



The cultural and structural motivations of cheap mobility: The case of retirement migrants in Spain and Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

Retirement migration is an increasingly common phenomenon. It involves the relocation of retirees from richer countries of the global North to places in the world where the costs of living are lower. In contrast from most other migrants, these retirees do not generally relocate to find more work opportunities. Aeromobility, namely frequent air travel, is a key aspect of their ability to be geographically mobile, which social scientists often depict as reflecting the economic advantages and consumerist culture of a new generation of older people. In addition, some experts consider older people's carbon footprint to be particularly large due to their economic advantages and lack of ecological values (e.g., see Haq et al., 2010). The literature on retirement migration scarcely focuses on the role that aeromobility—particularly cheap flights—plays in retirement migrants' decision to relocate and their experiences after migration. Using the cases of retirement migrants in Spain and Costa Rica, this article aims to better understand why some retired citizens of richer countries engage in lifestyles based on high-frequency travel, particularly when their migration is driven by the search for more economic security. To answer this question, we argue that values alone do not sufficiently explain social practices and individual decision-making, including the seeming prioritisation of mobility over sustainability.

1. Introduction

Retirement migration is an increasingly common phenomenon. It involves the relocation of retirees from richer countries of the global North to places in the world where the costs of living are lower. In contrast from most other migrants, these retirees do not generally relocate to find more work opportunities. As scholars highlight, among retirement migrants' diverse motivations, many wish to be able to spend part of the year in another part of the world for leisure purposes, return to their home country for a couple of months, and then go abroad again (Gustafson, 2008; Janoschka, 2009). Aeromobility, namely frequent air travel, is a key aspect of these retirees' ability to be geographically mobile, which social scientists often depict as reflecting the economic advantages and consumerist culture of a new generation of older people. In addition, some experts consider older people's carbon footprint to be particularly large due to their economic advantages and lack of ecological values (e.g., see Haq et al., 2010).

The discursive framing of individual responsibility is important to examine considering the 2017 Carbon Majors Report, which indicates

that 110 fossil fuel companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions (Riley, 2017), with the vast majority of those emissions resulting from individual consumption practices such as air travel. In addition, in the context of amplifying global inequalities, the most privileged travellers are able to engage in luxury safaris, expeditions to marginal ice zones, and hikes across glaciers before they are gone. At the same time, more people than ever are enduring forced migration as a result of climate change, and the United Nations estimates that “there could be anywhere between 25 million and 1 billion environmental migrants by 2050” (Bassetti, 2019). In this context, international environment experts call for a radical change to individuals' “behaviours and lifestyles” (IPCC, 2018: 25) to address the global climate emergency, and highlight the need for values that support ecological citizenship and green consumption, particularly among citizens of richer countries (Valencia Saiz, 2005; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008).

Yet, between these categories are citizens who enjoy relative privilege within the global context, but who nonetheless face economic insecurity in their home countries. For instance, over the last decade, scholars have increasingly revealed that some retirement migrants from

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richer countries relocate to another country—often permanently—in order to gain more economic security. Although these retirees are privileged compared to those in poorer countries, they struggle to make a living and pay for basic needs—such as food, healthcare, and housing—in their home country. For them, migrating can be a way to reduce precarity, and by doing so they secure their access to some basic goods and services which they cannot afford otherwise (Repetti et al. 2018; Bender et al., 2018). Just like more privileged retirement migrants, those with less economic resources use airplanes relatively frequently, typically benefitting from cheap flights.

The literature on retirement migration scarcely focuses on the role that aeromobility—particularly cheap flights—plays in retirement migrants' decision to relocate and their experiences after migration. Using the cases of retirement migrants in Spain and Costa Rica, this article aims to better understand why some retired citizens of richer countries engage in lifestyles based on high-frequency travel, particularly when their migration is driven by the search for more economic security. To answer this question, we argue that values alone do not sufficiently explain social practices and individual decision-making, including the seeming prioritisation of mobility over sustainability.

The article starts with a review of the existing literature on climate concerns, cheap mobility, and the increasing tendency of older people in the global North to relocate to countries with lower costs of living. Then we describe our dataset, which is derived from case studies of citizens of Europe and North America who permanently relocate to a new country after retirement in order to improve their economic security. Focusing on their motivations to engage in aeromobility between their new country of residence and their home country, our analysis examines the role cheap air travel plays in the selection of a retirement location and the organisation of life after migration. Finally, we reflect on the tension that arises when social and cultural expectations require that people engage in ecologically sustainable lifestyles while navigating economic insecurity. Our work demonstrates that aeromobility can be central to how people—such as retirement migrants—manage their lives with limited resources. For these populations, environmental costs of mobility are secondary to the socioeconomic and health benefits afforded through post-retirement migration. We see this trade-off as a consequence of insufficient policies in relation to the provision of economic support for older citizens.

