
THE GREY ESCAPE: HOW AND WHY ARE OLDER PEOPLE REALLY USING THEIR FREE BUS PASS?

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Abstract

Since 2008 those aged sixty and above have benefitted from unlimited area-wide free travel by bus after 09:30. The official policy rhetoric supporting implementation of the measure drew significantly upon the need to reduce social exclusion amongst older people. However, despite a substantial increase in the number of concessionary journeys in England and the associated cost liabilities for local authorities and possibly also operators, there is currently only limited understanding of the wide-ranging effects of providing a free pass on bus use, and in particular to whom benefits from the policy accrue. In part this circumstance results from a methodological focus by evaluation studies hitherto that has favoured aggregate-level data, often at the expense of the very rich contextual information that helps us understand how the individual benefits from using the pass. With this in mind, this paper seeks to understand more about the effects (both intended and unintended) of providing a free bus pass to older people. The paper specifically explores how pass users currently use the bus and how this has changed since the provision of free area-wide travel, highlighting the existence of both tangible and intangible benefits arising from the way pass holders use the bus. Second, it examines what the data can tell us about the benefits of the pass to the individual, leading to the finding that the nature and extent of benefits can vary between different groups of pass holders. The paper offers a fresh insight into previously unexplored uses and benefits of the concessionary bus pass. The paper concludes by exploring possible policy implications of the research in the context of the UK's ageing and growing population.

Keywords: Bus travel, older people, free travel, bus subsidy, public transport

Introduction

Transport is described by Cobb & Coughlin (2004) as the '*fundamental glue that holds life's activities together*' (p.4) and is widely recognized as an essential component for maintaining an acceptable quality of life (Lee et al., 1998; Preston & Rajé, 2007). Yet access to transport can become increasingly problematic with older age. Indeed, at a time when some older people may consider giving up their cars, Rosenbloom et al. (2007) assert that older people's desires to travel do not reduce at the same rate as their abilities to drive, thus creating a gap between desired mobility and actual mobility. This can result in a rupture occurring between the location of activities and those attempting to access these activities (Church et al., 2000). Those aged over 60 in particular are commonly identified as being at a higher risk of becoming 'transport captives' (Hine & Mitchell, 2001), with the result that some find themselves in the paradoxical situation of becoming isolated from the very aspects of life that made their retirement years more attractive than perhaps retirement seemed to the previous generation (Braithwaite & Gibson, 1987).

In response to this pressing issue – as part of a package of measures by the Government to reduce the effects of social exclusion and promote a better quality of life for older people in England - since April 2006 those aged sixty and above have been the recipients of unlimited free travel by bus in their home local authority areas after the morning peak, and from April 2008 they were able to use buses anywhere in England free of charge. The official policy mantra was to '*ensure that bus travel, in particular, remains within the means of those on limited incomes and those who have mobility difficulties*' (Dft, 2008). The 2005 budget announced that '*not only will this reduce the cost of travel for approximately 11 million people aged over 60 and approximately 2 million disabled people, it should also help approximately 54 per cent of pensioner households who do not have a car to travel freely in their local area*' (Butcher, 2009). This paper takes as a starting point that whilst concessionary fares policy has proved popular with many and led to a substantial increase in overall bus travel, there is currently only limited understanding of the individuals who are making these additional trips, why they are making them and what additional benefits they are obtaining from those trips.

Scope of the paper

After a brief discussion of the chosen research method, the question as to for what purpose pass holders are using their passes is addressed, finding that this range extends far beyond the traditional purpose categorisations used on typical travel surveys. Second, it discusses how many trips pass holders are making, highlighting a wide variance in the number of trips being made amongst pass holders. Finally, the issue of how many pass holders have increased their trips since the transition to free travel is discussed, and a number of factors potentially influencing this behavioural change reviewed. The paper makes the case that there are benefits and uses of the pass which have previously been poorly considered, yet potentially contribute to overall demand for bus services. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for further research into the more subtle effects of offering a free bus pass and assessing the extent to which they explain pass holder's response to the policy.

