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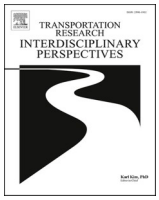

Looking back to look forward – Life events and everyday travel over the life course

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ABSTRACT

Everyday travel is often habitual and stable, yet life events can disrupt routines and create "windows of opportunity" for change. Mobility biographies and life course perspectives show how transitions such as relocation, parenthood, or retirement intersect with social roles, values, and structural conditions to shape long-term mobility. This qualitative study explored how life events shape everyday travel among older adults. Fourteen participants (8 women, 6 men; aged 56–85) were recruited via social media and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis resulted in four themes: (1) Conscious choices and unconscious patterns – participants navigated between deliberate, strategic decisions and behaviors shaped by, for instance, habit or gradual adaptation; (2) Personal history and external context – childhood, family, partnerships, parenthood, and significant life events influenced travel routines; (3) Adapting travel to changing capacities, values, and alternatives – health, environmental concerns, and digital options shaped how participants reassessed when and how to travel; (4) Facing illness, mortality, and existential limits – awareness of aging and life's finitude shaped travel decisions, motivating both caution and meaningful engagement with valued experiences. The study highlights that older adults' travel behavior evolves through the interplay of life events, personal values, social relationships, and aging bodies. Changes are rarely immediate or uniform; instead, travel reflects both conscious choices and unconscious adaptations, intertwined with identity, health, and relational contexts. A life course perspective emphasizes that mobility is continuously negotiated and re-evaluated, offering insights for designing sustainable and adaptable travel options for an aging population.

1. Introduction

Travel behavior in everyday life is often marked by habit and routine. Individuals tend to follow established patterns and seldom re-evaluate their mode choices under stable life conditions (Müggenberg et al., 2015). However, significant transitions in other life domains such as moving house, changing jobs, or becoming a parent can disrupt these routines. Such life events open periods of reflection during which individuals are more likely to reconsider their travel behavior (Müggenberg et al., 2015; Chatterjee et al., 2013). Research on mobility biographies and life course theory has emerged to explore how long-term life trajectories and short-term mobility decisions are interlinked, emphasizing the concept of "windows of opportunity." This concept highlights that life events create unique moments when interventions linked to changes in context can more effectively support transitions toward sustainable mobility practices (Janke et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that life events such as residential relocation, workplace changes, marriage, childbirth, and retirement can significantly influence mode choice and car ownership (Clark et al., 2016; Oakil et al., 2014). The link is not a clear-cut one – behavioral shifts do not always follow expected paths, as habit persistence, financial or emotional constraints, and structural conditions often intervene with the changes (Johansson Rehn et al., 2026; Oakil et al., 2014). The complexity of life trajectories, including nonlinear transitions like divorce and remarriage, challenges simplified models based solely on age or household structure (Rau and Schreiner, 2021). Gendered patterns of mobility further complicate this picture: while young men and women without children show similar levels of active travel, parenthood and household responsibilities are linked to decreased active travel among women and increased reliance on cars

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(Janke et al., 2021; Kawgan-Kagan, 2020). Chidambaram and Scheiner (2024) likewise show that gender, household composition, multitasking, and partner interactions shape the complexity of everyday activity patterns. These findings underscore the importance of subjective experience, social roles and normative expectations in shaping mobility trajectories.

From a policy perspective, life events present practical opportunities for targeted interventions. Relocation, in particular, is frequently studied as a moment conducive to promoting sustainable travel choices (Larouche et al., 2020). Interventions tend to be most successful when implemented shortly after life events and tailored to the individual's new context. In the case of older adults, this tailoring may need to include both accessibility conditions and social networks (Alousi-Jones and El-Geneidy, 2025), as acceptance is shaped not only by performance expectations but also by social influence, face-to-face information, and advice from family and friends (Kato and Yoh, 2025). However, despite this potential, many interventions remain underutilized or poorly targeted, highlighting a disconnect between research and practice. The habit discontinuity hypothesis points to the strong inertia of habitual behaviors, suggesting that without sufficient disruption, even motivated individuals may fail to change travel habits (Verplanken et al., 2008). Thus, successful interventions must address the timing of life events, the structural and cognitive reinforcements of existing routines, as well as the subjective meaning attached to life events, making life events and peoples' reactions to them complex and elusive phenomena. Promoting lasting behavior change requires a combination of life timing, social support, and infrastructure, not just information campaigns.