2. Climate concerns and cheap air transportation

We are in a historical moment of accelerated movement between countries. Between 1990 and 2019, the number of people living in a country different from the one in which they were born rose from 153 million to 271 million, an increase of 77% over that period of time (UNO, 2017). Climate-related disasters account for large-scale displacement, which the United Nations acknowledges as a threat-multiplier for migrants who lack agency in the face of mounting economic pressures and geopolitical tensions (McAuliffe and Khadria, 2020). At the same time, a growing portion of the population regularly travel internationally for a myriad of reasons, including tourism, family reunions, and labour-related activities (Bebington and Batterbury, 2001; Williams and Hall, 2000). Mobility (namely moving regularly from one place to another on a local or global level) interplays with technology. Specifically, rapid and cheaper modes of travel have become key “artefacts” (Latour, 1992) of transnationalism. In addition, due to transformations in time and distance—particularly since the middle of the twentieth century, with the proliferation of telecommunications use—it is now possible for people to interconnect in deep and meaningful ways (Beck, 2002). The proliferation of telecommunications has made it possible for people to share experiences, in real time, across thousands of kilometres (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). Consequently, while an increasing proportion of the population engages in migration, it is also possible to be mobile and maintain familial commitments, as well as economic, administrative, social, or even emotional relationships with

people across distances. The flow of people also depends on the affordability of transportation technologies (Beck, 2002; Zaera-Polo, 2010) as well as access to “places of flows” (Beck, 2017: 34), namely infrastructures such as train stations and airports that make it possible for people to move from one place to another. “Locally based but transnationally shaped” (Beck, 2017: 34), these material structures are at the very core of mobile lives, creating concrete possibilities for rapid and multiple physical movements between diverse metropolises around the globe.

Among other forms of transport, aircraft play an important role in people's ability to be transnationally mobile—moving faster over large distances. Reflecting this, studies show that increases in transnational mobility are associated with a rising numbers of flights and passengers, particularly from privileged countries in the global North (Eurostat, 2016). Indeed, in 2017, 3.4 million people travelled by airplane, which is three times more than in 2000 (World Bank, 2018). Since then, these numbers have maintained steady growth (IATA, 2018). Nevertheless, globally unequal opportunities for spatial mobility (Faist, 2013) yield carbon inequalities (Kenner, 1998) between different regions of the world, with 80% of all carbon emissions coming from the richest countries (OECD, 2018).

The growing use of transportation, of which air travel is a critical part, is often depicted as playing an important role in climate change because of greenhouse gas emissions that impact the atmosphere's composition (Hewett and Foley, 2000; IPCC, 1999; OECD, 2008 a, b). According to the OECD (2018), states need to adopt policies which promote “decarbonisation” (15) and support “carbon-neutral growth” (71). By doing so, experts hope, businesses will change their practices and citizens will better engage in greener mobility through reduced use of ecologically costly transportation, particularly airplanes (OECD, 2018; Valencia Saiz, 2005).

Yet, some authors point to the difficulty of assessing the ecological impacts of individuals—or “small polluters” (Spaargaren and Mol, 2008: 355)—in comparison to those of transnational corporations. To be sure, some social groups engage in and call for new attitudes towards mobility. For example, some citizens of Northern European countries advocate “flight shame”, intending to coerce individuals into renouncing air travel (Saner, 2019). But such groups remain a minority. In addition, reflecting on people's daily travel practices in France, La Branche suggests that the difficulty in understanding why people continue to adopt mobility practices with a high ecological footprint lies in the complex articulation between people's mobility and the different aspects of their daily life. “The complexity of mobility is great, since the obstacles to change are linked to the ‘social identity’ of individuals— (...) work, life phases, family structure, place of residence, etc.” (La Branche, 2011: 16).¹ Along similar lines, the OECD points to the need to better understand people's motivations behind consumption patterns and practices, including transport usage on global as well as local scales (OECD, 2018).

3. Spatial mobility

Scholars have diverse interpretations of intensifying consumption practices related to globalised mobilities, i.e. the capacity for people to move quickly from one place to another frequently and at relatively limited costs. Some see it as an outcome of cultural transformations, with a growing portion of the world's population valuing mobility as a form of freedom based on the ideal of “cheapness” (Zaera-Polo, 2010). According to this view, geographic movement reflects a desire to take part in transnational cosmopolitanism and urban culture, as well as global economic markets (Beck, 2002; Zaera-Polo, 2010). Here, the

¹ Translated from French: “(...) La complexité de la mobilité est grande puisque les freins au changement sont liés à ‘l'identité sociale’ des individus— (...) le travail, la phases de vie, la structure familiale, le lieu d'habitation.”

meaning that mobile citizens give to their geographic movements is central (Tetreault, 2017), and enrolling global society into greener lifestyles can be achieved through transforming values and culture (Valencia Saiz, 2005). According to these scholars, this transformation can make it possible for an increasing part of the world's population to not only understand the importance of cultivating ecologically sound practices, but also to be willing to build an ecologically sustainable society (Dean, 2001). Such theories emphasise citizens' actions and bottom-up dynamics as a way to engage in a greener society.

Other scholars describe this attention toward citizens' choices as overemphasising an individualistic “discourse of responsibility” (Dean, 2001: 494). They point to the insufficiency of such theories to explain citizens' resistance to embrace more ecological lifestyles and practices, even among those who share ecological values (Caney, 2016; La Branche, 2011; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008: 355). They suggest that political, legal, and structural constraints shape people's mobility practices and values. Reflecting this view, La Branche argues that whilst people's “awareness [of climate change issues] is necessary” for them to engage in a greener mobility, “it remains insufficient in itself, as it is not enough in the face of daily constraints” (2011: 16).² Firstly, the capacity to be mobile enhances people's socioeconomic capital (Faist, 2013), and can sometimes serve as an answer to the economic insecurity that citizens face not only in poorer countries, but also in the global North (Bourdieu, 1986; Kaufmann et al., 2004; Koh, 2020; Wonders, 2006). Secondly, in the global North, some scholars perceive the search for spatial mobility as reflective of transnational competition between workers who struggle to find a valuable place in an increasingly globalised labour market. In this context, governments are likely to consider those who resist engaging in mobility to ensure their socioeconomic security as unwilling to take responsibility for themselves (Périlleux, 2005). Here, geographical mobility becomes a condition for people in these countries to demonstrate that they are responsible citizens: by moving to find a better situation abroad, they show themselves as being unwilling to burden their community and the welfare state in their home country (Bourdieu, 1986; Kaufmann et al., 2004; Koh, 2020; Wonders, 2006). Thirdly, some authors suggest that the call for a greener citizenship reflects the neoliberal ideal according to which individuals are responsible for their actions and have all the same opportunities to decide on the kind of lifestyle that they want to engage in. Such a perspective, they find, ignores the role that inequalities play in shaping people's living conditions, and the decisions that they make, including about their consumption and their mobility (Curran and Tyfield, 2020; Spinney, 2016; Spinney and Lin, 2019).