Methodology

This paper is based on two sets of data collection conducted as part of PhD study. First, an on-board bus survey of 500 Concessionary Pass holders was commissioned on four selected routes on an operator's network in Southwest England. A quota sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that an appropriate number of pass holders of all ages were captured. Data was inputted and analysed using SPSS 17. Second, five focus groups were conducted with those eligible for a concessionary bus pass in the Devon area (deliberately not excluding those who do not have a pass). A convenience sampling strategy targeted the focus groups to include those who considered themselves as regular users, irregular users as well as non-users of buses. Transcriptions were transcribed and analysed using both a manual approach and with the help of Nvivo 8.

Motivations for using passes

Beginning with the question as to why pass holders were travelling at the time of survey, by far the most frequently-stated trip purpose by pass holders was shopping (57%). Clearly the umbrella term 'shopping' can encompass a whole range of activities from browsing and window shopping, making smaller purchases to a weekly shop (e.g. Shields, 1992). Although the survey itself cannot distinguish between different variants of shopping, much literature highlights that the bus is perceived to be far more amenable to small item shopping rather than a large weekly shop (e.g. Musgrave 2007; Broome, 2009). The type of shopping being undertaken has previously been related to what other modes of transport are available, with those with access to a car found in one research project to be twice as likely to shop at major out-of-town supermarkets (Robinson et al. 2000). The implication is that, depending on the type of shopping being undertaken, the actual experience and indeed the derived benefits could be distinctly different. One respondent in the focus groups reported using the dial-a-ride service for a main shop, when an assistant was able to lift the heavy bags, and the regular bus service for lighter shopping, such as for clothes.

About a quarter of respondents (26%) described travelling for social reasons. The focus group discussions revealed that this could include those who were going to venues for social events such as lunches, meeting friends and talks, but that often the actual bus journey was very much part of this social element. Indeed in some cases the act of getting the bus was purposeful in itself. This relates strongly to Ory & Mokhtarian's (2004) concept of *travel liking* - in other words how much an individual likes to travel on a mode. One member of the focus group commented "I get on and go round on the route, it's so enjoyable - I don't really have a purpose, I suppose getting out of the house - if I was sitting there I would be bored". The bus was also described as 'enjoyable' and fun by pass holders. Researcher observation confirmed the social nature of bus travel, with activities observed taking place on the bus including 'sharing photos', 'gossiping', 'catching up on the latest with friends' and 'chatting'. It could be argued that such uses of the bus make it akin to the Facebook for the older generation. Like Facebook, it seems the bus is in some cases providing a service whose benefits extend far beyond the purely instrumental and represent an intrinsic part of some older people's lives. This was confirmed by one respondent who claimed 'my reason for using the bus is because I enjoy it - a bit like asking 'why do you eat chocolate?'. I mean of course it gets rid of hunger, but it's far more than that". It seems that one indirect consequence of offering free travel is that the bus itself appears to play a greater role in the social lives of some older people. One respondent commented 'I didn't use to enjoy it so much when I had to pay - I didn't have that flexibility to stay on a bit longer when a friend came on board to go round in a circular route if I wanted'. Another respondent expressed her irritation at being asked to say where she was going and getting a ticket each time as she didn't really know where she was going and felt this took away her flexibility. There is a policy implication here, in that the issuing of accurate tickets is one of the principal methods of calculating operator reimbursement. The second implication is that whilst much emphasis is placed on concessionary bus travel as derived demand for accessing services, the actual on-board bus experience of pass holders and the intrinsic benefit of bus travel to pass holders is often given little consideration in current research. In turn this could suggest a systemic undervaluation of the benefits accrued to the individual pass holder.

A further 15% reported travelling for other reasons, including day trips out, getting out of the house, escort duties and specific activities such as football, dance and music. This highlights the crude nature of simple categorisations in the survey, with purposes such as volunteering, day trips out and 'getting out of those house' not fitting into the conventional descriptors of purpose. Whilst to some extent this high proportion of other trips could be attributed to the survey design and lack of options, it could imply that the bus is being used for a wider range of activities since it has become free. Health and educational trips formed only a small percentage of trips at the time of the survey. This could be reflected in the infrequent but important nature of these trips. Indeed, in some cases medical trips may be the result of an ailment or mobility difficulty that means bus use becomes less viable (e.g. Freeman, 1987).

Figure 1 below compares the trip purposes with a similar survey on the network in 2008, showing the results are broadly comparable.