Life events can be understood as transitions between stable phases in travel behavior, reshaping the psychological processes underlying habits and decision-making (Johansson Rehn et al., 2024). They may also affect the social conditions that support or constrain travel behavior, highlighting multiple pathways through which behavior change can occur. For example, the birth of a child changes household priorities and values, affecting how individuals assess transport options with new emphasis on safety, convenience, and flexibility (Scheiner, 2016). Furthermore, transitions such as forming new partnerships or relocating can alter the symbolic meanings attached to travel modes, influencing preferences beyond practical considerations (Janke and Handy, 2019). Cycling may for example become more attractive in communities where it is normative valued and practically supported while car use may continue to represent autonomy and status elsewhere. Social identity thus plays a critical role in shaping mobility behaviors, especially when activated by life transitions. The notion of "latent demand" is also relevant, describing unexpressed preferences for sustainable modes that remain dormant until structural or contextual barriers are reduced, for instance through moving to a bike-friendly neighborhood (Müggenberg et al., 2015). This point is reinforced by Ramezani et al. (2025), who show that the alignment or misalignment between mobility lifestyles and residential environments is linked to travel behavior, perceived health, and life satisfaction. Understanding how latent preferences interact with life events and environmental factors is essential for effective policy design.

Later-life mobility warrants specific attention because travel supports more than access to destinations: it can sustain independence, social participation, physical activity, and connection to social networks. At the same time, age-related changes in health and functional capacity can alter the feasibility and perceived safety of different modes, while access to suitable transport becomes increasingly important for maintaining participation in everyday life (Musselwhite et al., 2015; Cui et al., 2017; Pantelaki et al., 2021). Recent studies also emphasize that accessibility and the social context of transport influence older adults' use and acceptance of mobility services (Alousi-Jones and El-Geneidy, 2025; Kato and Yoh, 2025). These observations make older adulthood particularly relevant for a life-course analysis: mobility in later life reflects both accumulated biographical experiences and current adaptations to changing capacities, relationships, and environments.

Despite a growing literature on travel behavior and life events, less is known about how older adults retrospectively connect mobility changes to accumulated life events, relationships, and changing capacities. Qualitative and longitudinal approaches are particularly useful for examining gradual and relational change that may be difficult to capture through discrete event measures alone (Sattlegger and Rau, 2016; Rau and Schreiner, 2021). This study therefore explores how older adults describe the influence of life events on everyday travel over the life course, with particular attention to how intentional choices, social relations, health, and changing mobility contexts shape continuity and change.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design using semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into how life events relate to everyday travel behavior among older adults. The qualitative, phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the rich, subjective experiences and meanings participants attribute to changes in their mobility over the life course.

2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited through social media platforms using snowball sampling, which allowed for reaching older adults within the specified age range of 56 to 85 years. The inclusion criterion was simply being within this age span and expressing interest in participating, without restrictions based on gender, socioeconomic background, or mobility status. In total, 14 participants were included, comprising eight women and six men. This sample size was deemed appropriate for a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), allowing for sufficient diversity of perspectives while enabling an in-depth, iterative engagement with the data. All participants had either current or past experience of living in multi-person households, which allowed them to reflect on travel behavior in relation to shared household needs and dynamics. This study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (diary number 2024–06077-02–646581).

2.3. Procedure

Data collection took place between October and December 2024. The first author (SJS) conducted all interviews to ensure consistency in data collection procedures. Interviews were conducted via video calls. Each interview lasted between 25:40 and 58:30 min, providing ample time to explore both retrospective accounts of life events and their perceived impacts on current travel habits. The interview guide (see Appendix 1) was designed to elicit narratives around significant life events (e.g., retirement, relocation, changes in family status) and to capture changes in travel modes, routines, and motivations over time.

