

Gap year travel as a social practice:  
A study of long-haul flying in the age of climate change

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Signature:  .....

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**Abstract:**

The continued growth of aviation poses a major challenge to climate change mitigation. Many argue that absolute reductions in greenhouse gas emissions will not be possible without restricting demand and call for fundamental changes in travel patterns, particularly flying shorter distances. However, research shows that voluntary behaviour change in this area is unlikely: even those who express concern over aviation emissions are unwilling to sacrifice their travel plans for the sake of the environment. It has been argued, therefore, that researchers and policy makers should direct their attention to the collective nature of unsustainable air travel, rather than blaming individual passengers for their “choices”.

This thesis provides an in-depth and socially situated understanding of long-haul flying within the gap year context, which is an increasingly popular activity for the British youth. Drawing on Giddens’s structuration theory and using data from a study, which employed a variety of qualitative research methods, this thesis first positions the gap year as a social practice, characterized by shared social meanings, norms and resources; second, it explores factors influencing its current long-haul character; and third, examines the role of agency in gap year participation and mobility decisions.

The findings suggest that travel to (often several) long-haul destinations is a particularly desirable, appropriate and convenient way of “doing a gap year” and that opportunities for making more sustainable choices, whilst not completely absent, are constrained. Moreover, the rules and resources that form the terrain for action for prospective gap year takers are shaped by numerous networked agents. As such, this thesis joins the calls for redefining the problem of unsustainable mobility from that of individual “choice” to collective travel practices. Strong structuration is suggested as a particularly useful conceptual framework to study non-routine forms of travel, such as gap years. Policy implications are discussed, specifically potential interventions that could shift the gap year practice into a more sustainable trajectory, or substitute it for a less carbon-intensive equivalent.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

It is widely recognized that contemporary patterns of tourism growth are incompatible with sustainable development (Burns & Bibbings, 2009; Peeters, Szimba, & Duijnsveld, 2007; UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2008). In particular, air travel poses a major challenge to climate change mitigation strategies, as aviation is one of the few remaining industries where greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase (Bows, Anderson, & Upham, 2006; Dubois, Peeters, Ceron, & Gössling, 2011). Many argue that emissions reductions will not be achieved without restricting aviation growth, in light of the limitations of technological, operational and market-based solutions available in short and medium terms (Bows-Larkin, 2015; Bows, Anderson, & Mander, 2009; Bows et al., 2006; Cairns & Newson, 2006; Gössling, Hall, Peeters, & Scott, 2010; Gössling & Upham, 2009; Macintosh & Wallace, 2009; Mayor & Tol, 2010; Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Rothengatter, 2010). In particular, a shift from long-haul to short-haul travel has been recommended as the most important focus for demand management strategies, as the growth in emissions is associated mainly with increases in travel distance, rather than the number of trips (Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Peeters et al., 2007). However, research suggests that voluntary behaviour change in this area is unlikely, as people are unwilling to change their travel and holiday plans for the sake of the environment (Barr, Gilg, & Shaw, 2011a, 2011b; Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Barr, Shaw, Coles, & Prillwitz, 2010; Cohen, Higham, & Reis, 2013; Hares, Dickinson, & Wilkes, 2010). Thus, many suggest that more attention should be paid to understanding the role of air travel in contemporary societies more broadly, and directing climate change mitigation efforts to changing collective patterns of tourism mobility, rather than expecting individual consumers to act against established social conventions (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Burns & Bibbings, 2009; Cohen et al., 2013; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008; Young, Higham, & Reis, 2014).

This thesis aims to contribute to existing understandings of long-haul air travel. Unlike individualist, psychological accounts of travel behaviour (examined in more detail in section 2.2), it positions flying as a necessary “ingredient” of a gap year practice, which is an increasingly popular activity for the British youth (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Jones, 2004). Thus, taking a gap year (including the

associated air travel) is conceptualized not simply as a matter of individual *choice*, but as a deeply *social phenomenon*. Previous research identified socially shared conventions and rules of conduct that gap year takers follow largely unreflexively (Snee, 2014), including evidence of existing destination fashions, at least in relation to structured volunteering projects, which are one of the forms of gap year travel (Simpson 2004a). Thus, understanding mobility in the gap year context has to go beyond identifying individual preferences, aspirations and motivations. Drawing on Giddens's structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Stones, 2005) and using qualitative data, this thesis first conceptualizes the gap year as a social practice; second, those aspects of the practice that foster long-haul mobility are examined; finally, the role of agency is considered, particularly in relation to mobility choices and the issues of access to gap year participation. In this brief introductory chapter, I situate the focus of this research in a broader context (section 1.2); introduce the aim and objectives, as well as the theoretical and methodological approach adopted in this study (section 1.3); and outline the structure and contents of this thesis (section 1.4).

## **1.2 Background**

The last few decades brought about an increasing awareness of human-induced environmental threats. 'The Limits to Growth', published in 1972, was one of the first books to shed light on the possible negative impact that the growing human population can have on our planet (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972). The depletion of Earth's resources, pollution and overall degradation of the natural environment were brought to public attention. Since then, a number of international environmental initiatives have been organized, aimed at exploring the possibility of a shift towards more sustainable ways of development. 'Sustainable development', as defined in Brundtland Report, was to meet 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987 p. 43). Even though there is currently no single understanding of the concept of 'sustainability', and thus no consensus as to what actions need to be taken (Ratner, 2004), the necessity to act has been recognized by many. The following years brought about, among others: Earth Summits in Rio and Johannesburg; governments introducing their own sustainability strategies; numerous initiatives by NGOs and community organizations; and

many corporations developing environmental strategies and innovative green products. Many of these initiatives were specifically designed to tackle climate change, due to growing evidence that it is the human activity that is responsible for the increase in global mean temperatures.

Despite these efforts, scientific data demonstrate that the negative trends are increasing. The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that human activity is the main cause of the current global warming (IPCC, 2014b). It warned that unprecedented changes in climate and weather events are already being observed across all continents and oceans, caused by greenhouse gas emissions, including CO<sub>2</sub>, and other anthropogenic drivers. To limit climate change and its risks, “urgent and fundamental” changes are required, as inaction and business as usual would lead to serious consequences (IPCC, 2014b p. v). Recognizing the seriousness of this issue, 195 nations achieved a historic agreement in December 2015 in Paris, to keep a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius relative to pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC, 2015).

Within this context, air travel constitutes one of the most important areas for climate change mitigation. Flying, and long-haul flying in particular, is arguably the most carbon-intensive activity in which individual consumers can engage. According to a carbon calculator developed as part of the Act on CO<sub>2</sub> campaign in the UK, a return flight from London to Bangkok is responsible for around 2 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger, which is almost half of the annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of an average UK citizen (Act on CO<sub>2</sub>, 2012). Moreover, when non-carbon emissions and other impacts are taken into account, the environmental cost of flying is even higher (Macintosh & Wallace, 2009). For example, it has been argued that the formation of contrails and aviation-induced cirrus clouds may be responsible for a substantial part of the overall climate impact of aviation (Burkhardt, Kärcher, & Schumann, 2010; Chapman, 2007; Lee et al., 2009). Long-haul travel is particularly damaging, due to the length of journey and the fact that some gases, such as NO<sub>x</sub>, are more harmful at higher altitudes, typical for such flights (Chapman, 2007). Long-haul flights are also more likely to include stopovers, which result in higher emissions than direct journeys, as greater emissions arise from the take-off section of the flight (Jardine, 2009). In the UK, it has been estimated that long-haul travel (to non-European

destinations) is responsible for 66% of the aviation emissions (Committee on Climate Change, 2009).

These problems are exacerbated by the continued growth of passenger volumes, which pose a major challenge to climate change mitigation strategies (Gössling et al., 2010; Guiver, 2013; ICAO, 2009; Peeters & Dubois, 2010; UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2008). In the UK, air travel demand is forecast to increase from 219 million passengers in 2011 to 445 million by 2050, with the vast majority of these journeys undertaken for leisure purposes (DfT, 2013b). For the tourism industry, these issues are particularly problematic, as whilst air travel is a crucial element of some types of tourism (about 17% of tourist trips are undertaken by plane), anthropogenic climate change is already impacting on some of the popular, but vulnerable destinations, such as Maldives (Guiver, 2013). Various strategies to address aviation emissions are considered by numerous agents and stakeholders including the aviation and tourism industries; academics; governments; NGOs; advisory organizations; and international bodies, such as the IPCC (e.g. ATAG, 2010; Bows et al., 2009; Cairns & Newson, 2006; Committee on Climate Change, 2012; European Commission, 2013; ICAO, 2009; IPCC, 1999, 2014a; Mendes & Santos, 2008; Transport and Environment, 2016; UNWTO-UNEP-WMO, 2008). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze each of the suggested strategies in detail, but a brief overview is provided to show how demand management (including encouraging a shift towards shorter-haul destinations, which this thesis aims to inform) sits within the broader policy landscape.

The aviation industry, which tends to have national governments' support, aims for ambitious targets in technological innovations and operational improvements in air traffic management and is in favour of some market-based measures (ATAG, 2010; Gössling & Upham, 2009; ICAO, 2009, 2016). However, these proposed strategies are often criticized as insufficient and/or associated with major uncertainties (Bows-Larkin, 2015; Gössling & Upham, 2009). For example, while research for biofuels is underway and supported by the aviation industry as the most promising solution, many commentators express caution: biofuels can lead to conflicts with food production and cause other unintended consequences related to water footprints and social impacts; there are also many economic and technological barriers to their development and implementation;

moreover, they will not address the non-carbon impacts of aviation on climate change (e.g. Monbiot, 2016; Timilsina & Shrestha, 2011; Upham, Tomei, & Boucher, 2009). It has also been estimated that even in the most optimistic scenarios, any operational improvements and technological innovations to the aircraft (the latter limited due to the “maturity” of aircraft technology and long design lives) will be far outpaced by the projected demand growth (Bows et al., 2006; Peeters, Williams, & de Haan, 2009). In terms of market-based strategies, the aviation sector advocates open emissions trading schemes and opposes stronger measures, such as carbon taxes, levies and charges (ATAG, 2010). These schemes have been criticized, because emissions reductions can be achieved by purchasing emissions credits from other sectors of the economy, therefore not enforcing reductions within the aviation sector itself (Bows-Larkin, 2015; Lawson, 2012; Mendes & Santos, 2008; Scott, Gössling, Hall, & Peeters, 2016). For example, under the European Union Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), the aviation industry is predicted to be a net buyer of emissions permits for the foreseeable future (DfT, 2011). This means that it is not expected to reduce its emissions *at all*, instead being able to pay for reductions to be made elsewhere. Most importantly, international aviation (from and into EU) is currently exempt from this scheme, leaving long-haul flights totally unregulated. International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) was given time until January 2017 to develop a global market-based measure, as an alternative to the inclusion of long-haul flights in the EU ETS. Environmental groups criticize ICAO’s planned scheme for not setting appropriate timelines for implementation (it will only come into effect post-2020); and leaving out the non-carbon impacts of aviation; as such, it is believed to be at odds with Paris Agreement’s objectives (Transport and Environment, 2016).

