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A life course perspective on the travel of Australian millennials

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that the millennial generation may be inclined to more sustainable travel habits than previous generations, reflected in lower rates of driver licensing in many countries and greater use of sustainable modes in others. However, it is still unknown whether millennials will continue to use sustainable transport modes as they age, or whether their travel patterns will revert to the car dependence displayed by previous generations. This research addresses this overlooked area in the travel behaviour research through an in-depth, qualitative prospective exploration of the interactions between life course and mobility of millennials in three Australian cities (Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra). Drawing from life-course transition research, fifty-five in-depth interviews found that Australian millennial life courses could be categorised into three typologies: (a) traditional, (b) delayed-traditional and (c) non-traditional/uncertain. In addition, millennial mobility was categorised into four typologies: (a) choice multi-modals, (b) captive multi-modals, (c) choice drivers and (d) captive drivers. Many millennials preferred living in inner urban areas, were multi-modal and somewhat 'mode-agnostic,' open to using whatever travel mode best suited their needs; very few showed a strong preference for cars. However, the research does suggest that as millennials approach adult milestones such as having children, the difficulty in finding suitable housing near transit may push some of them into neighbourhoods where sustainable transport is no longer a practical option. Policy interventions that support a sustainable lifestyle are suggested and research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The millennial generation (also known as generation Y) is the demographic cohort whose birth years range between the early 1980s and early 2000s. In the last 30 years, Australian millennials have grown up against a backdrop of dramatic social and economic change including globalisation, a global financial crisis, recognition of climate change and the rapid changes in information and communication technology. Recent research suggests that the millennial generation may be inclined to more sustainable travel habits than previous generations, reflected in lower rates of driver licensing in many countries and greater use of sustainable modes in others (e.g. Noble, 2005; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012; Sivak and Schoettle, 2012a; Delbosc and Currie, 2013). Moreover, recent work has suggested that at least part of these changes are intricately linked to delays in 'adult' milestones (such as marriage and buying a home) among the millennial generation (Delbosc and Currie, 2014a; Le Vine and Polak, 2014; Hjorthol, 2016). Yet there is still a great deal that is unknown about the relationship between millennial mobility and life course transitions. There is a relatively rich literature on the complex relationships

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between travel and the life course of older generations (such as baby boomers), but this literature has not yet been explored in relation to changes in millennial mobility and the implications for transport policy.

Travel behaviour is closely related with the life course of individuals (Scheiner, 2014). The life-oriented approach enables us to explore changes in human lives over a long stretch of a lifetime (Mayer, 2009) and the behavioural interdependences across a broader set of life domains (Zhang, 2014). To understand travel behavioural changes over the life course, the mobility biographies approach has been used in the literature to more explicitly link life domains such as residential location, household formation, employment/education, etc. (Lanzendorf, 2010; Clark et al., 2014, 2015, 2016; Zhang et al., 2014). It is apparent from the literature that having a child leads individuals to shift to a car-oriented life style (Ryley, 2006) and older generations are highly likely to retain this driving habit after this key life stage. The millennial cohort has started to enter the workforce and some have started to raise a family. Understanding the life course and the associated mobility of millennials will have implications for transport policy and infrastructure.

One of the most difficult and significant questions raised in this field of research is, will millennials continue to use sustainable transport modes as they age, or will their travel patterns settle into car dependence? This research will address this overlooked area in travel behaviour research by advancing the understanding of the life course and travel behaviour of the millennials. It does so by using in-depth qualitative research methods to explore these relationships in the words of millennials. Narrative interviews with fifty-five Australian millennials from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra were undertaken where future intentions (prospective questioning) form the basis of the study design. Methodologically, this research is embedded in the theoretical framework of mobility biographies (Axhausen, 2007; Lanzendorf, 2010; Scheiner, 2014) and the life-oriented approach by applying a novel approach to measuring the life course timeline.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on life course, mobility and millennials' travel from the life course perspective. It is followed by a description of the qualitative research methodology, participants and analysis method used. Finally, the results of the study are presented and implications for transport policy and research are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Life course and auto-mobility

Car ownership and driving habits are co-created alongside major life course decisions (Dargay, 2001; Ryley, 2006; Clark et al., 2014, 2015, 2016; Nakanishi and Black, 2016). The key life stages that influence transport behaviour are (a) leaving home, (b) completing school (higher education), (c) entering the workforce, (d) getting married, (e) having children and (f) retirement (Settersten and Ray, 2010; Schoenduwé et al., 2015; Nakanishi and Black, 2016), although the order in which these stages occur and the delay, or omission, of key stages are all distinct possibilities.

In general, car-based mobility is said to follow a 'life cycle effect', increasing as young households form, peaking in the child-rearing years and declining into retirement (Dargay and Vythoulkas, 1999). In particular, managing the complex demands of full-time work and child-rearing greatly increases dependence on private car travel (Bowling et al., 1999; Best and Lanzendorf, 2005; Ryley, 2006; Lanzendorf, 2010; Tranter, 2014). Importantly, once driving becomes a habitual behaviour it becomes part of how individuals organise everyday life and thus might reflect a sense of identity or personal style that could last in the future (Gärling and Axhausen, 2003; Verplanken and Orbell, 2003).

The relationship between life course and auto-mobility has varied, to some extent, between different generations. These generations are: the silent generation who were born between 1925 and 1945, baby boomers who were born between 1946 and 1965, generation X who were born in roughly between 1963 and the early 1980s and millennials (or generation Y) who were born between the early 1980s and early 2000s. The silent generation, returning from the WWII and initiating the proliferation of suburban living and a rapid uptake of motor vehicles (Gealy, 2010), followed traditional life course transitions. Baby boomers lived through economic prosperity and enormous social change; they had more diversity of experience than earlier generations, were better educated and travelled, more often divorced and instituted greater gender equality (Quine and Carter, 2006). Baby boomers and generation X started to break away from the traditional life course pattern through delaying marriage and child-rearing, although the majority still kept the traditional life course (Arnett, 2000; Wyn and Woodman, 2006).

Each generation has had slightly different relationships with the car and auto-mobility. Most notably, although the silent generation rapidly adopted the car in adulthood, the baby boomers were the first generation to grow up with readily-available car-based mobility and this is strongly reflected throughout their life course. For Australian baby boomers, in their youth "possession of a car – and even more, the *kind* of car one possessed – were perhaps the single most defining aspects of identity among young people" (Davison, 2004). Australian and North American baby boomers are characterised by their movement to low-density, car-oriented suburbs where they expected to remain as they age (Hugo, 2003; Lord et al., 2011). This reinforced the importance of the car as they retire and age (Zeitler and Buys, 2015). This is consistent with Goulias et al. (2007), who conclude that baby boomers will continue driving until they are forced to cease doing so.

Compared with the volume of literature focusing on baby boomers and their mobility, the literature investigating the silent generation and generation X is relatively scarce. There is some indication that generation X may be slightly less car-dependent than baby boomers with similar levels of driver licensing and car ownership. A recent American survey found

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