Based on these considerations, scholars call on scholars to focus not only on individuals' values and preferences but to also consider issues of material security when studying mobility, even amongst citizens of the global North (Castles et al., 2014; Harvey, 2007; La Branche, 2011). Yet, literature on mobility and ecological issues is predominately theoretical and does not inquire into the multi-layered factors that shape decisions to relocate (e.g. Dean, 2001; Faist, 2013; Kaufmann et al., 2004; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008; Valencia Saiz, 2005). Thus, our aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the structural motivations for cheap aeromobility in contexts that are often depicted as tourist sites. To do so, we use the case of retirement migration, an increasingly common practice among retirees in the global North.

4. the mobility of retirement migrants

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in 2019, 11.8% of all the ‘international migrants stock’—i.e. all foreign-born residents in a country regardless of when they entered the

country—were aged 65 and over, a percentage that has been relatively stable over the last 30 years (IOM, 2020). Some of those are retirement migrants, mostly coming from Europe, North America, and Asia, who relocate to a poorer Southern country after having left the labour market (King et al., 2017; Torres, 2012).

Existing data captures the significant quantitative changes that this phenomenon has undergone over the last 30 years. For instance, between 1994 and 1997, the number of British pensioners living abroad increased by 7.3% (King et al., 2017: 25). In Spain, the most attractive retirement migration destination in Europe, the number of immigrants aged 65 years old and over increased from 87,828 in 1990 to 565,230 in 2019 (UNO, 2019). A similar trend is visible in the US, where 413,428 US social security beneficiaries received their cheques overseas in 2017, whilst in 1999, this figure was only 219,504 (Sloane and Silbersack, 2020).

Retirement migration is partially driven by economic advantages. These advantages are characteristic of the late twentieth century's generation of retirees, who benefited from post-war prosperity, the expansion of retirement policies, and the facilitated access to housing which enabled middle class people to purchase homes that they could resell at a profit when they retired (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005; Gustafson, 2008; Oliver, 2008; O'Reilly, 2000). Economic inequalities between countries that comprise the global North and those of the global South also play a role in the development of retirement migration as a global market targeting older people from richer countries. Some home countries actively support this market by developing political incentives for retirees to relocate, whilst promoting the idea that retirees have to individually find ways to improve their security (Bell, 2017; Sloane and Silbersack, 2020). Other countries, with lower costs of living, also offer attractive economic conditions to retirement migrants coming from richer countries, with unclear consequences for the local political, social, economic, and environmental contexts (Bell, 2017; Bender et al., 2018; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016; Calzada and Gavanas, 2018; Ciafone, 2017; Gavanas, 2017; Hall and Hardill, 2016; Hayes, 2018, 2020; Janoschka, 2009; Lardiès-Bosque et al., 2016; Oliver, 2017; Sloane and Silbersack, 2020; Spalding, 2013). Retiring abroad can also be a tactic to counterbalance the economic risks of retirement transition and to escape the economic, social, and health precarity that retirees often face in their home countries. Thus, while most retirement migrants do not move to find better jobs, their migration is economic in the sense that they are in search of a place with lower costs of living (Repetti et al. 2018; Bantman-Masum, 2015; Bell, 2017; Bender et al., 2018; Botterill, 2017; Hayes, 2015, 2020). Regardless of social class, retirees may desire to relocate to another country in order to gain an elevated social status and to escape ageism (Chen and Wang, 2020). Finally, retirees' migration options depend on international agreements between nation states, and on their abilities to travel between countries (Acker and Dwyer, 2002, 2004; Botterill, 2017; Gehring, 2017; Lardiès-Bosque et al., 2016; Longino and Bradley, 2006).

Migration can provide retirees with opportunities to make new friends and develop a lifestyle that reflects their cultural values in a comfortable environment. This can help them to engage in a form of ageing that they consider attractive (Phillipson, 2007), for instance through participating in various social and political forms of activism (Janoschka, 2009). The more advantaged economic and social status that they gain in the host countries can also provide them with more security in affording present and future formal and informal care, housing, food, and social activities (Repetti et al. 2018; Benson and O'Reilly, 2016; Bender et al., 2018; Hayes, 2020). Recent studies also reflect the positive effects for retirement migrants of living within a community composed of people of a similar age range and with a similar social status (i.e. retiree). Living abroad, often amongst other retirees, prevents them from feeling like a burden on their families, communities, and home states (Repetti et al. 2018). Yet, after migration, retirement migrants can feel lonely or helpless, particularly when they need more support themselves (e.g., in case of illness or the death of a partner). In

² Translated from French: “La conscientisation est nécessaire, mais elle demeure insuffisante en soi, car elle ne fait pas le poids face aux contraintes quotidiennes.”

such circumstances, maintaining strong links with family at home is critical (Repetti et al. 2018; Bender et al., 2018; Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016; Hall and Hardill, 2016; King et al., 2020).