Together, these three mainstream strategies present a vision for sustainable future where current patterns of aviation growth and passenger behaviour remain largely unchanged. However, many argue that absolute reductions in greenhouse gas emissions will not be possible without restricting aviation growth (Bows-Larkin, 2015; Bows et al., 2009; Bows et al., 2006; Cairns & Newson, 2006; Gössling et al., 2010; Gössling & Upham, 2009; Macintosh & Wallace, 2009; Mayor & Tol, 2010; Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Rothengatter, 2010), particularly in light of the limitations of technological, operational and open

market-based solutions. It has been estimated that without curbing demand, by 2050 all other sectors of UK economy will have to completely decarbonize to compensate for aviation emissions (Bows et al., 2006). Policy makers should therefore consider a mix of strategies, including demand management (Bows-Larkin, 2015; IPCC, 2014a).

Such demand management does not have to mean less travel in absolute terms. Suggested visions for sustainable tourism include a shift towards travelling shorter distances; opting for more sustainable transport modes; longer stays at destinations; and making the journey itself part of the travel experience (Dickinson, Robbins, & Lumsdon, 2010; Gössling et al., 2010; Guiver, 2013; Larsen & Guiver, 2013; Peeters & Eijgelaar, 2014). In particular, a shift from long-haul to short-haul travel has been suggested as the most important focus for climate change mitigation strategies, as the growth in emissions is caused mainly by the increases in travel distance, rather than the number of trips (Peeters & Dubois, 2010; Peeters et al., 2007). However, implementing this vision in the current political climate is likely to be difficult, taking into account the reluctance of industry actors to consider curbing aviation demand (Bows et al., 2009) and the conflicting concerns of policy-makers between mitigating aviation emissions on the one hand, and stimulating economic growth on the other (Daley & Preston, 2009). There is a significant resistance to applying some of the stronger fiscal measures, including removing subsidies, or halting airport expansion (Cairns & Newson, 2006). Aviation still benefits from historical state subsidies and tax exemptions designed to stimulate growth (for example jet fuel for international flights is exempt from tax) (Daley & Preston, 2009). In the “Aviation Policy Framework” the UK Government expressed support for the growth of the aviation sector in recognition of its contribution to the economy, and backed open market-based solutions, technological innovation and biofuels as appropriate measures to address the problem of emissions (DfT, 2013a). Plans are currently underway to build a third runway at Heathrow airport to accommodate the predicted demand growth (Topham, 2016), despite a lot of controversy surrounding the proposal, including protests by environmental activists (Monbiot, 2016). However, the same “Aviation Policy Framework” also considered some reductions in air travel demand as an additional way of addressing greenhouse gas emissions, through supporting alternatives to travel, including videoconferencing, teleconferencing

and remote working (DfT, 2013a). Sustainable travel has also been identified as one of the key behaviours to be addressed by behaviour change policies in DEFRA's Sustainable Lifestyles Framework, with recommended changes in behaviour including choosing alternative transport modes to flying or alternatives to travel more generally (e.g. video-conferencing) (DEFRA, 2011). Such inconsistent approaches towards air travel demand management (simultaneously providing infrastructure to facilitate the predicted growth in demand and considering demand reductions) highlight the complexities of the aviation emissions problem.

Some argue, however, that the benefits of aviation for the economy are often overestimated, particularly as calculations do not normally include potential benefits associated with people travelling less (and, for example, spending more money in the UK as a result) (Cairns & Newson, 2006). Moreover, whilst it is often believed that reducing long-haul flying will harm the less developed countries which are dependent on tourism, a recent study found that the average impact would be neutral, with some countries experiencing increases and some decreases in the number of tourist arrivals as a result of a shift towards short-haul destinations (Peeters & Eijgelaar, 2014). In addition, air travel is still restricted to the relatively small, wealthy section of the population, whilst many of the poorer households cannot afford even local holidays – Cairns and Newson (2006) suggested that instead of supporting the growth of unsustainable air travel for the few, investments could be made to expand the UK-based leisure opportunities and make them more socially inclusive. It can be argued, therefore, that demand restrictions are not only necessary to achieve real reductions in aviation emissions, but also that such solutions may be more acceptable from the economic, social and development points of view than is often assumed. As such, demand management can and should be incorporated into mainstream policy considerations in a serious and rigorous manner. Postponing such decisions may result in a socio-cultural lock-in of aviation and a significant social resistance to any restrictions that will need to be introduced in the future (Cairns & Newson, 2006).

Much recent work suggests, however, that voluntary behaviour change in this area is unlikely, due to the value-action gap identified in travel research: empirical studies show that even those who express awareness and concern over

air travel emissions are unwilling to sacrifice their holiday plans for the sake of the environment (e.g. Barr, Gilg, et al., 2011b; Hares et al., 2010). Increasingly, many researchers in the field suggest that we need to improve our understandings of how flying is embedded in our contemporary ways of life, rather than conceptualizing travel decisions as “choice”, which results from individual attitudes, motivations and values. In particular, theories of social practice have been suggested as a useful theoretical tool to study air travel (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008; Watson, 2012). When viewed from this perspective, flying is redefined as an ingredient of collective travel practices. People fly not only to fulfill their individual aspirations and desires, but to participate in socially valued travel practices, including various forms of holiday and business travel, which come with their set of understandings, know-how, expectations, motivations, norms, as well as resources, including infrastructures and institutional arrangements. Whilst individual “performances” of a given practice are never exactly identical and practices are undertaken by different individuals at different points of space and time, they are nonetheless recognizable entities. People’s choices are constrained by what is physically possible in a given context and by existing social conventions and normalized ways of doing things, which are often taken-for-granted. This has implications for climate change mitigation policies. Rather than developing strategies to encourage individual travellers to change, we should be directing our effort into reshaping social practices that foster unsustainable mobility. Social practice theories are examined in greater depth in Chapter 2.

Despite these calls, research developments in this field have been slow. Surprisingly, only one extensive article has been published exploring air travel from the social practice perspective. Randles and Mander (2009b) examined the “internationalization” of various celebrations and occasions, such as birthdays or stag parties, as one of the factors underlying frequent flying. Air travel in this context results from changing societal standards and expectations related to those practices, rather than simply from individual choice. Interest in sociological understandings of flying appears to be growing. A more recent study, whilst not adopting the social practice theory specifically, examined academic air travel as resulting from university policies and practices, thus questioning the extent to

which flying is indeed a “choice” for members of academic staff (Hopkins, Higham, Tapp, & Duncan, 2015).

More research is needed, however, to understand other social drivers of long-haul mobility to inform emissions reduction strategies. There is also scope for further theoretical developments in this field. This thesis aims to contribute to the sociological understandings of the current unsustainable air travel patterns in the UK, in order to inform policy makers and other stakeholders interested in promoting sustainable forms of tourism and travel to mitigate against aviation emissions, particularly facilitating a shift towards shorter-haul destinations. In particular, this study examined the practice of gap year travel, which is an increasingly popular activity undertaken by young people in Britain, a form of contemporary rite of passage, often endorsed by employers and academic institutions (e.g. Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004). Long-haul destinations seem to be particularly favoured by this group of travellers (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015; Tourism Intelligence International, 2005). Moreover, some gap year takers opt for visiting several countries on different continents as part of the around-the-world trip (O'Reilly 2006). There is also evidence to suggest that gap year travel may lead to return trips to visited destinations (O'Shea, 2011), thus resulting in even higher emissions in the future. As such, it is an important area to be addressed by emissions reduction strategies. The next section is dedicated to introducing the aim and objectives of this research, and its theoretical and methodological underpinnings.

### **1.3 Research focus**

The primary aim of this thesis is to provide an in-depth and socially situated understanding of long-haul flying within the specific context of gap year travel. In so doing, this thesis aims to advance strategies towards reducing aviation emissions to mitigate climate change. Whilst the details regarding my theoretical and methodological approach can be found in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, this section provides a brief summary and introduces their key aspects.

The theoretical framing adopted in this thesis was based on Stones's (2005) strong structuration, which is an improved and elaborated version of Giddens's theory of structuration (Giddens, 1979, 1984). This perspective retains the emphasis on the skilled and active character of agents, whilst being much

more realistic about the extent to which they are free to choose. In this light, young people are seen as drawing on social meanings, norms and resources when planning and arranging their gap years: together, these “external structures” shape the conventional ways of “doing a gap year”, constraining and enabling destination and other choices. As the initial travel and destination decisions need to be undertaken prior to the gap year itself, this study focused on the planning and organizing stage, examining how new “carriers” learn about the practice, who is involved in teaching them, and what are the existing conventions, possibilities and constraints regarding gap year mobility.