2.4. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed inductively in the original language. Minor modifications were made when translating quotations from Swedish to English to ensure clarity and fidelity to participants' intended meanings. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's methodology (2022), which is widely recognized for its systematic yet flexible approach to qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for its suitability in exploring complex, subjective experiences related to behavior change across the life course. This approach allows for capturing both individual depth and shared patterns across participants, accommodating the diversity of perspectives and

experiences reported by older adults.

The analytic process involved several iterative steps. The transcripts were first read multiple times to gain an immersive understanding of the content, after which meaningful data segments describing life events and their effects on travel behavior were identified and assigned preliminary codes. The initial coding was intentionally fine-grained and kept close to participants' accounts. Related codes were then grouped into broader patterns and developed into subthemes, which in turn informed the development of the final themes capturing recurring patterns and meaningful variations across interviews. The themes and subthemes were subsequently reviewed for internal coherence and distinction from each other, with discussions within the research team used to refine the thematic structure and resolve discrepancies. Clear definitions and names were then assigned to the themes and subthemes to capture their essence and relevance to the research questions, and selected illustrative quotes were extracted to exemplify the findings and enrich the analytic narrative in the results section. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes and subthemes, their prevalence across interviews, and illustrative quotes. Throughout the analysis, participant anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. The study adhered to established qualitative research standards (Tong et al., 2007) to support rigor, transparency, and trustworthiness in reporting.

3. Results

The analysis resulted in four themes that describe how everyday travel changed or remained stable across the adult life course: (1) Conscious choices and unconscious patterns; (2) Personal history and external context; (3) Adapting travel to changing capacities, values, and alternatives; and (4) Facing illness, mortality and existential limits. Table 1 summarizes the higher-order analytical dimensions within each theme, their prevalence across interviews, and illustrative quotations. The sections below focus on these recurring dimensions rather than on interpreting every element raised by each individual quotation.

Table 1
Overview of themes, subthemes, and prevalence across interviews.

Theme	Subtheme	Prevalence
Conscious choices and unconscious patterns	• Deliberate planning versus unplanned adaptation • Accessibility, proximity, walkability, and residential location • Habit, safety, autonomy, and practical constraints • Intergenerational transmission of mobility practices	Mentioned by 12/14 participants. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14)
Personal history and external context	• Childhood and earlier mobility experiences • Partnership, household negotiation, parenthood, and caregiving • Relocation, work, retirement, and other life-course transitions • Urban/rural context, transport access, safety, time, and car dependence	Mentioned by 14/14 participants. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14)
Adapting travel to changing capacities, values, and alternatives	• Illness, fatigue, and changing bodily capacity • Caregiving and social obligations that constrain or redirect mobility • Maintaining activity and independence through adaptation • Environmental values, changing social norms, and digital alternatives to some travel	Mentioned by 13/14 participants. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14)
Facing illness, mortality and existential limits	• Bereavement and loss as life-course turning points • Serious illness, vulnerability, and awareness of mortality • Anticipated dependency and threats to autonomy • Present-oriented mobility and the value of maintaining meaningful activities	Mentioned by 6/14 participants. (1, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14)

3.1. Theme 1: conscious choices and unconscious patterns

The first theme captures the interplay between planning and adaptation, i.e. between decisions that are deliberately made and those that emerge out of necessity or changing life circumstances.

Across the interviews, it became clear that certain life events, like relocating – which potentially affected participant's mobility and travel options – had been sought deliberately with this in mind, while for others the events and their consequences appeared to be more incidental. Participants either described themselves as active agents shaping their circumstances, or acknowledged the ways in which habits, coincidences, or external conditions also influenced their behavior and choices.