A number of focus group participants alluded to the 'blurring' of their bus trip purpose, particularly since bus travel became free. One commented "*I couldn't say- it's kind of shopping, but I don't really shop so does that make it social?*" Another respondent added "*now [the bus is] free I don't really have a specific reason for using it. It could be all of those categories*". Shield (1992) suggests that the blurred boundaries of trip purpose may be attributable to a broader societal change, for example the postmodern shopping lifestyle which has become '*a synthesis of leisure and consumption activities that were previously held apart*.'[p.6]. The policy implication of this neutralisation or '*depurposing*' of travel is that the link between additional bus travel and generated benefit becomes less clear and harder to define. This highlights an urgent need to understand better the complex interaction between the tool of the free bus pass, its creation of bus travel and the contribution of that additional travel to the individual's quality of life.

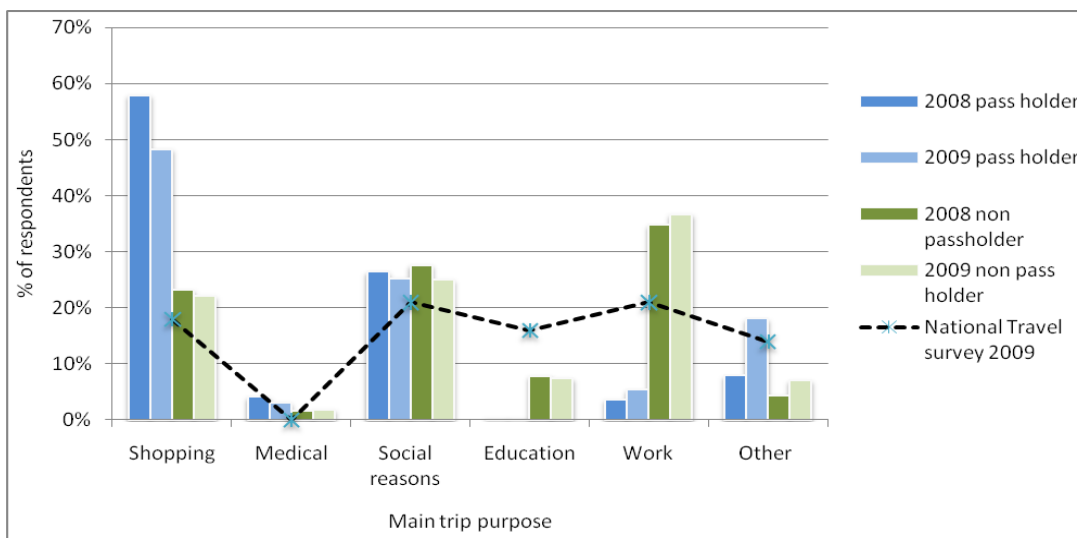


Figure 1: Main trip purpose at time of 2008 and 2009 surveys, compared with National Travel survey. **Note:** National Travel survey denotes percentage of all trips made on all modes and so is used as guidance only. Other trips include a number of 'return' trips where the specific purpose is unknown.

In some cases the free bus pass appears to have generated a completely new type of behaviour and trip purpose which has implications for overall bus use. 'Bus roulette' is one case in point, where pass holders arrive at a bus station and decide where to go on that day. Some groups, such as the Ramblers Association, have created regular activities based around the bus, such as the 'Route 72 club', which meets each week for an excursion organised using local bus services. One member added "*one of the benefits of the pass for me is that before there was no incentive for group travel on the bus so we went by car. Before, on the bus the cost increased as the numbers went up, but when we took the car the costs went down. Now this has changed*". Moreover it was suggested that group travel by bus meant that some pass holders were able to make trips further afield, which they would not make alone due to fear of becoming lost. This is one of a number of unintended or unexpected consequences of offering a free bus, discussed throughout the paper.

Having considered why people are travelling and using their passes, our attention now turns to how many trips are being made by pass holders, a key question for any Transport Concessionary Authority (TCA) tasked with reimbursing operators for concessionary journeys.

Frequency of pass use

In terms of how often pass holders were using their pass, a large variation was found in the extent to which pass holders had used their passes in the four weeks prior to the survey. Just under half (47.2%) of respondents reported having used the pass more than 10 times in the last three weeks, with a further quarter either having made 1-5 (26%) or 6-10 trips (25%) during the same period. Last's (2010) research reports a skewed distribution of trips; he found that 2.5% of pass holders made 25% of the trips, with important implications for the social equity of concessionary fares policy.