Drawing on interview data with retirement migrants in Spain and Costa Rica, we explore the motivations for engaging in cheap and frequent aeromobility between home and host countries. In the next section, we present our qualitative field study and sample, and the methods used to analyse the data.

5. Methods

This analysis draws on qualitative interviews about North–South retirement migration, conducted between August 2016 and September 2018. During this period, the first author interviewed retirement migrants in Spain and Costa Rica, more precisely in four towns (two in each country) which boast many retired expatriate citizens of richer Northern countries.

During these interviews, participants expressed their rationales for migration within the broader context of their lives (Goodson and Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2017). The interviewer asked questions about the way that they organised their lives in Spain and Costa Rica, particularly focusing on their mobility between their new home and the place where their families lived—generally their home countries. During the interviews, participants talked often about the frequency of their travels, as well as the extent to which their ability to be mobile—via plane—had shaped their selection of a place to live during retirement.

The sample was composed of 59 interviewees of the following nationalities: US Americans (25), British (13), Swiss (11), French (three), Belgians (three), Canadians (two), German (one), and Dutch (one). All Northern American respondents, as well as one Belgian and one German respondent, lived in Costa Rica. The others lived in Spain. All but one lived in the country they had migrated to permanently, and all had family—children, grandchildren, parents—in their home country. Fifty-six had left their country to retire in another place, and three (one in Spain and two in Costa Rica) had gone to live abroad at a younger age. In Costa Rica, four complemented their incomes by renting one or several houses; however, such activities were marginal, and these respondents had left their home country in order to retire. The sample was composed of 34 women and 25 men. Seventeen respondents were single, 12 of whom were women. Ages ranged from 47 to 83 years old, and the mean age was 62 (see Table 1).

6. Findings

In both Spain and Costa Rica, respondents' narratives reflected that their motivations for moving to poorer countries were to improve their quality of life. Economic security was stated as a major motivation. With this as one of the predominant factors, the respondents selected a location that was relatively close to their home country, in order to maintain family relations and support, made feasible by aeromobility after migrating. This did not mean that they were without ecological concerns. Rather, respondents mentioned their interest in sustainability as a reason why they appreciated their new country. Yet, being able to afford flights and living closer to airports overwhelmingly shaped their strategies for overcoming economic uncertainties in later life. By doing so, they also addressed policy makers' expectations in their home countries that older people facing economic insecurities should develop individual strategies to secure their later years. These two aspects—easy access to airports, and lower costs of living—shaped their selection of a location to retire.

6.1. Aeromobility, low costs of living, and secured retirement

Aeromobility was at the core of how interviewees managed their lives with limited economic resources. Whilst they mentioned the appealing lifestyle in their new country, they primarily selected their

Table 1
Sample.

Interviewees N =		Gender	Age	Partnership Status	Home Country
59					
<i>Interviews in Spain</i>					
1	Nina	F	63	Partnered	UK
2	Sylvie	F	64	Partnered	UK
3	Alma	F	69	Partnered with Ivan	UK
4	Ivan	M	63	Partnered with Alma	UK
5	Bernadette	F	59	Partnered	UK
6	Jane	F	63	Partnered	UK
7	Ismael	M	76	Partnered	UK
8	Jim	M	75	Partnered	UK
9	Nora	F	72	Single	UK
10	Claire	F	60	Single	UK
11	Christiane	F	63	Single	UK
12	Patricia	F	70	Partnered	UK
13	Stephany	F	51	Single	UK
14	Georgette	F	65	Partnered	Switzerland
15	Juliette	F	58	Partnered with Max	Switzerland
16	Max	M	56	Partnered with Juliette	Switzerland
17	Irene	F	58	Partnered with Don	Switzerland
18	Don	M	66	Partnered with Irene	Switzerland
19	Douglas	M	76	Partnered	Switzerland
20	Pauline	F	83	Single	Switzerland
21	Raoul	M	73	Partnered	Switzerland
22	Jean-Charles	M	70	Partnered with Marlyse	Switzerland
23	Marlyse	F	63	Partnered with Jean-Charles	Switzerland
24	Phoebe	F	55	Partnered	Switzerland
25	Charles	M	70	Partnered with Michèle	France
26	Michèle	F	71	Partnered with Charles	Belgium
27	Violette	F	72	Single	Belgium
28	Julia	F	60	Partnered	France
29	Pascale	F	64	Single	France
30	Frederic	M	75	Partnered	Holland
<i>Interviews in Costa Rica</i>					
31	Andrea	F	66	Single	US
32	Beatrice	F	68	Partnered with Laurent	US
33	Laurent	M	65	Partnered with Beatrice	US
34	Deagan	M	62	Partnered	US
35	Dalhia	F	60	Partnered	US
36	Jade ^a	F	61	Partnered with Jerome	US
37	Jerome	M	65	Partnered with Jade	US
38	Julien	M	83	Single	US
39	Jeremy	M	63	Single	US
40	Claire	F	61	Partnered with Jahan	US
41	Jahan	M	63	Partnered with Claire	US
42	Johan	M	66	Partnered with Sharon	US
43	Sharon	F	53	Partnered with Johan	US
44	Sallie	F	55	Single	US
45	Jenny	F	63	Single	US
46	Joseph	M	57	Partnered	US
47	Kylia	F	54	Partnered with Jimmy	US
48	Jimmy	M	70	Partnered with Kylia	US
49	Laurence	F	62	Single	US
50	Martin	M	61	Partnered with Louise	US
51	Louise	F	58	Partnered with Martin	US
52	Ron	M	67	Single	US
53	Stella	F	55	Single	US
54	William	M	53	Partnered with Cyril	US
55	Cyril	M	47	Partnered with William	US
56	Dalvin	M	62	Single	Belgium
57	Edeline	F	56	Partnered	Germany
58	Fabyan	M	57	Single	Canada
59	Josey	F	65	Partnered	Canada