Several participants explicitly framed their residential decisions and travel behavior as conscious and strategic. In these narratives, travel was not confined to the life event as such but tightly linked to broader life goals such as social belonging, proximity to family, or making daily life more manageable. For instance, one participant described how the decision to stay in a city was informed by a desire to maintain social ties and family proximity, and emphasized autonomy and ownership over this decision:

> Yes, because I've moved many times in my life and have now lived here for ten years, so it felt like – no, that's enough. Now I want to live close to the new friends I've made and one of my children who lives here. So, it was a conscious decision not to move far away. Yes, it was….
> It was a choice. Nobody forced me – it was a decision I made. Yes, it really was. (Participant 1)

Similarly, another participant articulated a long-standing awareness of the role transport played in enabling everyday life, even from a young age. Their reflections suggested that living near the city center was an intentional effort to maintain accessibility, shaped in part by childhood experiences of geographic isolation:

> Yes, living close to the city is deliberate. I grew up in the countryside, and back then it was all about cycling. I got my first moped at 13… because that was the only way to get around. (Participant 2).

This account links an early experience of limited accessibility with a later preference for living close to everyday destinations and transport options.

In contrast to these intentional narratives, other participants described how travel behavior evolved in more implicit or unplanned ways. One participant, for instance, noted that their proximity to a preschool, a factor that may influence mode of transport for family logistics after the life event of having children, was coincidental rather than planned:

> No, the preschool just happened to be there, so that was good. We moved in a few years before we had children. (Participant 3).

Some participants described becoming more conscious of their travel patterns only when prompted to reflect on them. One participant shared that travel had often followed decisions about lifestyle or housing, rather than being a primary consideration:

> To be honest, we haven't really thought much about travel. It was only when you sent that link about what you were interested in that I started thinking. I realized our travel behavior usually followed our

decisions about where to live or what to do – it came second. (Participant 7).

This example shows how travel can be a secondary effect of other choices, even if those choices carry significant implications for mobility. Other participants reflected on how their priorities had shifted over time, suggesting a temporal dimension to the conscious/unconscious spectrum:

Now that I'm older, I think about living close to public transport and shops. I didn't think that way before. Back then, it was more about a calm environment and safety for the kids….
Yes, I think I've done that, consciously and unconsciously. I've considered transport options. It's part of making everyday life work. (Participant 9).

3.2. Theme 2: personal history and external context

The second theme is about how participants' travel behavior in later life has been shaped by both personal decisions and experiences on the one hand, and by social relationships and responsibilities on the other. While some changes were framed as individual adaptations in response to one's own needs and preferences, others were clearly influenced by life events involving people around them. Retirement, caregiving and family life emerged as shared and intertwined life events.

Participants described how mobility routines shifted when entering partnership, illustrating how intimate relationships can shape or redirect travel behavior, i.e., that practices are not only individual but also relational and subject to influence from significant others:

I didn't bike before. I was a student and used the bus. But then I met my wife, and she biked. So, after that, it became biking for me too. (Participant 3)

Several participants pointed to how major life events, such as separation or retirement, shifted the geography and temporality of their travel. The arrival of children and parenthood fundamentally changed the organization of everyday travel, particularly due to increased logistical demands and shifting practicalities:

Well, it probably meant more car use, in the sense that it was easier to travel. You just put the baby in the back seat – at the time we barely had child seats. So of course, we probably took the car more often. That's how having children influenced travel, or the choice of transport. (Participant 4)

For other participants, this meant new or consistent use of a car in connection with children's activities:

It's always been more or less the same, it's had to do with the kids. I have three sons, lots of sports activities, soccer matches and so on, and we had to drive there. It's been frequent and always that kind of travel. (Participant 1).

This highlights how the practical demands of family life can normalize car use over time, especially in settings where alternatives may be perceived as insufficient or unrealistic. Another participant reflected on the early years with her son while her husband travelled frequently – capturing how family factors rather than just personal choice can shape travel modes:

He was away every other week, Monday to Thursday, and I had no car then. It was cycling – and you know, cursing the bike saddle in the snow, picking up my son. I had a bike seat on the back and a rack in front. And there were no electric bikes back then. (Participant 2).