At the same time, according to the theory of structuration, people are not simply carriers of the practice and can be at times capable of critical distance and reflection. More than one course of action is often possible for various social practices: choice is sometimes not only possible, but even mandatory, if several types of behaviour have systemic legitimacy (Stones, 2005). Individuals may be informed by their transposable skills, broader life projects, concerns and general dispositions, developed by various past and present practices, which can influence their performance. As Stones (2005) argued, agent’s reflexivity can be placed on a continuum from taken-for-granted, habitual performances, to a degree of critical reflection, innovation and choice. Taking into account that the gap year is not a routine, everyday practice undertaken over and over again by the same individuals, but its existence relies on its continued ability to attract new cohorts of practitioners, a degree of reflection was expected to be found among prospective “gappers”.

On the basis of these considerations and in relation to the overall aim of this thesis, three specific research objectives were formulated. In line with structuration theory, the first two objectives aimed to analyze the social and collective nature of the gap year practice, whilst the third aimed to account for the role of active agency in gap year taking:

- 1) To describe the gap year as a form of social practice, identifying social meanings and norms surrounding this phenomenon, as well as various resources that prospective “gappers” draw upon at the moment of recruitment.
- 2) In particular, to explore the ways in which these meanings, norms and resources influence conventions regarding gap year mobility, including factors

facilitating travel to long-haul destinations as a normal way of “doing a gap year”.

- 3) To examine the role of agency and its limits, particularly in relation to the issues of mobility choices and access to gap year participation.

Two forms of methodological bracketing developed by Giddens and refined by Stones (2005) allowed for maintaining the emphasis of the structuration theory on the skilled and reflexive nature of agents, whilst being realistic about the extent to which agents are free to choose. The first type of bracketing, agent’s context analysis, was adopted to address the first two research objectives, i.e. to analyze the external structural context for action. This involved temporarily bracketing out agent’s reflexivity to analyze existing possibilities and limits to the possible. It is important to note that in structuration theory, this terrain for action does not simply consist of static, chronically reproduced norms, meanings and resources. These are seen as dynamically shaped by variously positioned networked others and their practices, which themselves become an object of inquiry. Thus, the study commenced by interviewing a group of prospective gap year takers in one of the colleges in the South West of England and then through the process of chaining followed connections identified during interviews, adopting various qualitative methods to examine the “terrain for action” faced by prospective “gappers”. The data on which this analysis was based comprises of interviews with college students and other relevant actors, including college and university staff members and representatives of gap year organizations; content analysis of gap year materials (brochures, leaflets, websites); and participant observation at various gap year-related events.

The second form of methodological bracketing, agent’s conduct analysis, was then employed to address the third research objective, thus analyzing the role of active agency in gap year participation. This stage was based on in-depth interviews with college students to identify the variations between individual performances of gap year practice, and the role of transposable skills, resources and general dispositions (and attitudes towards aviation emissions in particular) on their mobility choices.

Whilst multi-sited method allowed for following some of the connections beyond the immediate spatial context in which this research commenced, it was

not the purpose of this study to provide a general and comprehensive understanding of the UK gap year phenomenon as a whole. Rather, the aim was to provide a rich and in-depth insight into the collective nature of gap year decisions; as such the scope of this research was relatively small-scale and caution should be taken when attempting to make wider generalizations.

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

This thesis is structured as follows. First, the existing body of literature is critically examined in Chapter 2. In particular, three broad interrelated areas of literature have been identified. Section 2.2 explores existing theoretical and policy approaches to sustainable behaviour change in the UK and the limitations of their application in the area of air travel, arguing that there is a need for more nuanced, socially-oriented understandings of flying. Then, section 2.3 introduces social practice theories and strong structuration, as a particularly useful framework to study non-routine air travel. Third, section 2.4 explores gap year literature, with a focus on gap year mobility, which is the case study examined in this thesis from a social practice perspective. Section 2.5 provides a brief summary of the overall approach in light of the reviewed literature. Chapter 3 then moves on to provide an overview of methodology, guiding the reader through all major methodological steps and decisions, including research design, methods of data collection, approaches to analysis and ethical considerations. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are dedicated to presenting empirical findings. Each chapter corresponds to one of the three research objectives. Thus, Chapter 4 describes gap years from a social practice perspective, identifying social norms, meanings and resources that inform and shape those experiences, as well as groups of relevant actors that are involved in this process. Chapter 5 then identifies those aspects of the practice that are responsible for shaping conventions regarding gap year mobility, in particular travel to long-haul destinations as a normal way of “doing a gap year”. These chapters draw heavily on all three methods of data collection: interviews, secondary gap year materials and participant observation. Finally, Chapter 6 moves on to address the third research objective and examines the role of agency in gap year participation, exploring how young people navigate between available opportunities, and how their transposable resources, skills and dispositions influence gap year participation and mobility patterns. This analysis is based solely on interview data. The last chapter, Chapter 7, is dedicated to the summary

and discussion of the main findings in relation to the aim and objectives; outlining the contributions and limitations of this work; and discussing implications for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Research context: Demand management, social practices and gap years**

### **2.1 Introduction**

An extensive literature review has been carried out to inform this thesis. Given the aim of this research to broaden existing understandings of long-haul air travel in order to help advance climate change mitigation policies, in particular those directed at managing aviation demand, three strands of relevant literature have been identified. Section 2.2 critically reviews approaches to demand management that dominate the landscape of policy making in the UK. In light of the evidence that theoretical frameworks of behaviour underlying these policy approaches fail to provide sufficient explanations of unsustainable travel behaviour, and thus the limited potential effectiveness of policy measures based on these frameworks, a case is made for a greater application of sociological models to the study of flying. Section 2.3 introduces the social practice approach as a particularly useful tool for examining patterns of air travel demand and informing demand management policies; in particular, structuration theory, which is adopted in this thesis, is outlined. Finally, existing body of evidence related to gap year travel, a case study explored in this thesis, is examined in section 2.4. Section 2.5 then briefly summarizes the overall approach adopted in this thesis in light of reviewed literature, before moving on to the methodological discussion in Chapter 3.

### **2.2 Towards slow travel – approaches to behaviour change**

There are many different theoretical models of pro-environmental consumption and behaviour (Jackson, 2005; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002), which could potentially inform policy makers in designing appropriate strategies to shift air travel demand into a more sustainable trajectory. All these theoretical models have different merits and limitations – environmental consumption is a very complex issue, so it is unlikely that one model would suit all contexts and purposes. The choice of the theoretical approach is of key importance for policy makers, as it influences the ways in which the problems are framed and understood, resulting in some intervention tools being perceived as possible and plausible, whilst excluding others (Spurling, McMeekin, Shove, Southerton, & Welch, 2013).

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish two sets of theoretical models of behaviour: individualist and socially oriented (Chatterton, 2011). In the UK, mainstream policy approaches to behaviour change tend to be based on the former, where human activity is seen as an outcome of individual choice (Shove, 2010). Such framings of behaviour result in a particular array of policy options – including education, social marketing and fiscal incentives, which aim to encourage individual consumers to make more sustainable decisions. These models have been criticized for their limited scope in bringing about the necessary change in consumption patterns (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Shove, 2010; Spurling et al., 2013). Spurling et al. (2013) identified three assumptions underlying these mainstream approaches (Spurling et al., 2013) and I argue that these become particularly problematic when applied to the area of air travel.

The first assumption is that consumers make rational decisions based on price and information, which can lead policy makers to introduce fiscal measures as a way of decreasing demand (Spurling et al., 2013). Whilst such solutions could potentially be successful, there is a need for a degree of caution when making assumptions regarding the impact of airfare on travel choices. It was found that not all types of air travel are equally responsive to price increases – for example business travel is characterized by relatively low price-elasticity, and so are long-haul journeys (IATA, 2008). Therefore, when assessing the effectiveness of fiscal solutions, it will be necessary to understand the social context in which air travel takes place. Moreover, Cairns and Newson (2006) suggest that people may become less responsive to price increases over time, as flying gets gradually embedded in people's lives (for example through establishing family networks, friendships, second homes, work opportunities or other practices abroad). Research on car use found that as households become accustomed to car travel, there is a tendency to maintain car use even when incomes fall (Dargay, 2004 in Cairns and Newson, 2006). It is now inconceivable to take away people's "right" to car ownership, and similar pattern may occur in relation to air travel, with people willing to pay a high price to maintain the lifestyle they got accustomed to.

A second assumption of mainstream behaviour change models is that individuals' behaviour is largely influenced by attitudes and values (Spurling et al., 2013). Interventions informed by such understandings involve using

education and social marketing campaigns (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000; McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999), in an attempt to develop pro-environmental attitudes, such as the Act on CO<sub>2</sub> initiative in the UK (Act on CO<sub>2</sub>, 2010). However, such interventions are unlikely to be successful in the area of travel and tourism, due to the “value-action” gap (or “awareness-attitude gap”) identified by many studies, i.e. the fact that individuals engage in flying despite their awareness of its negative impact on the environment and expressed environmental values (Barr, Gilg, et al., 2011a, 2011b; Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Barr et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2013; Hares et al., 2010). For example, Barr, Gilg, et al. (2011b) found that in the travel and holiday context, even those individuals most committed to environment found themselves struggling between their environmental concerns and hedonistic consumer needs. The willingness to protect the environment clashed with the desire to engage in unsustainable consumption practices (such as taking international flights). Some forms of environmental behaviour within the home were less problematic, as conservation practices were more easily incorporated into everyday habits and did not challenge the established consumption patterns (Barr, Gilg, et al., 2011b). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2013) found that people tend to suppress, reduce or even abandon their concerns over climate change in the tourism context. Hares and colleagues (2010) reframed the value-action gap problem as an “awareness-attitude gap”, as tourists in their study were often aware of climate change, but this awareness did not lead to positive attitudes towards changing their travel behaviour. They found that one of the reasons for this situation was that holidays were considered more important than environmental values. Altogether, these studies question the effectiveness of social marketing approaches in the context of air travel, as they reveal a variety of (often conflicting) values and concerns in people’s lives and contradictions in people’s behaviour in different contexts. Thus, Barr and colleagues (2011b) problematized the concept of uniform sustainable lifestyles, challenging the usefulness of segmenting the population on the basis of their environmental values, beliefs and attitudes, which was an approach adopted by DEFRA in their frameworks for sustainable behaviour (DEFRA, 2008, 2011).