The current authors' research was particularly interested in the pass holders who had used their passes the most in the last four weeks. Analysis of the onboard survey data established that higher-frequency pass holders (10+ trips per week) were statistically more likely to report having increased their trip frequency since having a free pass, compared to those making lower frequencies ($\chi^2 (3, N = 456) = 8.264, p < 0.05$). In addition this group were more likely to have held their passes for a longer period, giving support to other research which shows that newer pass holders travel less using the bus (White & Baker, 2010). They attribute this to newer pass holders being more likely to be younger and therefore being more likely to have car access. The influence of built environment and age were also tested as potential contributory factors to account for this variation in trip making, but no statistically significant association was identified.

A hypothesis was tested suggesting that 'those who reported making more trips within the local area since the free pass might also report making more travel outside the local area'. Overall 54% of respondents typically made 2-5 trips within their local areas. Of these respondents, nearly half only made one trip outside their local area, 29% made 2-5 trips outside their local area and 21% never travelled outside their local area by bus. This suggests that making many local trips is not an important influence on most pass holders making more non-local trips.

Having considered how many trips pass holders are making, our attention now turns to the extent to which pass holders reported increasing their trips and to potential explanations for this increase.

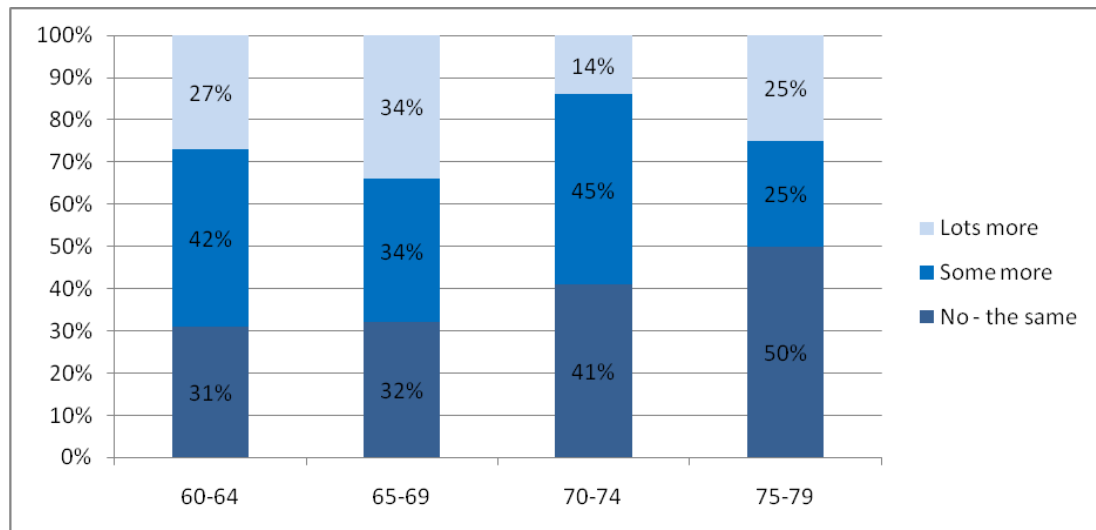


Figure 2: Extent to which pass holders are making additional trips since being provided with a free bus pass by age.

When age was taken into account, Figure 2 shows that older pass holders were less likely to report having increased their trips since obtaining a free bus pass than younger pass holders. The inverse of this finding is that older pass holders were more likely to report making the same number of trips as they made previously under the half-fare scheme. This finding was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (4, N = 456) = 5.334, p < 0.05$.)

The focus groups also discovered that in some cases the individual's trip patterns have changed since obtaining a free bus pass, with the result that they are now making more trips. In other words, some of the aggregate increase in travel could be accounted for by small changes at the individual level. One respondent commented that "*whereas before I did it all on market day to get the value from my day rider, now I can do a little bit of shopping here and there and spread it out*". Another added "*Thanks to the free bus pass I can go to town and do some window shopping and then come back and think about it and then go back the next day and buy it- before I would have not bothered*". Indeed, the spreading of trips was also found during the day. "*I enjoy hopping on and off the bus, going here and the getting on for a stop and getting off again. I couldn't do that before as I had a single ticket*". Furthermore, having a free bus pass allowed more choice and variety in locations visited. Another respondent reported "*I now go to Sainsburys and Tescos as I like the bargains in Tescos but I pop in a get the ham in Sainsburys on the way back*". These small level changes in individual behaviour could account for some of the increase in travel. A further benefit of this was that some respondents were now more likely to report going to local shops regularly rather than weekly shops at the supermarkets.