Jade is a dual US and Swiss citizen. She made her professional career in the US and married there as well. Her family is spread between the US (children and in-laws), and Switzerland (parents, brothers, and sisters).

retirement location on the basis of affordability—in comparison to their home country—and the possibility of flying to their home country within a few hours at a relatively cheap cost. In this context, aeromobility and more manageable living costs framed their strategies for confronting insufficient income from pensions and private savings.

Respondents living in Spain were proximate (about one hour by car) to international airports, with companies offering relatively cheap tickets. Don (66, Swiss citizen living in Spain), who did not see himself living in Switzerland because of the high cost of living, explained:

Among the reasons for our decision [to live in this specific region], there was the proximity [to airports], because Easyjet [a plane company offering cheap flights] is located in [a nearby city], or we go to [another nearby city]. If we go to the airport by car, in 1:30 h we are in Switzerland, so that was [...] a factor.

In reality, travel was not as quick as it first appeared, given transportation times to and from airports, plus time waiting and moving through security checks. However, what Don expressed was that it was easy and quick for him and his wife to reach Switzerland from where they lived in Spain, which made them feel comfortable and connected. In the same way that lower living costs framed their choice of retirement locale, quick access to airports also influenced their decision to settle there.

Ivan (63, UK citizen living in Spain) and his wife had decided to live in Spain primarily for economic reasons too: “Actually, one of the great advantages we saw in coming here had to do with finance.” But this decision was also influenced by the possibility of travel to different places at affordable rates. Ivan found that it was less expensive for them to live in Spain and pay for several flights per year between Spain and the UK, than living in the UK full-time:

Although I occasionally say “ah, I wish I had more of a pension”, we do rather well, because when you say we make these flights back and forth. [We can afford that] on our pension.

Thus, Ivan’s consideration of affordable, available, and quick flights to the UK had shaped his decision to relocate, bolstered by the relatively lower cost of living in Spain. Like Don, Ivan appreciated the choice between two airports: when one was too busy, he could fly from the other, both offering relative cheap airfares. “[Nearby city]’s airport”, Don said, “is very quiet and cheap. Sometimes the prices are really, really cheap.”

Stephany (51, UK citizen living in Spain) had moved out of the UK to gain more economic security as well. She mentioned the close proximity to airports and the capacity to take a two-hour flight back to the UK as the “the only reason” why she had selected that particular place in Spain. Referring to an island where she would have preferred to live, she said: “[From there], there’s only flights on Thursdays ... you can only get to England three days a week.” She had selected a place with more air traffic, remarking: “And that’s why this town was the best place to be.”

The capacity to be mobile through being able to purchase cheap flights and travel to their home countries quickly was at the core of respondents’ arrangements. Jane (63, UK citizen living in Spain) travelled “three times a year”, and Don (66, Swiss citizen living in Spain) and his wife travelled “regularly” back to Switzerland with cheap flights: “Last year, we went back to Switzerland with Easyjet” although “not every month” he specified. Jean-Charles (70, Swiss citizen living in Spain) had travelled “three times by plane to Switzerland” during the preceding year.

Reflecting the same rationale as post-retirement migrants in Spain, North American respondents in Costa Rica expressed their desire to migrate in terms of security—particularly economic security—and the ability to be mobile after they moved. Like the European respondents’ narratives, their discourses reflected the centrality of affordability and availability of air travel in the organisation of their mobile lives, since they also found it necessary to be able to reach their home countries and families through relatively cheap and quick flights. Jenny (63, US citizen living in Costa Rica) expressed this dual objective of gaining more economic security while remaining mobile at a relatively low cost:

Living in the United States would cost a great deal of money to be retired... It is important for me to be a resident here. But I travel

regularly. I leave the country to visit my family. It is not so much that I have to, but I want to. And, I plan when to go according to the airplane ticket price. I exit the country when the price of the flight is low.

Martin and Louise (61 and 58, US citizens living in Costa Rica) struggled to finance their lives in the United States. Louise had a chronic disease and needed constant care. They left the US because she could not work any longer due to her compromised health, while Martin had to leave his own job to take care of her. Paying for their life in the US was no longer possible due to their lack of regular income. And so, in contrast to other wealthier retirees, they said, they had “no choice” but to live in Costa Rica. They were now living on their savings and waiting to be able to access their pensions. Similar to other interviewees, cheap air travel made it possible for Martin and Louise to live in Costa Rica while remaining mobile:

We can fly for almost nothing. So, we made multiple trips back and forth... In the last months, we have flown just a little bit over halfway to the moon! Getting back and forth from here to where we had our home before.

Ron (67, US citizen in Costa Rica) had moved to Costa Rica after he retired. Money was a primary driver for his decision as well. Affordable travel was critical for him, as he travelled regularly to his home country:

Money is a big reason as to why I am down here. I didn’t save a lot of money while I worked. All I have is my social security plus my pension cheque. I don’t need a lot of money here. All I do is travel. In the US, I wouldn’t live as comfortably as I live down here. I wouldn’t be able to travel like here. Down here it costs me, just to live, about \$2,000. To live the same standard in the US, it would probably cost me \$4,000. And I have got \$3,000 to live. The extra \$1,000 pays for my travel and other things.