The third branch of mainstream behaviour change initiatives in the UK is the so-called “nudging”. It emerged from the realization of the limitations of the other two approaches, as individuals are not always rational, calculating or driven

by attitudes and values, but are to an extent unreflexive creatures of habit and often make their decisions based on convenience. Nudge theory, developed by Thaler and Sunstein (2008) attracted interest of the UK government, which resulted in the establishment of The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in the Cabinet Office (The Behavioural Insights Team, 2014). The idea behind this approach is that incremental changes in the surrounding environment (the so-called “choice architecture”) can push people in the direction of more sustainable choices, in a cost-effective way (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Reducing the visibility of tobacco and alcohol products in the shops to decrease their consumption is one example of how policies informed by “nudge” theory work in practice (The Behavioural Insights Team, 2011). Whilst useful in promoting certain behaviours, it has been argued that the scale of the effects of “nudge” is limited and is unlikely to bring about the necessary societal transitions that are required to meet sustainability challenges (Warde, 2011). It is highly doubtful that such approaches could successfully be used to change highly conspicuous forms of consumption, such as air travel.

Fiscal incentives, social marketing and nudging are all based on the individualist models of behaviour, which frame the problem of sustainability as a problem of consumer choice. Such perspectives are deeply embedded in the notion of a ‘citizen-consumer’, whose role is to exercise choice in the market place:

“The incorporation of sustainable consumption issues into the neo-liberal discourse of rationalising the lifestyles and consumption practices of citizen-consumers implies that the ecoburden is passed on to individuals.” (Spaargaren, 2006 p. 4).

It has been questioned, however, whether individuals are able to carry this burden and become effective agents for change, particularly in light of the conflicts that arise between resource-intensive consumption (including flying) and environmental concerns (Barr, Gilg, et al., 2011a). Johnston (2008) points to the internal incoherence of the citizen-consumer concept, which is an attempt to combine competing ideas of self-interest (consumerism) and collective responsibility (citizenship). This concept is particularly problematic under the current global capitalist system, where the emphasis is placed on consumption-growth. Under such conditions, the “consumer” aspect tends to overshadow the

'citizen' (Johnston, 2008). This reveals a broader problem, which is the neo-liberal idealization of markets and consumers as guardians of the public good and neglecting the importance of states and civil-society actors to protect the natural environment (Johnston, 2008).

In light of these criticisms, which suggest that policies based on individualist models of behaviour are likely to have a limited efficacy in the field of air travel, it has been argued that more nuanced understandings of contemporary unsustainable tourism mobility are required to inform policy interventions. In particular, greater attention should be paid to collective patterns of tourism consumption and socio-cultural, rather than simply individual, reasons for flying (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Cohen et al., 2013; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008; Young et al., 2014). For example, Young et al. (2014) criticized the concept of flying addiction introduced earlier by Cohen, Higham, and Cavaliere (2011). They argued that flyers are not motivated by a desire to fly, but to take part in tourism and travel experiences, which are at their core "social", thus problematizing those framings of the problem that place the blame for aviation emissions on the consumer.

Indeed, researchers pay increasing attention to the socio-cultural drivers of aviation demand. Randles and Mander (2009b) explored how the phenomenon of frequent flying is partly driven by the 'internationalization' of social practices, which were previously performed locally, such as birthdays or stag parties. People fly, therefore, to comply with the new social conventions and expectations surrounding those celebrations, rather than simply as a result of individual "choice". Similarly, a recent study by Hopkins et al. (2015) examined academic air travel as embedded in institutional policies, which frame international partnerships and collaborations as key to the careers of academic staff. It can be argued, therefore, that the "choice" of academic employees is constrained by institutional arrangements and expectations. However, there are many other socio-cultural drivers of aviation demand that deserve research attention, and there is also scope for further theoretical developments in this field. This thesis contributes to this small, albeit growing, research area, by adopting a social practice theory to develop a nuanced understanding of long-haul flying as a component of the gap year travel practice. The next section of this chapter introduces the social practice perspective and its merits, with a particular focus

on strong structuration (Stones, 2005), which was the theoretical framing adopted in this thesis. It is suggested that this framing is particularly useful in studying how people adopt (or get recruited to) new high-carbon social practices, such as gap years, due to its distinctive approach to agency.

## **2.3 The social practice perspective**

### 2.3.1 Introduction

Partly as a response to the criticisms of individualist models of behaviour outlined in the previous section of this chapter, there has been a growing interest across social science disciplines in the so-called “theories of social practice”. These theories bring a new perspective on the value-action gap identified not only in travel, but also in other areas of (un)sustainable consumption research. As Elizabeth Shove pointed out, the questions of why individuals act contrary to their beliefs only make sense if we assume that individual actions do (or should) depend on coherent values, beliefs and morals of that individual (Shove, 2010 p. 1276). Social practice theories offer an alternative understanding of human behaviour – whilst people have a degree of choice on what they do, they are also guided by existing social conventions and “scripts” for action.

Contemporary accounts of social practice theories derive from the work of writers such as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1979, 1984), which have been developed more recently by “second generation theorists” - Theodor Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz and others (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001), and then further fine-tuned by various academics for application in the field of consumption (Shove, 2007; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012; Warde, 2005). First, it needs to be recognized that the landscape of practice theories is fragmented and heterogeneous, which makes it challenging to adopt in empirical studies. What complicates the matter further, is that empirical applications vary greatly from a loose orientation towards the material and socio-cultural context of human behaviour (with human behaviour still at the centre of the analysis), to what Shove calls a “stronger line” that takes social practices as the central topic of the inquiry (Shove 2014, p. 418). This thesis adopts the latter approach, in particular drawing on “strong structuration” developed by Rob Stones as an improved and elaborated version of Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration (Stones, 2005). The differences between the two approaches (the “loose orientations” and the

“stronger line”) are discussed in greater depth in section 2.3.3. However, before moving on to discussing the logic behind adopting this particular perspective and the methodological and policy implications of this decision, it is useful to provide a brief overview of social practice theories more broadly, highlighting their distinctive features.

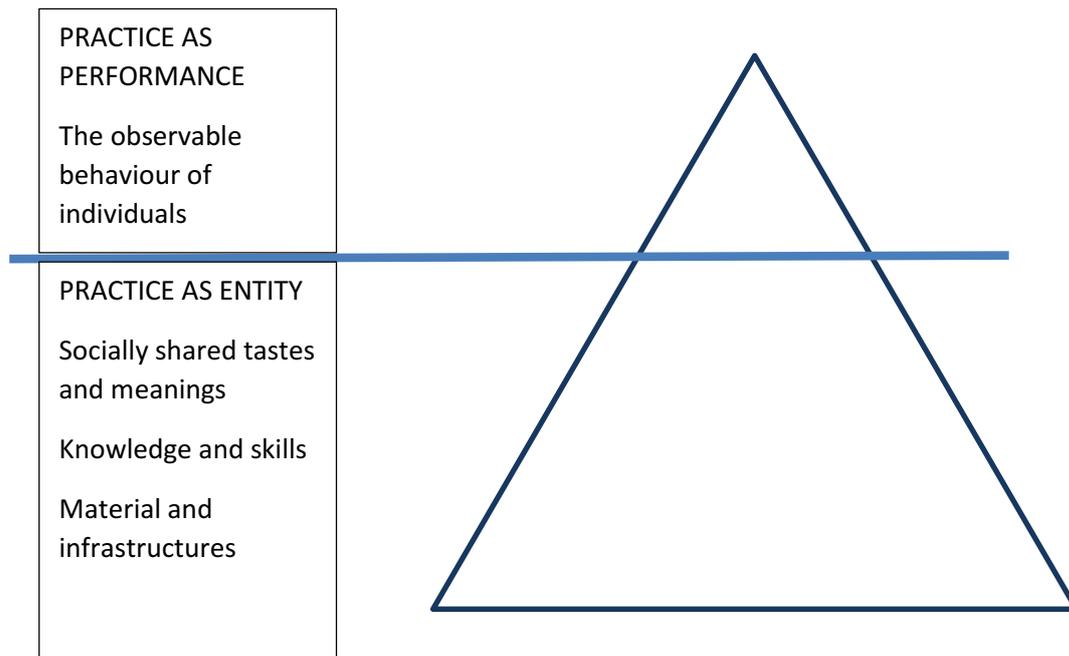
### 2.3.2 Social practices and sustainable consumption

The main characteristic of social practice theories is that practices (rather than individuals or institutions) are seen here as the basic, fundamental unit of the social world, from which both individuality and structure result (Shove, 2007 p. 12). Focusing on practices helps to overcome the long lasting agency-structure dualism in social sciences and replace it with what Giddens calls the “duality of structure”, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the dichotomies (Giddens, 1984 p. 25).

In a widely quoted definition, Andreas Reckwitz refers to a practice as “a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2002 p. 249). A practice is ‘social’, because it is carried out by different individuals at different points of space and time (Reckwitz, 2002). Examples may include going to church on Sunday, playing football, food shopping or, as in case of this study, going on a gap year. Each of these practices is enacted by people at different locations and different times, but is characterized by the same or similar dress-code, behaviour, rituals, material objects as well as understanding, motivation, expectations etc.

The observable behaviour of individuals (*practice-as-performance*) is, therefore, just “the tip of the iceberg”, as represented in Figure 1 (adapted from Spurling et al. 2013). Practice theories direct our attention to the “base” of that iceberg (*practice-as-entity*) – a particular assembly of understandings, conventions, material and non-material resources, skills and know-how, which enables the continuous performance of a given practice by different individuals and as such facilitates reproduction of the practice across space and time. As each individual participates in a number of social practices, each associated with

different meanings, norms and available resources and requiring a different set of competence and skills, it is likely that behaviour might appear inconsistent across different spheres of life, if judged by any one chosen criteria. An example could be the apparent contradiction, discussed in the previous section of this chapter, between environmental behaviour within the home and resource-intensive holidaying (e.g. Cohen et al., 2013). From the social practice



**Figure 1:** *Observable behaviour is just the tip of the iceberg. [Adapted from: Spurling et al. (2013)]*

perspective, such inconsistency is not bewildering, but is seen as a natural consequence of participating in various practices.