Thus far the attention of the paper has been devoted to pass holders who are using the bus and are deriving some benefit from it. Benwell (1976) states the obvious but important point that, for the pass to be of any use, the pass holder must have a bus that goes where he or she wants and must be able to physically use it. We identify the problem of the 'currency' or 'spendability' of the pass - in other words how and by whom it can be used. Unlike cash payments to the elderly - such as the state pension - that are paid in universal 'currency', the currency of the bus pass is only redeemable to a select subgroup of people (in the main part determined by whether they have a bus stop near their homes, although passes can be used on some park and ride services) and have the appropriate aptitudes to use it. Focus group research with irregular users by the current authors identified that, whilst the policy may be universally available, it can by no means be described as universally beneficial. One rural respondent commented "*the bus pass is utterly useless to me, I can't get down that hill to the bus stop - I get on the ring-a-ride service but you can't use your pass there*". Another added "*I don't have a bus at all here- the nearest one is miles away and I can't be sure it will get me back*".

Indeed, previous research has shown pass-use to be invariably higher in urban areas where provision of public transport is generally of a higher standard (Rye & Carreno, 2008). Furthermore, it is suggested that 75% of rural parishes have no bus (Musgrave, 2006), partly explaining why only 4% of trips in remote areas are made bus (Rye & Carreno, 2008). In addition to the research on the suitability of the bus for shopping noted above, Metz, (2003) found that only 35% of survey participants thought the bus was an acceptable way to get to the nearest hospital. This is a particular issue given that two-thirds of hospital patients are aged over 60. Such findings suggest that even if people could afford bus travel, in many cases the bus does not currently meet their requirements. The discussions found evidence that some respondents from rural areas, or hilly areas were using the car to get the bus stop to catch a bus, which could lead to the conclusion that in certain situations where access to the bus service is problematic, the pass is more useful to those with a car.

Alternatives to concessionary bus travel

Survey respondents were asked what their first choice of alternative mode for that particular journey would have been if they had not had free travel. The results were compared with a survey conducted by Passenger Focus (2009). In the 2009 survey a third of pass holders (34%) would have taken a paid bus journey for that particular trip, a further third (33%) would have travelled in a self-driven car and 15% would not have travelled. These results imply that whilst the free bus pass has substituted or replaced car-based travel and had some potential congestion-reduction benefit in over a third of cases, it has also meant a non-payment of bus fares in a further third of cases for this particular journey, with the further implication being

that in some of these cases consumer surplus has been created as the travellers were willing and able to pay. There may also be some positive externalities of the decisions of some to travel by bus rather than car, although these trips would be outside the morning peak, when congestion and pollution are greatest, which may erode the value of these benefits.

