in the urban, the rural also became a defence mechanism, and with individuals highlighting how the RUF helped them to achieve specific aspects of rurality, such as strong social networks.

Third, and in explaining such trends, we also wish to draw attention to Osti’s (2010) model of connectivity and reversibility. Connectivity is defined as the availability of, and access to, mobility instruments in order for individuals to remain connected with others without there being a ‘spatial co-presence. Reversibility is defined as the capacity to maintain relationships and the attachment of individuals to particular places (ibid.). In the context of this study, what we have demonstrated is that the RUF offers highly fluid levels (and forms) of connectivity and reversibility, and arguably over and above those outlined by Osti (2010) in the context of rural spaces. The mobility infrastructure potential of the fringe facilitates connectivity to opportunities internally within the RUF as well as externally. Yet, paradoxically, such connectivity – as well as reversibility - also has the potential to be subverted by the much more transitional nature of the RUF compared to the rural. Thus, we could categorise RUF landscapes as having high, but also extremely vulnerable (and variable) levels of connectivity and reversibility, as emphasised by the paradox discussed in the paper. For example, the paper highlights the ways in which a combination of a lack of long term planning / governance strategies for the RUF, coupled with development pressures affecting such landscapes may serve, over time, to undermine the reasons for older residents remaining ‘fixed’ within the fringe.

Other studies have demonstrated the significantly more ‘liquid’ nature of RUF landscapes – those that directly function as a product of private vehicle ownership. In this respect, we do not wish to imply that every RUF area offers the levels of public transport connectivity described in the context of our case study. Indeed, other authors have noted the implications of ageing in more suburbanised, private transport dependent fringe areas (see Stjernborg et al., 2015). We therefore need to consider connectivity and reversibility in the RUF as having multiple aspects. In some instances, the fringe maybe defined as ‘liquid’ in the sense of a dependency on private transport, and perhaps contributing to more ‘placeless’ landscapes (though we implore that considerably more research would be required to explore this trend). In other cases, connectivity and reversibility may combine to create ‘marginal’ fringe landscapes, where public and private transport is more sporadic and which undermine a ‘sense of place’. A third scenario involves the fringe being defined as a ‘networked’ landscape where the availability of public infrastructure contributes to the more idyllic perceptions documented in this paper. Such issues therefore require further consideration in different RUF contexts and from the perspectives of different groups of residents. This will help in developing a more fluid approach to understanding fringe landscapes rather than the linear approaches that have been commonly utilised to date.

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