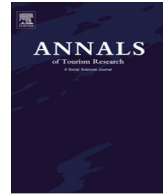




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures)



# Social tourism and well-being in later life



Nigel Morgan<sup>a,\*</sup>, Annette Pritchard<sup>b</sup>, Diane Sedgley<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Surrey University, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Cardiff Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

<sup>c</sup> Cardiff Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 July 2012

Revised 7 February 2015

Accepted 15 February 2015

Available online 6 March 2015

**Coordinating Editor: Scott McCabe**

#### Keywords:

Ageing

Bereavement

Health

Anxiety

Poverty

Social inclusion

### ABSTRACT

Studies of social tourism have concentrated on the benefits for young families and people with disabilities, yet few analyses have investigated its wellbeing value for economically disadvantaged older people. Based on participant-driven interviews during a UK social tourism trip, this paper informs understandings of social tourism experiences and explores the links between wellbeing and social tourism opportunities for older people. It reveals that social tourism presents older individuals with occasions for escape, respite, companionship, and reminiscence and for renegotiation of self-identity following spousal bereavement, but that these trips can be anxiously anticipated. The study proposes a research agenda, which explores the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual impacts of social tourism on older people's wellbeing.

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## Introduction

Our world is ageing. By 2030, the world's over-65 population will exceed one billion, with the most rapid growth occurring in less developed economies; during 2006–2030 the numbers of older people in less developed economies will increase by 140% (National Institute on Ageing, 2011). Seventeen per cent of the European Union's population are already over 65 and in the United Kingdom (UK) 650,000 people turn 65 every year (Office for National Statistics, 2014). These older people have been recognised as a vital tourism market, contributing a growing share of spending. At the beginning of

\* Corresponding author. Address: School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Surrey University, Guildford GU2 7XH, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)1483 686377.

E-mail address: [n.j.morgan@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:n.j.morgan@surrey.ac.uk) (N. Morgan).

this century the [World Tourism Organisation \(2001\)](#) forecast that the over-60s would be responsible for two billion trips by 2050. Such predictions assumed that each older generation would be healthier, better educated and more financially secure than the last ([Patterson, 2006](#)). This scenario of a widening of affluence across the older population now requires problematising; for instance, increasing pensioner poverty since 2008 means that 25% of UK retirees now live in poverty ([Department of Work & Pensions, 2012](#)).

Economic and demographic developments are contracting retirement income systems across economically developed economies and threatening to impoverish significant numbers of their upcoming older generations. Underfunded pension programmes in the United States exceed \$5 trillion and 14 million UK employees will retire on substantially smaller pensions than their parents ([Ellis, Munnell, & Eschtruth, 2014](#)). Wealth disparities intensify with age so that retirement exacerbates income inequalities, particularly for those who are alone and in receipt of one pension and for women suffering from lifelong cumulative disadvantages ([Bureau International du Tourisme Social, 2010; Formosa, 2005](#)). Many European and North American workers retiring after 2020 will face hardship in old age ([Casey, 2012](#)), making holidays less and not more affordable for them. In this context, tourism researchers must pay greater attention to the experiences of the growing numbers of older people already living in poverty in these societies and better understand the relationships between tourism and later-life wellbeing.

The aim of this paper is to illuminate the links between economically disadvantaged older people's holiday opportunities and their wellbeing. Specifically it provides insight into the social tourism experiences of older people in order to inform understandings of social tourism as a set of experiences, offering evidence of "...the association between senior tourism and quality of life" ([Dann 2001, p. 15](#)). To achieve this, the paper considers the immediate impacts of a short holiday by examining the experiences of 16 people participating in the National Benevolent Fund for the Aged (NBFA) 'Breaks-Away' scheme—one of the UK's few older people's social tourism schemes. As a study of a difficult-to-access group, which discusses sensitive issues including poverty, loneliness, bereavement and health, it employs participant-driven, empathetic interviews favoured by critical scholars in gerontology ([Formosa, 2005](#)) and tourism ([Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011](#)). Crossing boundaries between these unfolding approaches, the paper seeks to create person-centred tourism knowledge that is relevant to the everyday experiences of disadvantaged older people. Such personalized accounts have the potential to be memorable, to invoke compassion and empathy and thus to influence changes in perceptions, attitudes and social policies.

## Literature review

Explorations of later-life wellbeing and social tourism are well suited to multi- and interdisciplinary approaches since integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines can deepen understandings of social tourism as a diverse set of experiences. This literature review traverses the tourism, leisure, critical gerontology, organizational behaviour, social policy and health science fields, not to generalise or explain older people's experiences but to create a platform from which to understand their life-worlds. Many tourism studies have attempted to segment the older market and explain motivations, whilst others have categorised older tourists as educational, cultural, hedonistic/indulgent and anxious/ailing (see [Sedgley, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2011](#) for a review). Indeed, marketing segmentation of older people using various demographic and psychographic data and lifestyle and attitudinal factors (e.g. [Horneman, Carter, & Ruys, 2002; Morgan & Levy, 1993; Moschis, 1996, 2003, 2012](#)) is well established.

These market-driven approaches dominate "given the potentially lucrative outcomes and difficulties of studying the senior market," which in turn explain why "research has maintained steadfast on investigating their travel motivations, preferences, characteristics, and expenditures" ([Tung & Brent Ritchie, 2011, p. 332](#)). Such scrutinizing of older people's tourism motivation presupposes that it is possible and desirable to generalise their travel behaviour and can actually confirm stereotypes. Homogenising discourses are compounded by the standardisation of people separated by as many as four decades and a failure to recognize diversity amongst age cohorts as, although they may have lived through the same period, of more relevance to tourism behaviour is an individual's health,

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