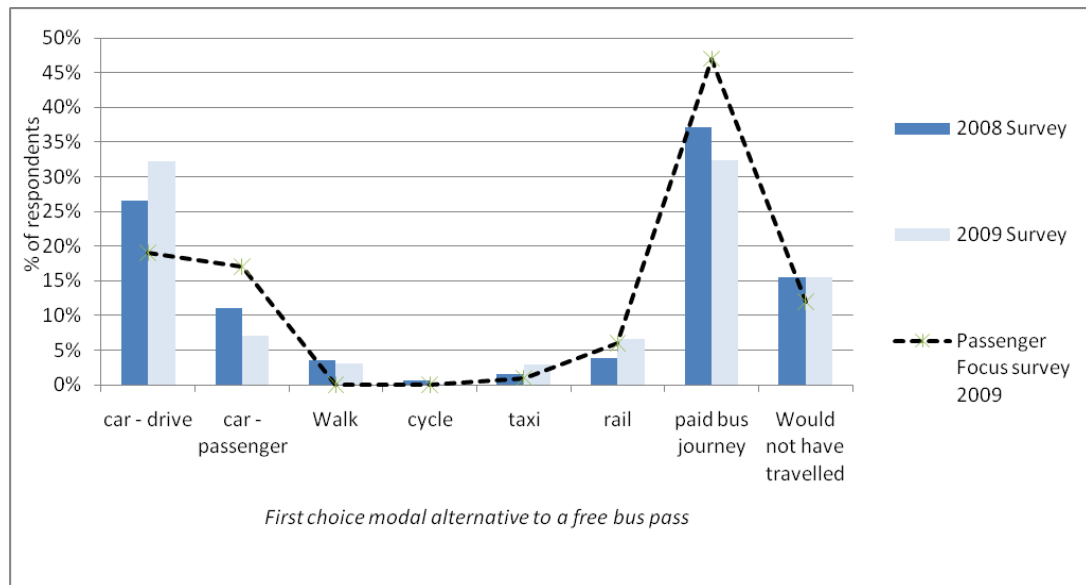


Figure 3: First choice modal alternative to the free bus pass

Nature of benefits to pass holders

The focus groups highlighted three types of benefit, direct and indirect. First, there is the **cost gain**. Some benefits are related directly to not having to pay for a specific trip - either because participants could not afford a notional journey or that they would not have been able to justify the trip if they would have to pay. In relation to this one respondent reported that *“the pass doesn’t really improve my quality of life but helps me maintain a quality of life that has become increasingly difficult as I get older”*.

Second, there is evidence of a **facilitative gain**: in other words benefits that relate to what is allowed to happen because the bus is free. Examples include increased flexibility in the daily routines of pass holders and increased variety and choice of end destinations. One respondent added *“the benefit of the free bus pass is the ability to take up routine activities, rather than the specific benefit of this particular trip. I can now take my weekly dance class without worrying about having to pay to get there”*. Another added *“My tourist trips are enjoyable and enrich the quality of life I enjoy, but I simply wouldn’t make them if I had to pay- but I would go elsewhere I think”*. The focus groups found that so called ‘bus pass tourism’ was found to become more frequent amongst some pass holders since being offered free travel. A number of quotes lead us to this conclusion. *‘Well lately I’ve done Newport, Chippenham and Weston. We tend to use the bus as often as possible to go to Street, Thornbury and we tour around. Another commented ‘I wouldn’t go there if it wasn’t free!’ If you go down bus station on a fine summer’s day to go to Weston you have to get there early otherwise you can’t get a space. Yet another added that “Without the bus pass I wouldn’t do one half of the social activities that I do now’ I can make a day of it. I got to places I wouldn’t have gone to”*. These are trips that wouldn’t have taken place previously.

Third, there is evidence of **avoidance gain** relating to aspects that people can avoid by using their free bus pass. There is emerging evidence of the perceived positive benefit of ‘not having to drive, especially in the winter’ and *“having someone else to drive me like a chauffeur”*. These benefits clearly affect people differently according to their age and life situation. Of course, there was evidence in some cases that pass holders journeys contained hints of all three benefits, with one responding commenting that

“having the free bus pass has meant that I can save money and spend that on a coffee in town. I tend to walk in through the hills (well its down hill so it’s easy) which means I don’t have to pay for the inward journey. Then I get the bus back when it comes at 12 and it is free. [...] well the main thing is keeping fit and getting out the house”.

Above and beyond this, the focus group studies revealed that the free bus pass appeared to have value above and beyond simply its monetary value, contributing to feelings of autonomy and freedom. When asked whether a simple addition to the state pension would be the same as having a free bus pass, one respondent responded *“no way! It’s not the money that matters, but the pass symbolises my freedom and independence...The pass gives me freedom - I flash that pass and it opens up a whole new world. Paying for tickets would be a hassle for me to find the change and in a rush.”* This suggests the existence of underlying nuances and narratives about the pass and a certain affinity towards it.

Subtly emerging from the focus groups is a new ideological perspective on bus travel. Gorz (1979) described the way in which the car became far more than simply a mode of travel - it was seen as *‘a mechanical embodiment of the dominant political and cultural ideology in the latter quarter of the 20th century – capitalist values of individualism, equality, freedom and progress’* (Gorz 1979). Likewise, a subtle argument can be made that the concessionary bus pass may have had the effect of changing the way the bus is perceived ideologically and become to some extent the plastic embodiment of those very same values. These ideas are considered further in the final section.