On a similar note, there were also disclosures about extensive nighttime driving during periods of parenting adolescents and young adults, illustrating the impact of concessions to/demands of others.

Participants were also influenced by their own childhood and experiences with their birth family, although the significance of such social influences varied across interviews. For some participants, family relationships shaped not only practical access to mobility, but also emotional attachments to particular modes of transport. For example, one participant recounted how her relationship with her father (a car mechanic) deeply influenced her attachment to cars:

My dad worked with cars. I was a daddy's girl, and getting a driver's license was really important. I got it early. It was a way for us to connect: I'd pick him up, he'd help me with the car, and we'd talk while working on it. It was a way of spending time together. (Participant 9).

Here, car use was described not only as practical transport but also as connected to a relationship with a parent and to the timing of obtaining a driving license. Other participants, however, described family events as having little effect on their travel routines:

There are so many life events: the kids being born, the grandkids, doing theater, but they haven't really changed my travel. It's been education, work, and moving house that have made the difference. (Participant 4).

Across these accounts, family relationships influenced travel most clearly when they changed everyday destinations, schedules, responsibilities, or access to transport. Other social events were described as important in participants' lives without necessarily changing established travel routines.

3.3. Theme 3: adapting travel to changing capacities, values, and alternatives

The third theme captures how participants adapted their travel in response to changing personal capacities, values, and available alternatives. These changes included health-related limitations, shifts in environmental values and social norms, and the growing availability of digital communication as a substitute for some travel. Across these experiences, participants described reassessing whether, how, and how much they travelled as their circumstances and priorities changed.

But that operation I had before, I had a lot of bleeding for six months, and I had fibroids without knowing it. And then, commuting just wasn't fun. We had just started commuting again, and it was a long drive. I just felt like, this isn't worth it. I can't keep doing this…
It was actually about realizing, when we were sitting at home, how much time traveling takes. Not just the time in the car, but also working super intensely, being alone in that role… I started to feel a bit calmer. (Participant 2)

Health also shaped travel in more pragmatic and regulatory ways. The same participant described how living with diabetes had long-term consequences for her driving:

If you have diabetes before turning 18 or before getting your driver's license, you need a medical certificate. And until two years ago, you had to get a retinal scan every other year. I didn't have any complications, but still, that requirement stuck. If I had gotten diabetes later in life, that rule wouldn't have applied. So now, I must monitor my blood sugar. I don't drive with low blood sugar. I've got control now, I wear a continuous glucose monitor. (Participant 2)

Health conditions could translate into practical rules for travel. In this account, diabetes required ongoing monitoring before driving. Participants also anticipated how age-related physical changes might affect future walking or cycling and described possible adaptations:

If my body starts to protest, if it gets harder to get up on the bike, then I might get a women's bike. Or maybe an e-bike if it gets too hard. That would be the alternative. (Participant 3)

The participant's response illustrates adaptation rather than

withdrawal from active travel: a different bicycle or an e-bike was considered as a way to continue cycling if physical capacity changed.

Beyond physical health, participants described how long-standing values and habits, particularly related to the environment, shaped their travel choices. One participant shared a strong commitment to sustainability that began early in adulthood, and how these values became part of family life:

> When we were newly married, we joined the *Swedish Society for Nature Conservation*. That's where we learned early on that, if you can bike, it's better. This was long before climate and environmental concerns became mainstream…
> We've tried to live by that way of thinking. The kids grew up with it. They've got the same mindset, and the grandchildren too – it's been passed down. (Participant 11)

For some participants, environmental values were long-standing and embedded in family practices. In this account, cycling and limiting unnecessary car use were described as habits and values that had been carried across generations. Participants also described changing social expectations around travel, particularly flying. Some contrasted earlier periods of their lives, when environmental impacts were less salient in everyday travel decisions, with a present context in which air travel and car use were more likely to be questioned. Others described environmental concern as secondary to convenience, health, or practical obligations:

> I do think a bit about it, that it's good for the environment that I don't take the car every day. But that's not what decides it. (Participant 3)

Some participants reflected on how digital technologies had reshaped perceived needs for travel, both in professional and private life. In work contexts, digital communication made some meetings appear less self-evidently necessary. One participant described how video conferencing and email gradually changed expectations around work-related mobility:

> Somewhere during the time I was working with [company name], starting in 2009, video conferencing started to become possible. Email became more common. And then we started asking: is it really necessary to meet our networks twice a semester? When you start questioning it in your professional life, you start questioning it at home too. (Participant 7)

Digital communication constituted a third form of adaptation by changing which trips were perceived as necessary. Participants described video meetings, FaceTime, and Teams as ways to maintain work and social contact across distance. These technologies did not eliminate travel, but they sometimes reduced the need for particular meetings or visits and therefore altered the circumstances in which physical travel was considered necessary.

Taken together, these accounts show that travel was adjusted in response to different constraints and considerations. Health could make a mode more difficult or require self-monitoring; environmental values could favor lower-impact modes; and digital communication could reduce the perceived need for some trips. The relative importance of these considerations varied between participants.

3.4. Theme 4: facing illness, mortality and existential limits

The fourth theme is about death and mortality, which was present both directly and indirectly in participants' reflections on life events and travel. Rather than being a distant abstraction, death and declining health were discussed as looming possibilities that shaped how participants viewed their current and future mobility. Several participants brought up the possibility of death in a humorous or matter-of-fact way, while still expressing a deep awareness of how illness and aging could restrict their independence:

> Other life events ahead include, well, death [laughs]. Then there won't be much transport anymore… But we talk about not knowing how long we can stay here. We try to make arrangements so we can remain, even if we need home care. (Participant 4)

The participant expresses a strong desire to remain at home and maintain autonomy, even in the face of functional decline. The quote illustrates how travel becomes conditional on physical and cognitive ability, as well as the structure of care systems. Another participant shared a vivid memory of becoming seriously ill:

> In 2015, I became seriously ill. I was almost paralyzed. I couldn't walk, had to use a cane. It was terrible. Psychologically, it affected me a lot. You become aware of your own mortality, in a way. (Participant 6)

The shock of sudden illness challenged not only this person's physical mobility but also their self-concept and outlook on life. While travel remained necessary, for example, taking taxis to work, the meaning of travel shifted from freedom and engagement to necessity and vulnerability. The experience of being transported by ambulance further underscores the loss of control and the sudden confrontation with dependency.

In some cases, death and fear entered the travel narrative through accidents rather than illness. One participant described hitting a moose shortly after getting a driver's license:

> I was very quick to call and say I'm fine, but the car looks really crushed. It was a bit scary. I kept seeing moose everywhere after that, real ones and maybe imagined ones too. But I kept driving. (Participant 13)

The emotional residue of fear lingered even though driving behavior resumed. Heightened vigilance became a coping strategy, showing how people adapt emotionally and behaviorally to perceived threats to safety. For some older participants, thoughts about death and illness led to a focus on the present moment:

> What should you think about when you're 81? You take one day at a time. I don't plan much anymore. We just go with the flow. (Participant 10)

Such reflections suggest an existential shift in how time is experienced, and mobility is valued. Rather than planning for long-term travel or change, participants focused on daily routines and present capabilities. The act of cycling, in particular, was described not only as physical exercise but as a way of maintaining autonomy, sensory engagement, and joy:

> I'm very happy as long as I can cycle. I get to see a lot. I know that one day it might not be possible, but I don't stand around waiting for it. I take life as it comes. (Participant 11)

This quote illustrates freedom through mobility. Finally, participants reflected on how losing a spouse could radically alter travel practices and life structure:

> It depends on how long I get to keep my wife, so to speak. That could be a big life event, if she passes away before me. (Participant 12)

The possibility of becoming widowed was seen not just as an emotional loss but as a potential transformation of everyday life, including travel behavior. These thoughts were grounded in real examples from peers, reminding participants of their own mortality and the fragility of companionship. There were also clear elements of dependency involved here: dependency on each other and dependency as opposed to freedom.