Although respondents expressed their attachment to being able to live a mobile life, only a few of them engaged in air travel for tourism. Generally, they only travelled for family reasons, such as to provide care to family members (especially grandchildren and older parents), to attend events (such as weddings, funerals, and family reunions), to access healthcare, and to attend to any other requirements needed to maintain family and community relations.

6.2. Aeromobility for family support first

Respondents talked about family relations, and particularly care and support between generations, as the main reason for engaging in frequent air travel. Mobility was also a primary consideration in the selection of retirement location. It was important for respondents to remain available to their families despite distance, both through being able to reach them in their home country (or elsewhere for some), and through being able to welcome their kin in their own homes. For instance, Ivan (63, UK citizen living in Spain) and his wife regularly travelled to provide support to his mother or his children:

I go to see my mother, and when my son used to live in [a European city], we used to go there. My daughter lives in [European city], close to [international airport]. It’s only a two-hour flight. And so, if anything really desperate [happens], we can be there very quickly. My wife is going next week, for instance. She’s going to look after the grandchildren.

Stephany (51, UK citizen living in Spain) also mentioned aeromobility as a condition for living abroad, as she had to be able to reach her sons quickly in case they needed her help:

I just want to be close to my sons. I know that if they need me, I can, you know, go straight out of the country and straight on a plane, and I’m home within a couple of hours.

Jane (63, UK citizen living in Spain) also used planes to reach the UK and visit her family regularly, but also to be there to support them during particular events, such as when her grandchild was born: “We knew the day that the baby was due, and we didn’t go for the actual birth, but we hopped a flight to go the week after, to give them a little bit of time on their own.” For her, it was important to be able to fly to the UK in case her adult children or her grandchildren needed her in an emergency. This was possible because of the affordable and frequent flights offered, as this excerpt from our conversation highlights:

- [Jane] In case of an emergency, for example when my children had a second baby, it was very difficult for them to manage, so I went over to help out.
- [Interviewer] So, if they call you, then you take a bag, you take a flight, and you go?
- [Jane] Yes. I drop everything. Absolutely. Yes.
- [Interviewer] Like in one day or two you can be there?
- [Jane] Yes, yes. Or as soon as possible, yes. I always do that.

Stephany (51, UK citizen living in Spain) expressed a similar view, detailing the rationale for settling in Spain as opposed to on an island that she had also considered as an option. The frequency of flights made it possible for her to be sufficiently flexible and join her children in case of an emergency:

If I was living on that island and if, God forbid, anything happens to my son on a Sunday, I wouldn’t be able to get a flight until Thursday. I can’t do that... I need to know that I can get back if they need me, so that [island] is not an option anymore.

Jean-Charles (70, Swiss citizen living in Spain) also took a plane to visit his family. He regularly went to see his granddaughter, but also travelled for unexpected occasions, such as a family member’s death: “When my aunt died, I had to go home. I had to take a plane.” Flying was a way for him to provide support to his family.

Phoebe (55, Swiss citizen living in Spain) also provided family support in a similar situation because of affordable flight options. In the year before her mother passed away, Phoebe had flown regularly to her home country to visit her mum, sometimes several times a month:

I used to fly every month to see my mum in Switzerland when she was sick. I tried to go, between once and twice a month, and I tried to take the least expensive flights. I could go when it was necessary.

Ron (67, US citizen living in Costa Rica) also travelled by plane to see his children. He had become a grandfather some months before the interview, and since then, he was willing to travel even more often than before to the US to see his daughter and her baby:

I went three times to see my daughter in the US this year, because my daughter got married and had her baby. The baby is the main reason why I travel to the US now. Now, I am planning to go again in four months. I will fly on Friday night, I will spend Saturday with my child and the baby, and I will fly back on Sunday.

Finally, interviewees found that the capacity to be mobile was useful not only for them, but also for their family members, particularly children and grandchildren who could reach them with relative ease. Many of their kin visited them in their home in Spain or Costa Rica for various periods of time—from a few days to a couple of weeks (see Repetti et al. 2018). The option to take a flight to reach each other easily and at a

relatively low cost had sometimes been part of the conversation between retirees and their family. For instance, after Julia (60, French citizen living in Spain) had announced her decision to move to Spain, it took a couple of months for her adult children to accept the new situation.³ Once they considered her relative proximity living in Spain, they accepted the move. She reported on their conversation: “I told them ‘No worries because the airports are really not far away. We have two of them; here are planes every day from Paris several times a day. No worries.’” Also, when her son announced that he could come and visit her, she wanted to make it easy for him and his wife, and offered to cover the cost of the flights: “I bought the plane tickets”, she explained. “I told them: ‘You have the tickets, you come’, and all that! And they spent a week here.”

As these interviews demonstrate, for our interviewees, aeromobility was not just a lifestyle intended to satisfy a desire to live in a pleasant area. Rather, it also served as a vital structure that determined the strategies they used to secure their economic situation while maintaining relationships with their family abroad. These retirement migrants had family engagements that they wanted to participate in, which required global infrastructures as well as relative proximity. Although they had left their home countries, they did not allow distance to have a negative impact on their family ties.