Practice theories conceptualize consumption as a component of (or a moment in) practices (Warde, 2005). People use energy, water and other resources in order to achieve particular outcomes, i.e. as means of accomplishing practices, as they go about their daily lives. It makes therefore more sense to think of people primarily as practitioners, rather than consumers, as consumption of resources is rarely a goal in and of itself. For example, Shove explored how contemporary trends in domestic laundering to wash clothes frequently at low temperatures, emerged as a result of changing notions of cleanliness and freshness (clothes no longer need to be objectively “dirty” to qualify for washing), as well as technological developments in textile, detergent and washing machine

industries (Shove, 2003). A consumption of water and energy in this context, therefore, is only an aspect of the normalized social practice of frequent laundering.

### 2.3.3 Social practice theories and the role of agency

There have been ongoing debates in the field of social sciences on the role of agency in the social practice perspective and the extent to which this approach can be integrated with individualist framings of human action. Whitmarsh et al. (2011) called for greater interdisciplinarity, understood as converging insights from practice theory with those derived from psychological models of behaviour and other theoretical traditions. Shove (2011), however, argued that theories of practice and behaviour are like “chalk and cheese”, as they result in very different problem definitions, and as such opportunities for convergence are limited. According to Shove, there is no single, objective problem of sustainability that can be approached from different angles to build a complete picture, but how the problem itself is framed depends on theoretical traditions from which we depart. In her view, attempts to integrate the social practice perspective with behavioural approaches are typically limited to the greater incorporation of social and structural factors as drivers of behaviour – but they do not challenge the framing of the problem itself as that of individual behaviour. Therefore, rather than attempting to integrate these approaches, Shove called for a continued involvement from different disciplines to generate a greater *diversity* of policy problem framings. Whilst, undoubtedly, there is merit in improving behavioural approaches by incorporating insights from practice theory to shed light on the social context and environment in which behaviours take place, new and different understandings and avenues for intervention open up if we take a “stronger line” and take practices, rather than behaviour, as the main unit of inquiry (Shove, 2014; Spurling et al., 2013; Watson, 2012). Section 2.3.5 explores the policy implications of adopting this perspective in more detail.

These theoretical considerations find their reflection in empirical applications of practice theories. For example, some researchers, such as Hargreaves (2011) and Barr et al. (2011) adopted the practice approach to improve the understanding of individual behaviour and inform behaviour change policies. There, social practices are employed to provide a more comprehensive account of human action by shedding light on the context, or sites, in which it

takes place (Shove, 2014). Others take social practices as the main unit of inquiry, for example Pullinger et al. (2013) explored the complex dynamics shaping domestic water consumption practices, including the materials, meanings and skills underlying the performance of cooking, gardening, laundry, vehicle cleaning and personal hygiene practices, thus taking the focus away from individual consumers and their behaviour, instead perceiving agents as carriers of social practices that pre-exist their participation. This thesis adopts the latter approach, where students are predominantly seen as carriers of the long-haul gap year travel practice, which is shaped by a particular assembly of meanings, norms, and resources.

However, if individuals are to be seen as the carriers of practice, acting according to its norms, rules and conventions, then how do we account for social change? Indeed, performances in familiar practices are influenced by conventions, traditions, routines, history etc. Individuals involved often lack reflection or conscious awareness of their own actions (Warde, 2005 p. 140). However, some accounts of social practices overestimate the extent to which practices are uniformly shared and reproduced across space and time. It needs to be stressed that even though practices “resemble macro phenomena in constraining individual activity and organizing the context in which people act, they never possess the *sui generis* existence and near omnipotence sometimes attributed to structural and wholist phenomena” (Schatzki et al., 2001 p. 5). Rather, practices are “defined, constituted, reproduced and reconfigured through participation” (Shove & Walker, 2007 p. 72), and are subject to transformation as new norms, solutions, innovations and technologies arise. “Performances in the same practice are not always the same... practices also contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logics of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment” (Warde, 2005 p. 140). Numerous actors and agencies are involved in configuring and re-configuring the elements of which practices are made (Shove & Walker, 2010 p. 473). Social practices, therefore, are not static entities; they are not only carried over space and time by individuals, but also moulded by them on the way. Practice theories are therefore neither holist nor individualist (Warde, 2005). Moreover, it is clear that not everyone can undertake every possible practice and that their distribution in the society is not uniform (Shove et al., 2012). Some

understanding of the agent is, therefore, necessary to account for the ways in which practices recruit (or lose) their practitioners and the dynamics of social practices (i.e. how they change over time). The processes of enrolment into (or withdrawal from) practices is a key explanatory issue of the changing nature of consumption (Warde, 2005).

Accounting for the role that agents play in the (re)production of social practices, particularly identifying their capable, knowledgeable and adaptive character, can be challenging to accomplish, if one wants to maintain the focus on practices as the basic unit of the organization of social life, and avoid falling back into overly-individualistic accounts of human behaviour. Social practice proponents acknowledge that past practices are of relevance in shaping people's lives, influencing the kinds of practices that people aspire to participate in, as well as resulting in the accumulation of competence and know-how necessary to undertake future practices (Shove 2014, p. 425). To account for these processes, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus has been suggested as particularly useful (Ropke, 2009; Shove, 2014; Stones, 2005). It differs from the concept of lifestyles, attitudes or identity, as it does not imply a more-or-less uniform set of ideals that is then applied (or not) in different contexts. Instead, it recognizes the plurality of concerns, pressures, worldviews and dispositions and the possibility of existence of conflicting discourses within the agent. The difference is subtle, but vital: social practice theories question the integrity of individual identities. Drawing on the works of several authors and Chantal Mouffe's in particular, Theodor Schatzki describes individual identity as "the particular ensemble of subject positions she assumes in participating in various social arenas" (Schatzki, 1996 p. 8). Examples of such subject positions could be student, Catholic or doctor. "Such positions are made available to people by the practices in which they participate... The identity of the socially constituted subject is thus precarious and unstable" (Schatzki, 1996 pp. 7-8). Individual identity, therefore, resembles a patchwork, in a way in which it consists of many separate parts, with new elements constantly being added and/or removed as the individual adopts new practices and/or abandons old ones. As Warde pointed out, simultaneous engagement in diverse practices might be a source of the apparent "fragmentation of the self" discussed in a lot of literature, which in his opinion "is not the dissolution, fracturing or saturating of the self, as is suggested in

postmodern accounts. Neither is it simply a form of psychological adaptation to the postmodern world, nor a problem of identity per se, but rather *a consequence of the nature of the social organization of practices*" (Warde, 2005 p. 144, author's emphasis).

Thus, the practice theoretical lens brings new insights into our understandings of individual identities. Conversely, turning attention to practitioners and their individual performances of social practices can provide important clues regarding the nature of practices-as-entities. This is because trajectories of social practices are "defined by the performances of changing cohorts of carriers. Individuals are constantly taking up and dropping out of different practices as their lives unfold" (Shove et al. 2012, p. 65). In their book "The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes" Shove and colleagues argue that it is crucial to examine how issues of access and changing commitments over an individual's lifetime combine to define the career of a practice, including future patterns of participation, experience and commitment. They contend that the intimate connection between practices and their carriers is difficult to describe, as we need to at times proceed as if practices were stable, while keeping in mind their dynamic character. To describe the dynamics of social practices and show how practices and persons change, reproduce and transform each other, they suggest turning "back and forth between the lives of practitioners and those of the practices they carry" (Shove et al. 2012, p. 66).

Indeed, practice-oriented researchers increasingly turn their attention to the role of agency, particularly in relation to recruitment to new practices. Truninger (2011), for example, carried out participant observation at a demonstration event of a multi-food processor (Bimby), alongside exploratory interviews and analysis of secondary data, to examine how normative and symbolic messages, as well as skills and competence related to cooking, are spread and adopted, and how new practitioners are recruited to the practice of cooking with Bimby. Following Shatzki (2001), Truninger criticized the tendency of some of the practice approaches to overlook human agency. The de-centering of the individual, which is one of the main facets of practice theory, often obscures the role of reflexivity, intentions and plans, instead focusing solely on shared routines and dispositions. Truninger (2011) thus combined Shove's version of the theory of practice with Thevenot's (2001) concept of pragmatic regimes to

account for the interactions between the material and human agency (i.e. the materiality of the food processor and the agency of practitioners). She found different ways in which humans interacted with Bimby at the demonstration event – varying from the demonstrator’s at times automatic, unreflexive engagement with the food processor; to the rationally and carefully planned sequence of steps and dishes to be prepared; to participants learning from experience and acquiring competence and skills through using tools, from the demonstrator and from the Bimby recipe book; to moments of improvisation and creativity and adapting the recipes and procedures according to participants’ competence and skill brought over from past practices. Therefore, the study highlighted the plural modes of engaging with cooking practices in a demonstration setting and the role of reflexivity, intention and planning. Elsewhere, Ropke and colleagues (2010) analysed how the information and communication technologies shape people’s everyday lives with implications for energy use, but also paying attention to how people can use such technologies in a reflexive, creative manner, as the flexible nature of ICTs opens space for improvisation. Pantzar and Shove (2010) examined the ability of practitioners to generate and sustain innovations in practice, through analyzing the relatively new practice of Nordic Walking. This work acknowledged that whilst practices comprise of different elements (conceptualized as material, skill and image), in the end it is “those who do”, the practitioners, that integrate the elements together. Whilst other agents, such as producers of Nordic Walking equipment, may more-or-less actively influence the elements of the practice, practitioners have a unique role in the (re)production of practices. In yet another work, Pantzar and Shove (2007) focused their attention firmly on patterns of recruitment and reproduction of practices. By analyzing the practices of digital photography and the game of floorball, they highlighted the role of practitioners in actively performing practices, for example by bringing in and modifying meanings and competence from other areas of life, and as a result reproducing slightly different versions of the same practice. Practitioners can therefore define new territories, which may be followed by others, thus potentially reshaping the face of the entire practice.