Discussion: a new kind of market for bus travel?

Through decades of decline in the UK bus market in most places outside London, the non-transport policy concessionary fares measure introduced for welfare reasons is the one instrument that has produced a clear and national halt to that trend. The last section examines the proposition that the provision of free travel has fundamentally changed the deliberative process by which pass holders are deciding to use the bus. .

A clear distinction emerged within the focus groups between those who would not have travelled as they could not have afforded it, and those who would not have travelled because they didn’t think it was worth the money. The former included one respondent with the clear opinion that *“I simply couldn’t pay for my journey- I am reliant on the bus for every day journeys and cannot drive. If I had to pay £4 a day I would not use it every day like I do”*. The views of a second group, those who could have afforded to travel but would not have, suggest a subtle influence of the pass on the ways in which trips are justified. It emerged that for some pass holders a key benefit of the bus pass was making trips which may be seen by others as trivial and would not be made in the absence of the scheme, but nevertheless contribute significantly to the pass holder’s sense of wellbeing. For example one respondent claimed *“I wouldn’t have made that journey to town if I had to pay - I couldn’t justify the expense. I mean, I could afford it, but I don’t think it would be worth it!”*. *“I use it a lot because I might as well, but if I had to pay I would seriously consider whether I want to use it - we don’t want to waste our pennies!”*

This evidence adds support to the notion that the fact of the concessionary pass being free has the potential to alter pass holder’s behaviour and potentially circumvent the normal transaction processes that have been assumed to govern purchasing behaviour. In other words there may be an effect of the free bus pass above and beyond that of the simple price-changing mechanisms. But in addition to potentially altering pass holder’s justification and decision making mechanisms, behavioural theorists such as Ariely (2008) suggest that the nature of being free can stimulate extra demand in itself, and thus actively encourage consumption. He posits that there is a certain novelty of acquiring free things and that humans are hardwired to love ‘free’ items, with the result that zero is not a price but an *emotional hot button* that should be placed in a category of its own. Studies involving the online retailer Amazon revealed a similar phenomenon, in that offering free delivery was found to stimulate much more custom than offering even a significantly higher discount, even on the same product (Lewis et al., 2006).

There seems to be a case for incorporating some aspects of economic psychology when studying concessionary fares policy. Whereas economics assumes people interact through market forces, economic psychology recognises that human actions are embedded in their social environment (Epton, 1998). Warneyrd (1999) comments that '*economic psychology deals with real man rather than simply economic man by considering the behavioural especially social psychological mechanisms underlying economic behaviour*'. He argues that theories of rational choice relate only poorly to actual behaviour, meaning they are '*normatively useful but fundamentally deficient as accounts of real life behaviour*'.

The policy implication of this is that whilst it is well documented that the free bus pass has significantly altered the landscape and operating conditions of the UK bus industry, both in terms of influencing market and price mechanisms and also increasing state subsidy to a notionally private industry, this paper suggests and makes the case that the policy of providing free fares has also fundamentally changed the deliberative processes of pass holders at the individual level and the ways they use the bus.

In other words, the case can be made that the concessionary bus pass may have distorted the allocation of resources both at the operational and the individual decision-making level. The policy's funding arrangements are based on the presumption of highly rational behaviour and use of elasticities to model response to price, which assumes that it is useful and indeed possible to differentiate between 'captive' and generated trips in order to leave bus operators 'no better - no worse off'. However, the evidence in the current paper suggests serious doubt must be cast on whether the 2006 and 2008 stages to the policy amount to a price reduction from 50% to 0%, or whether it should be better described as a more radical market revolution, with more useful comparisons being made with price eliminations in markets for other goods and services than can be made with incremental price changes in bus markets at other times and places. Furthermore, it may become increasingly complex to distinguish between the effects of the scheme and its benefits and the magic effects of a zero fare, with important implications for reimbursement procedures. Indeed, if the whole psychological basis to bus trip making and the market within which those trips are made has changed, then the logic of 'no better no worse' no longer holds.