6.3. Immobility as a risk of increased precarity

While most of our interviewees could afford to fly regularly, some feared they would not be able to afford it. This was particularly a concern among retirees in Costa Rica, while those in Spain did not mention it. There were a number of reasons for this difference. First, although respondents in Costa Rica mentioned lower flight costs available from certain airports and under certain conditions, the flights were not as cheap and easily available as in Europe.⁴ Second, respondents living in Spain mentioned their ability to reach their home country by car “if necessary” (Don, 66, Swiss citizen living in Spain) due to the relatively short distance between their home country and location in Spain. This was not possible for the North American respondents living in Costa Rica.⁵ Moreover, to return to their home country, retirees in Costa Rica had to cross several countries with ongoing geopolitical security issues, such as Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. On the contrary, European retirees in Spain could cross France and Belgium to reach their home country with no particular impediments, and with easy transfers between countries due to the international agreements in Europe.

Consequently, while all respondents’ narratives reflected a regular use of airplanes, those in Costa Rica felt more dependent on air travel to be mobile. Also, in some cases, affording air travel to maintain family ties was a source of anxiety, with respondents fearing they could not financially afford to join their families as often as they desired. Sharon (53, US citizen living in Costa Rica) explained that she and her husband

³ As shown elsewhere (Author 1, 2018), retirees’ decisions to migrate regularly create tensions with their adult children who expect them to be at close proximity for different reasons, such as to take care of their grandchildren. This is particularly the case in Europe, but also happens in the US among families who live close to each other.

⁴ As an illustration, on 19 November 2018, the cheapest flight from San Jose (Costa Rica) to Washington or Los Angeles cost \$530 and \$240 USD, respectively. On the same day, the cheapest flights between Alicante (Spain) and London or Geneva cost \$47 and \$138 USD. Comparison made on <https://www.skyscanner.com/>.

⁵ Indeed, the distance between the interviewees’ nearest city in Spain and London is 1,250 miles, and between that city and Geneva is 815 miles. The distance between San Jose (which is where most international flights depart from in Costa Rica) and Washington is 3,780 miles, and there are 3,600 miles between San Jose and Los Angeles. Comparison made on <https://www.google.com/maps>.

had decided to live in Costa Rica to gain more economic security after retirement, and she expected that their children and grandchildren would eventually come and live in Costa Rica with them. This helped her make her decision to migrate, offering an initial sense of comfort. However, over time, both their children and families changed their plans, and decided that they would stay in the US. Since then, Sharon had been concerned about how to deal with the unexpected distance between her and her family, particularly because she and her husband had very little money to live on, which prevented her from flying as often as she wanted to see her children:

I want to be sure that I can be mobile because I miss my family terribly. I would like to go back at Christmas to be with my family. Thanksgiving, same thing. I saw my children more before [our migration] and that's where I am kind of torn. Mostly [I would like to be mobile] for my children. And my children miss me too. So, I need to know we have enough money for me [to pay for a flight ticket regularly] to go see my family as often as I want. I don't want to be stuck here.

For Sharon, and many other respondents, aeromobility made it possible to increase economic capital whilst maintaining family ties. In cases where affording this mobility was at risk, though, there were unforeseen consequences both for the economic security of the respondents as well as for their capacity to support their family despite the distance.

6.4. Using planes and loving nature

While our respondents privileged aeromobility as an important factor in their migration decisions, these decisions were not mutually exclusive to considerations of the ecological impacts of frequent travel. While they did not speak about the contradictions between their practices and values, it was quite clear that sustainability was a consideration for many of them. In both Spain and Costa Rica, interviewees often mentioned the environmental context (particularly the sea and the luxurious nature) as a well-appreciated aspect of their new lives that reflected their nature-loving culture and values. For them, nature facilitated activities they enjoyed, such as hiking or jogging in a pleasant area they could reach easily. For instance, Nora (72, UK citizen living in Spain) stated that: "People who live here tend to be much more active. Physically active, and you have the nature of the sea, the ability to swim most of the year."

Some also mentioned that a rural lifestyle was more relaxing for them. For instance, Andrea (66, US citizen living in Costa Rica) said:

Everything [shops, cafés, pharmacy, etc.] is close so there's no traffic. The traffic jam may be the farmer having his cows cross the road. And that's ok, you know, it's just a lot less stressful. That's the advantage.

Jim (75, UK citizen living in Spain) also enjoyed the natural setting where he lived, in particular the proximity to the sea. He explained that when he regularly looked at the seaside by his little town, finding it a particularly nice environment to live in, he would compare it to the city where he lived before:

I still have done the right thing, and sometimes driving this road, by the sea, and the sun shines on the sea, I think about my journey every day into work [in my home country], driving into town. [I say to myself:] "Remember!"

Beatrice (68, US citizen living in Costa Rica) had a similar point of view. She also compared her new location with the place where she was before, expressing how she liked to live in a less urban area—which meant living at the edge of the jungle:

Since we've moved here, for me, it's like living back in a world with nature. We have a view, a lake. It's just beautiful. And with the animals, you're part of the world.

Other interviewees in Costa Rica expressed their cultural and political attachment to economic policies and support for the state authorities, who they understood as particularly concerned with protecting the environment. This particular political aim was more in line with their own values and culture than those of the authorities in their home country (mostly in the US), who interviewees believed failed to operate with eco-friendly political orientations. When asked about the reasons why he liked to live in Costa Rica, Deagan (62, US citizen living in Costa Rica) said that he appreciated how "85–95% [of the energy in the country was] green energy, renewable energy". He believed this contrasted with policies in the US:

There's no pollution here. The food that is grown locally around here is not treated with pesticides. We try to buy locally for fruit and vegetables and stuff like that. You can see the plantains and bananas hanging right there. They have all kinds of fresh stuff all the time. [Unlike the US], the meat has no antibiotics, has no steroids, none of that nonsense in it.