4. Discussion

This study explored how older adults reflect on the influence of life

events on their travel behavior across the life course, thereby contributing to ongoing calls for a stronger integration of life course perspectives in mobility research (Sattlegger and Rau, 2016; Rau and Schreiner, 2021). Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified four interrelated themes: (1) Conscious choices and unconscious patterns, (2) Personal history and external context, (3) Adapting travel to changing capacities, values, and alternatives, and (4) Facing illness, mortality and existential limits. Together, these themes illustrate the nuanced, dynamic, and often relational ways in which everyday travel practices evolve, shaped not only by major life events but also by values, identities, aging bodies, and changing social norms.

A central finding across themes was the interplay between intentionality and adaptation in shaping travel behavior. While some participants described life transitions such as residential relocation or retirement as deliberate and strategic choices to support preferred mobility patterns, others emphasized how routines formed unintentionally or in response to external demands. This resonates with previous findings that life events can both enable and constrain travel behavior change (Müggenberg et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2016). The concept of "windows of opportunity" (Janke et al., 2021) is useful here, as several participants described moments when life events created openings for change in everyday travel practices. For example, relocation, changes in work situation, retirement, or health-related events sometimes enabled participants to reconsider transport routines and make more deliberate choices, such as choosing residential locations for proximity, convenience, or walkability, switching transport mode for safety or health reasons, or reducing work-related travel. However, these windows were not always acted upon. Some participants described missed or constrained opportunities, where car dependency in rural areas, financial considerations, relationship compromises, caring responsibilities, or emotional strain limited their capacity to change travel practices. Thus, life events may create opportunities for more sustainable or convenient mobility, but whether these opportunities are realized depends on the practical, social, and emotional conditions surrounding the individual. Similar findings have been observed by Johansson Rehn et al. (2026), that also emphasize that the window of opportunity may include more than life events, such as contextual or practical shifts.

Our findings highlight the social nature of travel practices, echoing previous work on the relational embeddedness of mobility (Janke and Handy, 2019; Scheiner, 2016). Participants' decisions and consecutive actions were often shaped by the needs and behaviors of family members, particularly children and partners. Parenthood emerged as an important life event associated with increased car use, as seen in previous studies (Janke et al., 2021), while caregiving responsibilities led to restricted or reoriented travel patterns. Furthermore, childhood experiences and intergenerational influences, for example a parent's attitudes toward cars or nature, continued to shape travel values decades later, supporting the idea that mobility biographies are co-produced across relationships and generations (Müggenberg et al., 2015; Rau and Schreiner, 2021). Notably, some participants reflected on the transition from individual to household-level decision-making over time due to family relations, e.g., when becoming parents or in retirement. These shifts in social roles influenced both the purpose and pattern of everyday travel. Furthermore, several participants anticipated future limitations tied to the possible loss of a spouse, highlighting how relational transitions can act as latent turning points with significant implications for mobility (Oakil et al., 2014) both in the present situation, and in the future.

Health and aging shaped mobility in two directions: participants described adaptations intended to maintain mobility (for example, considering an e-bike or adjusting travel frequency), while illness or functional limitations sometimes constrained travel more abruptly. Mobility in later life is closely connected to independence, social participation, and well-being, while changes in health can alter both the feasibility and meaning of travel (Musselwhite et al., 2015; Pantelaki et al., 2021). In the present interviews, serious illness and anticipated decline were sometimes accompanied by reflections on dependence and mortality, whereas walking and cycling were also described as valued ways of maintaining everyday activity and autonomy. This pattern is compatible with work that cautions against treating aging only as decline (Ng and Chow, 2020) and with evidence on physical activity in successful aging (Szychowska and Drygas, 2022).

