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City dweller aspirations for cities of the future: How do environmental and personal wellbeing feature?

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores city dweller aspirations for cities of the future in the context of global commitments to radically reduce carbon emissions by 2050; cities contribute the vast majority of these emissions and a growing bulk of the world's population lives in cities. The particular challenge of creating a carbon reduced future in democratic countries is that the measures proposed must be acceptable to the electorate. Such acceptability is fostered if carbon reduced ways of living are also felt to be wellbeing maximising. Thus the objective of the paper is to explore what kinds of cities people aspire to live in, to ascertain whether these aspirations align with or undermine carbon reduced ways of living, as well as personal wellbeing. Using a novel free associative technique, city aspirations are found to cluster around seven themes, encompassing physical and social aspects. Physically, people aspire to a city with a *range of services and facilities*, *green and blue spaces*, *efficient transport*, *beauty* and *good design*. Socially, people aspire to a *sense of community* and a *safe environment*. An exploration of these themes reveals that only a minority of the participants' aspirations for cities relate to lowering carbon or environmental wellbeing. Far more consensual is emphasis on, and a particular vision of, aspirations that will bring personal wellbeing. Furthermore, city dweller aspirations align with evidence concerning factors that maximise personal wellbeing but, far less, with those that produce low carbon ways of living. In order to shape a lower carbon future that city dwellers accept the potential convergence between environmental and personal wellbeing will need to be capitalised on: primarily aversion to pollution and enjoyment of communal green space.

1. Introduction

This paper explores people's aspirations for cities of the future. It examines the city aspirations of those who live in Britain's two largest cities, London and Birmingham. Set within the context of national and international commitments to radically reduce carbon emissions by 2050, people's aspirations for cities are evaluated in light of their alignment or clash with the carbon reduction agenda. Thus the paper interrogates whether people's hopes for cities of the future are in line with carbon reduced ways of living or not. Furthermore, the particular challenge of creating a carbon reduced future in democratic countries is that the measures proposed must be acceptable to the electorate. Such acceptability is fostered if carbon reduced ways of living are also felt to be wellbeing maximising. Thus the paper analyses city dweller aspirations in relation to subjective visions of the wellbeing-enhancing city. In addition, it examines the evidence base concerning what yields personal wellbeing. In sum the paper explores what kinds of cities people aspire to live in with an eye to whether these aspirations support or undermine both carbon reduced and wellbeing maximised ways of living.

1.1. Carbon footprint and the city

Cities produce a considerable carbon footprint. Estimates suggest that over 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions are produced by cities (UN-Habitat, 2011). Although the specific nature of a city's environmental impact has been debated in recent years (Hoornweg, Sugar, & Gomez, 2011; Satterthwaite, 2008), there is firm evidence that the key sources of carbon emissions in cities relate to the consumption of fossil fuels by way of electricity, transport and industry (UN-Habitat, 2011). This consumption is rising: Aviation emissions, for example, are rising disproportionately faster than other sources of travel emissions due, in part, to the rapid growth of the airline industry (van Renssen, 2012). Moreover, this is concentrated in an elite few; affluent city dwellers are most likely to use international air travel for work and vacations (Brand & Preston, 2010). Regarding industry, while many of the most polluted cities have introduced policies to limit

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industrial carbon emissions (see Holt, 2012), carbon dioxide emissions continue to increase mortality, especially in already polluted areas (Jacobson, 2008).

1.2. Wellbeing and the city

Carbon emissions are also linked to impairment of personal wellbeing (Boyko, Cooper, & Cooper, 2015). Personal wellbeing is a 'happy, healthy, or prosperous condition' (e.g. Oxford English Dictionary). Government bodies add to this definition 'life satisfaction' and 'lack of anxiety' (Office for National Statistics, 2011) while global bodies (e.g. World Health Organization, 2014) emphasise that mental *and* social wellbeing constitute the 'health' component. Thus the concept of personal wellbeing includes happiness, life satisfaction, freedom from anxiety and health. Several reviews have identified and categorised the factors that promote and hinder wellbeing (e.g. Diener, 2012, 2013; Diener et al., 1999; Huppert, 2009). One prominent approach focusses on specific factors that improve personal wellbeing (New Economics Foundation, 2008). At an individual level, these 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' are "Connect", "Be active", "Take notice", "Keep learning" and "Give". A growing evidence-base underpins these dimensions (Rugerri, Garcia-Garzon, Maguire, & Huppert, 2016). In particular, the importance of building and maintaining connections with significant others forms a key buffer against mental ill-health (Jenkins et al., 2008; Morrow, 2001) and, adding to the 'Five Ways', so too does contact with green space (Ambrey & Fleming, 2014; White et al., 2013). Beyond these actions that foster personal wellbeing, a set of interrelated *physical* and *social* factors have been found to contribute to the personal wellbeing and ill-being of city residents. These will be reviewed prior to presentation of the study reported in this paper, which aimed to glean, from the subjective perspective of city dwellers, their aspirations for cities of the future and to then assess the alignment or clash of these with carbon reduction and wellbeing maximisation agendas.