As these responses illustrate, our interviewees' frequent use of planes did not signify a disinterest in ecological sustainability, or even in ecological policy issues. Yet, they did not express concerns about their aeromobility contradicting their ecological values. Rather, they seemed to understand these concerns as unrelated—or separate—issues. Aeromobility, just like living in a country with a lower cost of living, shaped their decisions about how to secure a living in later life whilst maintaining family links and support. At the same time, they appreciated the natural environment to which they had access in their host country, and some of them found it important for policy makers to develop eco-friendly policies.

7. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have examined retirement migration in order to understand the motivations of retirement migrants in the global North who engage in aeromobility in later life, flying regularly between richer countries and poorer ones. By relying on cheap aeromobility for the organisation of their social and economic life, these retirees do not heed scholars' and specialists' calls for individuals to reduce their carbon emissions and live and consume locally. Rather, they enter the category of "small polluters" that some supporters of green citizenship see as a problem. However, our findings indicate that retirement migrants who relocate to a country with cheaper living costs are primarily choosing to overcome economic uncertainty, due to insufficient welfare state pensions and private savings, often following an insecure end of career, divorce, widowhood, etc. In such contexts, aeromobility, particularly cheap and frequent flights as well as accessible airports, is about more than the satisfaction of cultural values which prioritise comfortable lifestyles. Crucially, aeromobility enables retirement migrants to support their families while living at lower costs abroad. Being able to fly can become critical for them when their family members need increased levels of support due to challenges that they may face in their daily lives or on special occasions, like the birth of a child or during holidays. Conversely, the lack of capacity to be aeromobile can create risks of losing links with families, as well as of not being able to provide and receive support. In addition, the transnational organisation of these retirees' lives meets policy makers' expectations in richer countries that individuals should be responsible for their economic security, rather than the state. In other words, by migrating and maintaining a mobile lifestyle, retirees show themselves to be good and responsible citizens. Yet, their security in later life relies on lower costs of living and aeromobility—externalities which are bound to the exploitation of poorer countries and the use of cheap fossil energies.

The Covid-19 pandemic which emerged after we finished collecting data, drastically reduced retirement migrants' ability to travel. Still, it is likely that global travel will resume, leading to a recovery of aeromobility for retirement migrants. In addition, the economic consequences of the pandemic may well lead to an increase in the number of older people relocating to a cheaper country to secure their material resources. On their part, the host countries utilise tourism in order to improve their account balance and stimulate their domestic economy, and they might well be doing so even more in the future as a reaction to the dramatic effects of the pandemic on their economies.

Our findings reflect the limits of analysing values and decision-making in the context of mobility consumption, even when it relates to citizens of the global North. The choice to relocate in later life is more likely to reflect material living conditions than particular values only. Individuals do not face equal choices, as highlighted by the relative privilege that our interviewees enjoy in comparison to masses of global citizens who suffer through forced migration. But the inequities of mobility are also recognisable at local levels, within countries and even amidst families. In the global North, while the level of economic security is higher than in poorer countries, the risks of older people enduring economic uncertainty remain a pressing reality (OECD, 2019). In the face of economic insecurity and lack of access to healthcare and social support, many retirees living in rich countries are at risk of social exclusion and the possible inability to meet their material needs. In such situations, relocating to a country with a weaker national economy on the global market can be a feasible way to secure a comfortable living. For more privileged people, spending a portion, or the totality, of their retirement abroad is a choice that can be motivated by other reasons, including the wish to maintain a higher social status than they can expect in their home country, and to engage in a pleasant lifestyle. However, these retirees do not face the risk of being financially insecure in both their home and host countries, because they have sufficient money to decide where they want to live and whether they want to travel. In contrast, retirees who face more precarious economic conditions sometimes invest all their economic resources into relocation and have limited options to make new decisions after migration (Repetti et al. 2018). Such inequalities significantly shape motivations for migration and mobility in later life.

Finally, with this paper, we better understand retirees' motivations for wanting to be mobile, i.e. to be able to travel quickly across large distances using relatively cheap air travel with relative frequency. These motivations do not necessarily reflect a neglect of ecological issues, but they indicate that mobility is an important avenue for material security. This simultaneously exposes the failure of liberal governments to provide for citizens' needs in later life, and allows the state to construct retirement migrants as good citizens. It suggests that engagement in a more ecological society is not just a matter of individual values, but also a factor of economic sustainability (Curran and Tyfield, 2020; Spinney, 2016; Spinney and Lin, 2019). This perspective challenges the current structure of our society, particularly the emergence of a global spatial mobility in recent decades as an answer to restrictive welfare state social policies, insecure employment in later life, and transformations in family compositions (Lain et al., 2019). Therefore, succeeding to implement greener economics and citizenship depends not only on individuals' desire to adopt greener values, but also on governments' and experts' capacity to better understand and consider people's material and economic needs, and how these interact with socioeconomic structures, inequalities and the climate. Thus, if the consumerist ideal of using relatively cheap geographic mobility to ensure economic safety is disconnected from its ecologically dramatic consequences, the production of inequalities persists and the question remains as to *who* can afford to live locally, sustainably, and comfortably.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marion Repetti: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis,

Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Jennifer L. Lawrence:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

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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