Participants' narratives also reflected shifts in environmental attitudes and travel norms over time. Some described a lifelong commitment to sustainability shaped by early involvement in environmental movements, while others spoke about more recent changes in perception – such as the emergence of "flight shame" or increased awareness of the climate impact of driving. These findings echo previous work showing how both immediate environment and societal change in general can shape mode choice, particularly when values are reinforced by community norms or infrastructural support (Janke and Handy, 2019; Verplanken et al., 2008). However, not all participants prioritized environmental concerns in their daily decision-making. Instead, sustainability was often one consideration among many, coexisting with convenience, health, and relational obligations. This aligns with research highlighting the complexity of behavioral motivations and the role of competing priorities in everyday travel (Scheiner, 2016). It also points to the importance of targeting life events not only with information but with enabling conditions such as infrastructure and support, that align sustainable options with people's values and capacities.

By examining current practices together with retrospective accounts, the study shows several concrete ways in which mobility change accumulated across the life course. Participants linked residential moves to accessibility and proximity, parenthood and partnership to household travel arrangements, illness to mode adaptation and self-monitoring, and digital communication to reduced need for some work and social trips. These examples indicate that the effect of a life event depended on the practical and relational context in which it occurred rather than on the event alone. This interpretation is consistent with mobility-biography research emphasizing that travel practices develop through sequences of life-course transitions and changing contexts rather than as isolated responses to single events (Johansson Rehn et al., 2026; Müggenberg et al., 2015; Sattlegger and Rau, 2016; Rau and Schreiner, 2021).

The use of reflexive thematic analysis allowed for a rich and layered understanding of travel biographies across a small but diverse sample of older adults. While the sample size is typical for in-depth qualitative work, and participants varied in gender and location, further research could explore more systematically the intersection of socioeconomic status, gender, and geographic setting in shaping mobility over the life course. Moreover, the recruitment strategy relied partly on snowball sampling, which may have introduced bias by favoring more socially connected individuals. In addition, while the retrospective nature of interviews allowed for wide-ranging reflection, it is possible that certain life events or shifts were not recalled or framed in ways consistent with participants' past behavior. A longitudinal or mixed-methods design could complement these insights by tracking actual behavioral changes over time.

5. Conclusions and implications for research, policy, and practice

This study highlights the complex ways in which life events shape older adults' everyday travel behavior over time. A key finding is that life events such as illness, retirement, parenthood, or becoming a grandparent, do not necessarily produce immediate or uniform changes in mobility. Instead, their effects are often gradual, layered, and dependent on how they intersect with health, social relationships, residential location, personal values, and broader societal norms. Participants described both conscious decisions and unconscious adaptations, showing that travel is embedded in everyday routines and closely tied to

identity, independence, affect, and social connection.

The study's contribution is to show, within these retrospective accounts, how later-life mobility was shaped by combinations of biographical transitions and the conditions surrounding them. Residential context, household responsibilities, health, social relationships, environmental values, and digital alternatives did not operate as a single causal mechanism; rather, different combinations became salient at different points in participants' lives. This life-course perspective therefore complements studies of discrete events by illustrating how continuity and change in everyday travel can accumulate across successive transitions.

These findings have important implications for transportation planners and service providers. First, mobility services for older adults need to be flexible enough to respond to changing life circumstances, rather than assuming stable or homogeneous needs among older populations. Second, planners should consider the social and emotional meanings of travel, including how mobility supports independence, family relationships, friendship, care responsibilities, and participation in everyday life. Third, service providers should recognize that digital communication may reduce some travel needs, but it does not replace the social value of physical mobility. Finally, interventions aimed at supporting sustainable and inclusive mobility may be more effective when timed around key life transitions, such as retirement, changes in health, loss of significant others, or moving house. Understanding travel behavior through this lens can support mobility policies and services that are more adaptable, equitable, and responsive to the lived experiences of older adults.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Siri Jakobsson Støre: Writing – original draft, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Markus Fellesson:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Margareta Friman:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Lars E. Olsson:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2026.102310.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality restrictions.

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