The empirical accounts discussed above engage directly with the role of active agency in the (re)production of social practices. As Shove and Pantzar (2007) argued, practices change not only as external conditions change – they

also “develop from within, or, more accurately, as a consequence of the continual re-positioning of practitioners with respect to the entity or practice they sustain and reproduce” (p. 165). However, there is no single conceptual framework with which to systematically account for the role of active agency from the social practice perspective – instead, relevant concepts and themes are either developed to address each empirical case separately or borrowed from other theories (as in the case of Truninger, 2011). Arguably, exploring the issues of agency would benefit from a more systematic analytical approach that could provide a guiding, sensitizing framework for examining relevant aspects of active agency in the (re)production of social practices.

Strong structuration has been chosen as a conceptual framework for this study partly because it is a version of social practice theory that provides a systematic way of the turning back and forth between the lives of practitioners (performers) and the practice-as-entity at the moment of recruitment. Its methodological tools allow for accounting for the concept of habitus and active agency in a strong and rigorous manner, without falling into overly individualistic accounts of behavior. This is particularly important when studying how people adopt new practices, as a degree of more-or-less conscious deliberation and active engagement with the structural context can be expected in such situations, arguably more so than when performing routine, everyday practices often repeated without much reflection. Strong structuration allows to examine the role of the agent at the moment of recruitment to the gap year practice and the interplay of students’ multiple value frames, projects, concerns and considerations, and to explore the degree of choice that is available within the boundaries of the gap year practice itself:

“The quadripartite conceptualization of structuration allows us to retain Giddens’s emphasis on the skilled, knowledgeable and active character of agents whilst also being much more realistic about the extent to which external social pressures constrain the actor” (Stones, 2005 p. 109).

Crucially, turning the attention to practitioners allows for exploring the dynamics of the gap year practice-as-entity and its possible future trajectories and patterns of participation – even the incremental changes at the individual level of

performance can over time lead to the transformation of the practice-as-entity. The next section outlines structuration theory and strong structuration in more detail, exploring other merits and strengths of this approach.

#### 2.3.4 Structuration theory and strong structuration

##### *2.3.4.1 Introduction*

The theory of structuration was developed by Anthony Giddens as an attempt to overcome the long-lasting dualism in social sciences (i.e. giving primacy to either agency or structure as the main driving force of social life) and to replace it by what he called a “duality of structure”. This duality lies in “the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and ‘exists’ in the generating moment of this constitution” (Giddens, 1979 p. 5). It needs to be stressed that when Giddens talks about “structures” he has something rather different in mind than its conventional usage in social sciences. By “structures” he understands rules and material and non-material resources that agents draw upon (and transform) in their continuous reproduction of social practices (these structures can be loosely equated with the elements of practice-as-entity discussed earlier). In line with other practice theorists that adopt the “stronger line”, Giddens sees social practices as the basic unit of the social world and the main object of social inquiry:

“The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens, 1984 p. 2).

Actors are seen as “knowledgeable” in the sense that they know how to perform the practice, they have understanding of the rules (norms and meanings) and competence/skill in using available resources (both material and non-material). This knowledgeability can be placed on a continuum, from the more-or-less taken for granted and habitual (as in the case of many routine tasks, where agents themselves are not aware of the process of drawing upon the structures), to instances of a degree of critical distance, where agents are capable of some

reflection regarding the structures on which they act, and can respond to them, sometimes in a creative manner (Stones, 2005 pp. 55-58). Such understanding of the agent is very useful for the study of long-haul air travel, a non-routine, conspicuous form of consumption, which requires a certain level of deliberation and decision making on behalf of the agent taking up a new practice, and this approach allows for assessing whether, and to what extent, agents can adopt critical distance and creativity, particularly in relation to destination and mobility choices.

Giddens was criticized for dedicating too much time to the ontology of structuration, developing a range of abstract concepts, without considering epistemological and methodological issues (Bryant, 1991). He himself saw his theory as a “sensitizing device” to make researchers sensitive to the kinds of social phenomena they can encounter in their research and supported a critical and selective approach to the empirical application of his theory, one that wouldn’t adopt an excessive amount of abstract concepts (Giddens, 1989, as cited in Stones, 2005 p. 35). Due to Giddens’s preoccupation with the philosophical and abstract levels of structuration, particularly his treatment of the key concepts of structure and agency, structuration theory could be presented as both an overly individualistic and overly deterministic theory, depending on where the emphasis was placed (Stones, 2005). Stones’s (2005) “strong structuration” was an attempt to further develop and strengthen the key dimensions of structuration theory, going beyond the abstract concepts and taking into account its main criticisms by bringing together insights from those who engaged with the theory at empirical and theoretical levels. The emphasis was to “develop bridging concepts between the philosophical and substantive levels of structuration, to develop not only what we might call “ontology-in-general”, but also “ontology-in-situ”, ontology directed at the ‘ontic’, at particular social processes and events in particular times and places” (Stones, 2005 p. 8). He succeeded in developing a very strong methodological tool to address a range of empirical questions at the “meso-level” of explanation, which he saw as the appropriate level for empirical studies of structuration, as its in-depth character makes its application complicated in larger and more complex systems and institutions. At the same time, it is important to note that broader historical and social trends are also of relevance and they too are shaped over time by numerous social practices of various agents. However,

such processes are too complex to account for in the detailed study of structuration, which is best suited to the analysis of meso-level relationships (Stones, 2005). Instead, they should be seen as a broader context in which a particular social practice takes place, a context, which for practical reasons would always be rough and imprecise (Stones, 2005). Such rough historical and social framework for this study is provided in the final section of this chapter, examining the development of the gap year practice over time and its current position in relation to issues such as employment conditions of late modernity or the changing nature of transitions to adulthood.

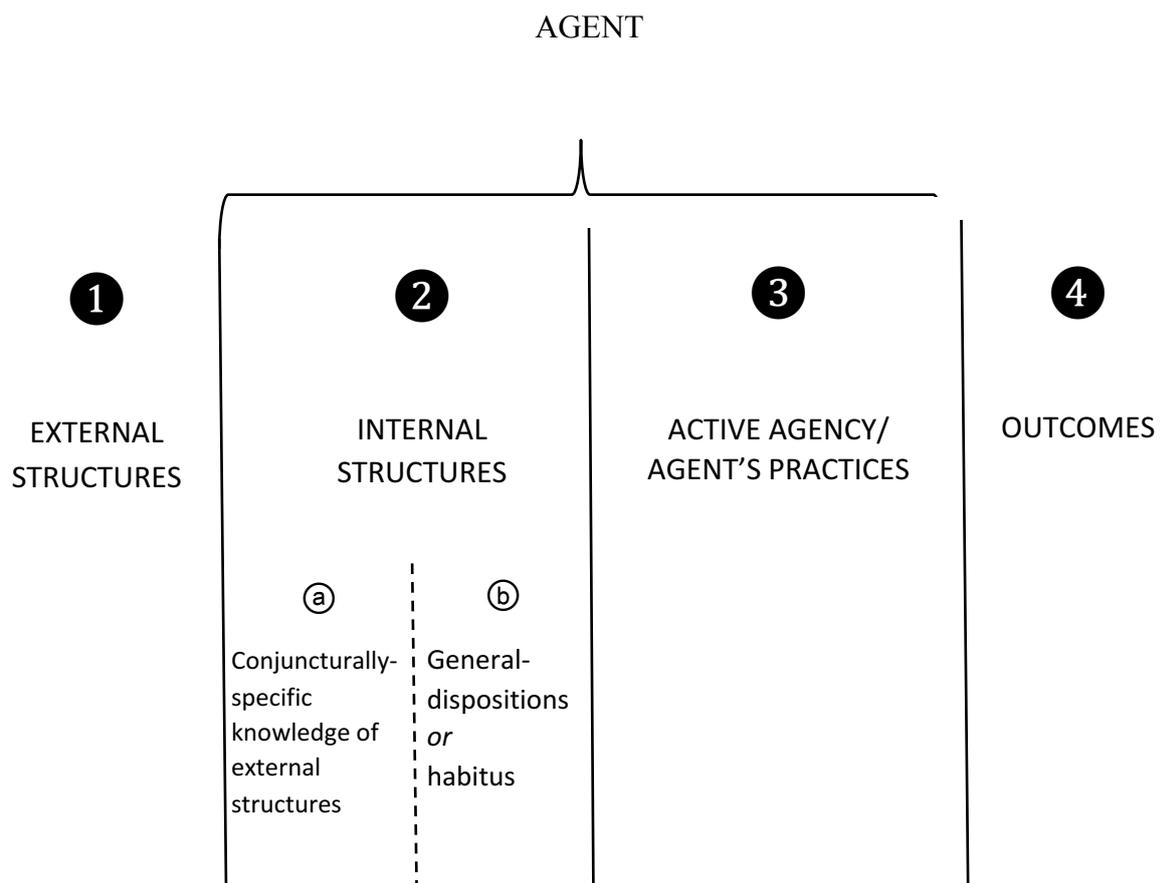
#### *2.3.4.2 Cycles of structuration*

This study adopted Stones's strong structuration as a particularly useful conceptual framework to the study of non-routine consumption such as long-haul travel. The complex and detailed model developed by Stones allows for accounting for the ways in which new agents are recruited to take part; which meanings, norms and resources are involved in that process; and also examining the role that any skills and dispositions, including environmental worldviews, shaped by past practices (*habitus*) play in making decisions about participating in the gap year practice.

Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the cycle of structuration, which is the process through which practices and structures are (re)produced. Stones sees structuration as consisting of four interrelated components. Social practices (3) are performed by agents, who draw on their "internal structures" in order to do so (2). Whilst Giddens does not make an explicit analytical distinction between the two forms of internal structures, Stones (2005) argues that it is a key dimension and distinctiveness of structuration theory (p. 71). In "The constitution of society" (1984) Giddens is concerned with agent's knowledgeability in two ways – their transposable and generalizable knowledge which is applied across various circumstances, and the context of their immediate, specific, circumstances of action (p. 375). Stones makes this distinction clear in his model, based on Giddens's writings, by distinguishing between two elements of internal structures: (a) - agents' understandings of the specific conditions of action, i.e. their knowledge of external structures (1) which are meanings, norms and resources autonomous from the agent; and *habitus* (b), which can be understood as general dispositions and skills that are transposable between different

practices and contexts, and which derive from numerous past practices of a given individual. Finally, there are outcomes (4), which are intended and unintended consequences of practices, and include reproduction or change of various external and internal structures. The key components of the structuration cycle are further elaborated on below.