If the above proposition is true, then it is likely that the tensions between private bus operators and the local and central government funding agencies will grow as the available funds for reimbursement come under pressure. A detailed analysis of alternative policy options is beyond the scope of the present paper, but a practical response to avoid a certain proportion of trips being made solely due to the zero price effect might be to introduce a nominal charge for bus travel. By charging even twenty pence, the standard transaction processes may be reintroduced and the step-change in economic behaviour avoided. Another innovative option emerging from the current research project could include offering the over 60s a card containing £40 of free travel for a period of one month, with the catch being that what they do not spend they can have returned in cash value. This method would reintroduce the transaction elements to the decision, whilst encouraging rational behaviour and optimal use of the pass. At a distributional level, the issue of currency would be dealt with, as those unable to use the pass would receive the amount in cash or would be able to spend their money on other things. At a psychological level, reintroduction of the transaction processes would reduce the effects of the emotive nature of an item being free. By encouraging optimal use of the pass (recognising that this will be different for each individual), the economic efficiency of the policy should be optimised.

Conclusion

Whilst existing data and research has shown that providing a free bus pass has changed the number of trips being made by pass holders in many cases, this paper has found that the free bus pass has also changed the very landscape of bus travel for pass holders. There is some evidence that it may have an effect on the justification processes of bus travel, promoted the bus's identity as a social experience, and stimulated entirely new bus uses such as 'bus roulette', where pass holders select their bus route upon arriving at the bus

station. Ureta (2005) recognises the feelings of freedom engendered by travel in some cases are more significant to the bus user than the end destination (Marsden & et al., 1999). These individual level changes in the daily bus routines of pass holders have not previously been explored in depth, yet can explain to some extent the increase in travel witnessed as a result of the scheme, and more importantly contextualise the trips in the meaning of the everyday lives of pass holders. However, changes in bus use since free travel were also found to be highly variable amongst different pass holders. These findings begin to make the case that existing methods of researching concessionary fares policy and indeed the mechanisms of reimbursement that assume rational consumer behaviour could be inadequate to fully capture the uses and benefits of the free bus pass. The benefits of the scheme have been found to extend beyond simply the removal of cost barrier to offering a greater flexibility in bus travel amongst pass holders, whilst avoiding some of the negative aspects of car travel felt in older age. Additional research needs to be undertaken to capture the meaning engendered by the additional travel, particularly in the context of a policy which seeks to address the subjective issue of social exclusion. In brief, this points to the urgent need for further research that understands the whole journey patterns of bus users from their door to their final destination and the mode choices preceding the use of the bus.

The wider implication of this paper could be a suggested need for a more fundamental transition in the policy approach. Whilst the current policy approach and basis for reimbursement focuses on modelling how pass holders responded when the policy change was instigated, this was almost three years ago and may have less relevance in coming years. Indeed many pass holders may have difficulty in realistically describing how they would have travelled. Hence, this research supports a move to considering and furthermore understanding how pass holders are reacting to their free bus pass now, highlighting the need for further research into the more subtle effects of the free bus pass identified in this paper, such as its effect on the deliberative processes for bus travel. In brief, the reported aggregate increase in bus travel is the function of a number of subtle responses by the individual, which are to date poorly understood.

Finally, the paper recognises that much of existing research tends to sideline those who cannot use the bus due to mobility impairment or inability or unavailability of the bus. Indeed the conceptual inconsistencies mentioned in the paper could mean that the very people who are at most risk of becoming isolated are those who cannot use the bus pass. It could be argued that the bus has a potential to improve feeling of isolation but not in isolated places. With the Confederation of Passenger Transport warning of *'a very real danger that the most visible effect of the government's generosity to older and disabled people will be a substantial shrinking of England's bus network'* (The Guardian, 2008), this paper endorses an approach that takes greater consideration of the interaction between the provision of a free bus pass, its use, and the resultant benefits, which will become increasingly relevant and resonant given the severe financial restraints and an ageing and growing elderly population with very uneven access to cars.

Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the author's PhD research at the University of the West of England, Bristol, supported by a major UK bus operator, the Southwest Regional Development Agency and UWE through the 'Great Western Research' initiative. The author would like to express his gratitude to his supervisors, Prof. Graham Parkhurst, Prof. Jon Shaw and Dr Yusak Susilo for their ongoing contributions and support to the project.

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