1.3. Physical and social characteristics of cities that engender wellbeing or ill-being

The physical and social characteristics of a city interact to produce either wellbeing or ill-being. City design contributes to the sense of safety and vibrancy offered by a city (Jacobs, 1961; Wood et al., 2008). In particular, 'mixed-use' neighbourhoods, where residential, work and leisure facilities co-exist foster wellbeing (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2000; Jacobs, 1961; Oldenburg, 1999). Furthermore, 'active sidewalks', where people socialise outside of both home and work contexts, nurture a sense of social connectedness and trust between city residents (Gehl, 2010; Jacobs, 1961). Social capital, the degree to which people feel connected to others in their community, is a strong predictor of happiness (Goldberg, Leyden, & Scotto, 2012; Putnam, 2000) and is perceived to be essential for health (Eriksson & Emmelin, 2013). A trusting environment, in particular, facilitates community connectedness. Spending quality time with trustworthy neighbours and the ability to call on a neighbour during an emergency predict wellbeing (Corrado, Corrado, & Santoro, 2013; Helliwell & Putnam, 2005; Kan, 2007).

Several researchers have explored how services and facilities, in particular, support wellbeing. In a study of ten international cities, residents' happiness was predicted by positive perceptions of services and facilities, convenience of public transport and access to cultural and leisure facilities (Leyden, Goldberg, & Michelbach, 2011). Furthermore, those who thought that their city was 'beautiful' reported higher levels of happiness. Corroborating this, Goldberg et al. (2012) found that those city dwellers who felt proud to live in their 'beautiful' city and who had easy access to services and facilities reported feeling healthier and more connected to others.

The importance for wellbeing of living in a 'walkable' city has also been identified (Frank et al., 2006; Saelens, Sallis, & Frank, 2003). City dwellers who live in walkable and mixed-use neighbourhoods are more likely not only to know and trust their neighbours but to be more socially and politically engaged with the community than those living in car-dependent suburbs (Leyden, 2003). The benefits of walkable green space are well documented, with several studies highlighting the links between green space and both physical and mental health (Bell, Wilson, & Liu, 2008; Ellaway, Macintyre, & Bonnefoy, 2005; Thompson et al., 2012). While the plausibility of the causal link between wellbeing and green space has been debated in the past (Lee & Maheswaran, 2011), White et al.'s (2013) longitudinal study has made inroads into identifying the nature of the link between green space and wellbeing. The study assessed levels of mental distress and wellbeing in individuals residing in urban areas that were characterised by either the presence or absence of green space. It found that people were happier when living in areas with more green space, and, conversely, showed higher levels of distress when living in areas with little green space. The strength of this effect was reinforced by controlling for other potentially confounding variables including change of income, employment or marital status over time.

While green space tends to have a positive effect on wellbeing, high density living can foster either wellbeing or ill-being. Evans (2014) identified how certain groups in a fashionable central London neighbourhood, including families with children, the elderly and vulnerable new migrants did not benefit from the services offered by this location. Noise, litter, limited open space and low levels of community cohesion contributed to a sense of isolation for such groups. A considerable volume of further research has also documented the ill-health effects related to urban living, most notably increased levels of obesity (Arambepola et al., 2008), respiratory problems associated with urban pollutants (Environmental Audit Committee, 2014) and high crime rates, which predict ill-being (Corrado et al., 2013; Howley, Scott, & Redmond, 2009).

Given the stress that living in cities can generate, several studies have explored the links between urbanisation and mental health (Evans, 2003), finding a connection between urban living and schizophrenia (Krabbendam & van Os, 2005; Peen et al., 2010). Population density in highly urbanised environments is strongly related to the onset of first episode psychosis (Oher et al., 2014). Assessing the mental health impact of cities more implicitly, Lederbogen et al. (2011) identified that people currently living in cities differ in how their brains processed stress and the effect was more pronounced in those who were brought up in cities. Over-responsiveness to stress, in long term city dwellers, appeared to make them more susceptible to mental ill-being.

However, high density living environments can also foster wellbeing, particularly in lower socioeconomic groups. Children living in poorer, denser areas have stronger social ties than children living in more affluent and less dense areas due to more opportunities for contact (Bernard, 1939; Boyko & Cooper, 2014; Moore, 1986). Also perhaps counterintuitively, civility or politeness, which correlates with wellbeing, can also be more prevalent in cities than rural areas. Villages with their quintessential sense of community can have higher levels of incivility than disadvantaged inner city areas. Indeed, civility was higher among residents of a deprived London borough compared with wealthy Wiltshire villagers (Griffith et al., 2011); tolerance for populations with different backgrounds was greatest in the places with the highest racial and ethnic mix.

In sum, the design and aesthetics of cities has a major impact on the personal wellbeing of their residents in part because of the interactions that design fosters. Since the quality of these interactions is central to wellbeing, people can have a strong sense of wellbeing in places that others would judge as aesthetically displeasing. This may relate to the social ties that exist in these spaces and that nurture a deep sense of belonging and rootedness (Cattell et al., 2008).This speaks to a broader conceptualisation of cities as places where not just crime and stress but also 'collective effervescence' (Jacobs, 1961) can be fostered. The 'collective joy' fostered in the ritualistic coming together of strangers who share a sense of collective identity (Ehrenreich, 2007; Novelli et al., 2013) can lend city dwellers a sense of wellbeing.