The first of the two internal structures, the conjuncturally specific, is the agent's understanding of external structures, i.e. of specific conditions of action, which include the role of other agents within the context of a given practice. Conjuncturally-specific internal structures link therefore directly to external structures. Giddens rejected structural determinism – individuals are conceptualized as not merely reproducing or following the external structures. They have knowledgeability of their structural conditions of action and skillfully



**Figure 2:** The quadrupartite nature of structuration. [Adapted from: Stones (2005 p. 85)]

draw on this knowledge while producing practices. Whilst intimately related, conjuncture-specific internal structures and external structures should not be assumed to be the same – people can have different levels of critical distance towards external structures and challenge or redefine them through practice. Applying these concepts to empirical situations means that it is possible to talk about degrees of knowledgeable and critical reflection of an agent towards their internal structures and fewer or greater choices available to a given agent. These issues are examined in greater depth in Chapter 3, where methodological bracketing (developed by Giddens and fine-tuned by Stones) is introduced as a way of keeping the ‘duality of structure’ at heart of the analysis, i.e. giving the primacy to neither the structure nor agency as drivers of the social world, which is a key premise of structuration theory. External structures can be analytically divided into the three components identified by Giddens – meanings, norms, and power over material and non-material resources. Meanings relate to the shared understandings and interpretative schemes, and the knowledge of how other agents are likely to interpret a given behaviour. Norms, on the other hand, relate to social sanctions and rewards. Resources, or structures of domination, relate to the control practitioners have over material resources and people. Conjuncture specific structures can be plural, in the sense that a social practice can involve variously positioned agents, each with their own orientation towards it.

The second of the two internal structures, the general-dispositional or habitus, relate to transposable skills, worldviews, hierarchies of concerns and dispositions, many of them unconscious. They are shaped by past practices of a practitioner and they play a part in ordering of purposes and making choices between a plurality of different practices and available courses of action within them. Both conjuncture specific and general-dispositional internal structures play a part in performing social practices. It is important to remember that habitus differs from more uniform concepts of attitudes, values or lifestyles. Stones emphasizes that habitus is not necessarily internally consistent according to some overarching logic or value system. It can be plural in two ways: 1) there can be different or conflicting discourses *within* the particular practice or institutional domain, rather than one set of coherent rules; 2) there are multiple position-practices that the agent is involved in, each with different general discourses that

can be contradictory. Stones intends for concepts of the “general-dispositional” and “habitus” to be used interchangeably. This is for two reasons: Bourdieu’s “habitus” sometimes has overly deterministic connotations and is too much associated with practical action, whilst the concept here is meant to incorporate also “dimensions of culture as discourse” (Stones, 2005, p. 87). The general dispositional, in Stones’s terms, encompasses “transposable skills and dispositions, including generalized world-views and cultural schemas, classifications, typifications of things, people and networks, principles of action, typified recipes for action, deep binary frameworks of signification, associative chains and connotations of discourse, habits of speech and gesture and methodologies for adapting this generalized knowledge to a range of particular practices in particular locations of time and space” (Stones, 2005, p. 88). This includes both the taken-for-granted and unnoticed states, i.e. people drawing on the habitus without thinking or questioning, but also moments when taken-for-granted knowledge becomes unsettled and open for reflection and discussion. Drawing on the work of Crossley (2001) and Giddens’s writings, Stones argues that there is no limit to the potential of “discursive penetration of practical consciousness”, the point that Bourdieu sometimes underestimates in his conceptualization of habitus, wherein at the moment when the taken for granted becomes questioned and open for debate, it ceases to be a part of habitus (Stones 2005, pp. 88 – 89). Moreover, whilst acknowledging the existence of the enduring, transposable capacities, which Bourdieu was preoccupied with in his conceptualization of “habitus”, Giddens tended to focus more on the immediate structural terrain of action – in strong structuration, Stones made both dimensions of internal structures more explicit. Acknowledging the knowledgeability and reflexivity of agents (albeit limited) is particularly important when analyzing recruitment to new practices, such as gap years, as a degree of reflection and deliberation and even critical distance can be expected at that moment. As discussed in the final section of this chapter, previous gap year research showed that whilst young people tend to reproduce similar discourses in relation to their gap year experiences, they are also able to have a degree of critical reflection towards it (however limited or varied). Moreover, it became clear during the analysis of research data that whilst gap year geographies and mobility patterns were to a large extent shared, there was also some scope for choice and

alternative ways of doing things, which can over time trigger change in the practice-as-entity. As discussed earlier, practice theorists highlight that agents and their individual life projects are important to the reproduction/change of practices (Shove et al. 2012) whilst calling for caution to avoid falling into overly individualistic accounts of agency when accounting for its role. Whilst other social practice proponents also suggested the use of “habitus” as a concept to account for the role of practitioners in the reproduction of practices (Ropke, 2009; Shove, 2014; Shove et al, 2012), and in empirical work Butler et al. (2014), for example, employed several concepts from Bourdieu and Wilk to account for agents’ reflexivity in relation to their everyday energy consumption, strong structuration provides a unique conceptual framework to address the role of agency in a systematic way. This is due to its clear model of cycles of structuration and methodological bracketing that enables the translation of abstract concepts into empirical work. Indeed, structuration theory has been previously mobilized in research on lifestyle migration in East Asia (O’Reilly et al., 2014) to study practice stories including those leading to the moment of migration, which allowed to avoid both the overly-individualistic accounts of agency and migration “choices” and overly deterministic structural accounts. This was achieved by employing the concepts of the two types of internal structures, paying attention to how migrants combined their enduring dispositions (habitus) with the newly acquired situational knowledge (in this case – of migration) to produce action. In this thesis, the concepts of reflexive agency and habitus (or “general-dispositions”) are employed to reflect on three issues relevant to the study of long haul gap year mobility in the age of climate change: (1) to what extent young people’s habitus and active agency impact on whether they can participate in gap years? The issues of access are of relevance for the potential of the gap year practice-as-entity to grow over time and attract wider groups of students, which is important from the climate change mitigation perspective; (2) to what extent individual students can make reflexive decisions regarding gap year mobility and what is the role of habitus in this process? This was to reflect on the opportunities for different mobility choices currently available within the boundaries of the gap year practice. Whilst literature suggests that long-haul destinations are the most popular way of gap year travelling, it was important to remain open to other, more sustainable types of gap year mobility that might be happening at the niche,

alternative enactments of the practice. In particular, (3) to what extent any environmental concerns of gap year practitioners (i.e. transposable dispositions/habitus in relation to environment) are mobilized in making gap year mobility decisions? This was to assess opportunities for making sustainable choices within the boundaries of the gap year practice and the role of values. These three questions related to habitus and active agency have implications for gap year mobility and sustainability, and are addressed in Chapter 6.

External structures constitute, as mentioned above, the structural context that agents face. They have both constraining and enabling properties. Stones further distinguishes between independent causal influences, which are those elements of external structures that agents cannot control, as they do not have the physical capacity to do so, for example existing infrastructures or institutional arrangements. Irresistible social forces, on the other hand, are those whose grasp over agents lies in the feeling that agents cannot resist a particular influence, even if theoretically they could always “do otherwise”. However, as Stones observes “real people are less free to “do otherwise” than abstract agents’ (Stones, 2005, p. 112). In order to resist such forces, the agent would need to have: the power to resist “without endangering the conditions of possibility for the realization of the core commitments”; knowledge of alternatives and their consequences; and adequate critical distance (Stones, 2005 p. 115). Finally, external structures also include networked others, which are “themselves involved in a duality of structure and all that it entails” (Stones, 2005 p. 109)

It is evident from the above discussion that the four aspects of the cycle of structuration are closely interrelated with one another, and that separation is possible only at the analytical level. “Often an initial focus on one aspect of the cycle will lead, logically and systematically, to other specific aspects of the cycle relevant to the depth of exploration of the question(s)-at-hand.” (Stones, 2005 p. 117). Moreover, as Stones argued, any given study will likely provide empirical evidence that is only a “shard” of the overall cycle of structuration, but the model and the logic of structuration will serve as a reference point and an organizing device, and as such it will allow for identifying the limitations of empirical data (Stones, 2005 p. 121). The research design adopted in this thesis was developed in relation to the specific aim and objectives and thus explored only some aspects of the structuration cycle. The methodological approach was based on the two

forms of Giddens's methodological bracketing refined by Stones (2005), which allow for releasing the potential of structuration theory to pay attention to the external structural context of action, whilst conceptualizing agents as skilled and knowledgeable. Chapter 3 describes the methodological implications of adopting structuration theory as a conceptual framework in more detail.

#### 2.3.5 Practice perspective: social change and policy implications

It is important to highlight that it is not my intention here to present practice theory, or strong structuration, as the only or the best version of social theory and thus the "true" account of the social world. As Reckwitz eloquently stated, "social theories are vocabularies necessarily undetermined by empirical 'facts'. As vocabularies, they never reach the bedrock of a real social world, but offer contingent systems of interpretation which enable us to make certain empirical statements (and exclude other forms of empirical statements)" (Reckwitz, 2002 p. 257). This has implications for policy perspectives and strategies, as "the priorities that matter when the aim is that of promoting pro-environmental behaviour are not the same as those that pertain when the goal is one of reconfiguring the practices that people reproduce" (Shove, 2014 p. 427). Proponents of practice theories argue that rather than convincing individual consumers to use less resources, we should focus on how to change resource intensive practices to become more sustainable. For example, when applied to the study of everyday mobility, practice approach can reframe the problems of intervention as a challenge to "engender recruitment to contemporary practices of different modes of mobility, which can operate in the current socio-technical landscape. This perspective represents a fundamental shift from the individualistic focus of dominant approaches to understanding travel behaviour" (Watson, 2012 p. 493). It is also possible to apply the theory to inform demand reduction strategies, where modal shift is not possible, particularly long-haul flying:

"The more politically difficult strategy of reducing 'need' for mobility can be framed in terms of recruitment and defection in some respects – for example considering how defection from practices of flying can be engendered." (Watson, 2012 p. 495)

Spurling et al. (2013) identified three potential interventions in practices: re-crafting practices (i.e. changing elements of the practice so that they are more

sustainable; here, this could involve changing the long-haul character of gap years and promoting shorter-haul destinations); substituting practices (can an alternative practice fulfill gap year purposes?); changing how practices interlock (can we address interactions between gap years and related practices to promote a change towards sustainability?).

Policy insights from such perspectives, aside from the necessity to address a variety of actors and factors involved in shaping practices, and thus the demand for resources (i.e. not limiting interventions to individual consumers), also include the importance of acknowledging the dynamic character of practices and the danger of a socio-cultural lock-in if unsustainable practices are not addressed and allowed to continue to attract more practitioners. Shove used a metaphor of a “ratchet” in order to describe “the impossibility of backward movement and the locking in of technologies and practices as they move along a path dependent trajectory of sociotechnical change” (Shove, 2003 p. 400). It would be inconceivable now to introduce regulations that would limit people’s right to own a car or shower daily, even though those practices were not that common not so long ago, when people had different mobility expectations or ways to keep their bodies clean. To think about sustainability from a practice perspective means to ask “how do new conventions become normal and with what consequence for sustainability?” (Shove, 2003 p. 396). By studying travel practices, we can understand the directions in which air travel mobility is developing and predict the challenges we might face in the future.

So far, the social practice approach has been mainly applied in the area of everyday, routine consumption, such as water and energy use within households (Shove 2003, Gram-Hanssen 2010, Strengers, 2011), food consumption and waste (Evans, 2012; Halkier & Jensen, 2011), or everyday mobility (Nijhuis, 2013). It has been suggested, however, that adopting a practice perspective in the field of travel and tourism consumption could bring interesting insights into how mobility demand is shaped and inform policy makers on how best to address the problem of unsustainable air travel (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008; Watson, 2012). After all, plane tickets are not usually purchased for the experience of a flight itself, but to allow participation in various leisure and business practices. These insights could be particularly useful in light of the limitations of individualist approaches discussed in the previous sections

of this chapter. However, these understandings remain absent in mainstream policy debates regarding aviation emissions. Research developments in this field have also been slow, with a notable exception of Randles and Manders (2009b) study into social practices that underlie the phenomenon of frequent flying, discussed earlier. However, more research is needed to understand how the demand for air travel (in particular long-haul air travel) is shaped in different contexts and to identify appropriate sites for policy intervention. Such practice-based interventions might to an extent involve drawing on similar methods and techniques as those already being employed within the psychological framings of behaviour, but they also open up other areas for intervention. Their ultimate utility lies in their ability to generate a distinct set of policy problem framings, to complement (rather than discredit) many important insights from the dominating socio-psychological perspectives. The final section of this chapter introduces the gap year travel phenomenon, which is the case study explored in this thesis from the social practice perspective.

## **2.4 Gap year travel**

### 2.4.1 Tourist places, mobility and social practices

Even if not necessarily explicitly adopting a social practice theory, empirical research in tourism and related fields often hints at the interrelations between tourist places/mobilities and more-or-less concrete practices. These insights further emphasize the relevance of studying travel practices. For example, Shields (2004) explored “the tube” that forms under the crest of breaking waves (at some coastlines) as a generic surfing place. His analysis could easily be reconceptualized from the social practice perspective, as common imaginations, understandings, skills and rules of behaviour were identified, alongside the materiality of the surfboard design and technology. Shields (2004) also examined the historical development of surfing from its origins in Polynesia and Pacific-Rim cultures to its current global character, thus pointing to the changing and dynamic character of the practice. Most importantly, the contemporary social image of surfing was identified as that of “a masculine lifestyle that emphasizes dedication and a global pursuit of the very best places to surf” (Shields, 2004 p. 50). In light of this analysis, air travel emerges as a means to an end, enabling participation in a valued, historically shaped practice. “The tube” as a tourist place only exists in relation to the social practice of surfing – without it, it would be meaningless,

unlikely to attract interest from potential visitors. Some beaches are world-famous for their surfing conditions, and arguably the demand for air travel in this context can be best understood in relation to the practice of surfing.

At the same time, it would be limiting to think of mobility solely as a means to an end, enabling access to specific destinations, where practices can then be performed. It has long been observed that sometimes “where someone goes is less important than the act and style of going” (Relph, 1976, as cited in Cresswell, 2015 p. 76). The act of mobility itself can be an integral aspect of social practices. “Mobility is practiced, and practice is often conflated with mobility. To move is to do something. Moving involves making a choice within, or despite, the constraints of society and geography” (Cresswell & Merriman, 2011 p. 7). For example, a historical analysis by DeLyser (2011) explored how women pilots in the late 1920s and early 1930s engaged in flying as an active and embodied practice which served to challenge the place of women in the American society. Thus, understanding air travel demand from the practice perspective should not be limited to understanding “destinations”, but also include an appreciation of the act and style of mobility.

Of course, there are numerous social practices that lie at the heart of the growing demand for aeromobility, some of which were previously examined by Randles and Mander (2009b) in their study of frequent flying, such as changing societal conventions regarding celebrating hen and stag parties. From the sustainability point of view, the most important message emerging from these various sociological accounts of destinations and mobility is that social world is not static – when predicting future scenarios and patterns of aviation demand, we should take into account the constant emergence and development of various new forms of social behaviour that may involve long-haul mobility. For example, new tourist places may emerge to accommodate new social practices:

“New places based upon new performances are always ‘around the corner’, surfacing out of the swirl of economic, social and cultural processes. These processes swirl around, changing the fixing of place and bringing unexpected new places into play... while others rapidly go out of play” (Sheller & Urry, 2004 p. 6)

Indeed, in the field of geography, it has long been argued that places should be seen as “an unstable stage for performance” of social practices, constantly reshaped and reimagined (Cresswell, 2015 p. 70). The same is true for the styles and acts of mobility itself – for some social practices, these might be of equal or even greater importance than arriving at a destination. Indeed, calls for making the journey an attraction in itself as an aspect of slow travel are attempts to bring the act of mobility to the foreground of the tourist practice.

Thus, it is argued here that stakeholders interested in promoting sustainable travel should direct their attention to existing and emerging carbon-intensive tourism and travel practices. This thesis examines post-school gap year travel as a particularly interesting phenomenon, which grew in popularity over the past few decades, developing from an alternative, niche activity to a commonplace and institutionalized stage in young people’s lives (Heath, 2007; O’Reilly 2006; Bagnoli, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that long-haul destinations are particularly popular for this type of travel (ABTA, 2013, 2014, 2015). The gap year is also a unique practice as it combines two forms of mobility - geographical mobility, i.e. physical movement from one place to another; and life-course mobility, i.e. a transition from youth to adulthood (see sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4 for more details). This thesis aims to examine the role of spatial mobility in the performance of the gap year. The following sections of this chapter are dedicated to reviewing existing empirical and theoretical accounts of gap years, and gap year mobility in particular, which helped to inform the design and execution of this research.

#### 2.4.2 Gap year travel - introduction

Whilst the gap year is an increasingly popular activity in the UK, it is not an exclusively British phenomenon. Gap years are taken in various countries across the globe; for example, it was recently announced that Malia Obama, a daughter of the US president Barack Obama, is going to take a gap year before commencing her studies at Harvard University (Yuhus, 2016). Research suggests, however, that gap years are characterized by distinctive national features. Israelis tend to take it in their early twenties, following a military service (Shulman, Blatt, & Walsh, 2006); Italians do not have a direct equivalent, but their middle class youth tend to travel to the UK to learn English to complete their education (Bagnoli, 2009); whilst the young Chinese are more likely to go on a

gap year in their late 20s or early 30s as a career break, as the higher education system in China does not support deferred entry, and delaying study tends to be frowned upon by families and universities alike (Wu, Pearce, Huang, & Fan, 2015). This thesis is concerned exclusively with UK gap years, and given the distinctive character of gap year taking in different parts of the world, findings should not be directly translated to other contexts.

The UK gap year is a complex yet still largely under-researched phenomenon and it is difficult to grasp all its facets in a single definition. Jones's (2004) review commissioned by the UK Department for Education and Skills, defines it very broadly as "any period of time between 3 and 24 months that an individual takes out of education, training or the workplace and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory" (p. 22). This definition shows that the name can be somewhat misleading, as a gap year does not necessarily last a year. Some people opt for longer or shorter breaks. For example, structured mini-gap opportunities are available from some gap year providers, such as Oyster Worldwide, for those who want to have a gap year-like experience over summer, without having to take a whole year out (Arnold, 2011).

But what exactly constitutes a "gap year experience"? The clue lies in Jones's (2004) observation that "a gap year is not simply 'time out doing nothing' but part of a longer term educational and/or life trajectory development" (p. 32). Therefore, the types of activities that one engages in are crucial for defining a gap year. Jones (2004) suggests that they can be divided according to three main layers: location (UK or overseas); degree of structure (whether they are structured, i.e. set up, managed and facilitated by a providing organization; or organized independently); and nature of activity (this can include travel, learning, paid and voluntary work and various leisure activities). It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive - often a year out includes a combination of work, travel, volunteering and/or other activities, undertaken in the UK and/or overseas. It is gap year travel that is the main focus of this thesis, in whatever form it takes - whether it is for the sake of travel itself, or to participate in work, volunteering or other endeavors. Crawford and Cribb (2012), in the first quantitative analysis of the characteristics of gap year taking in the UK, found that travelling is the second most popular activity undertaken during pre-university gap years, after paid work in Britain, particularly for those who had planned their gap years in

advance<sup>1</sup> – around 60% reported engaging in travel. Working and volunteering abroad were also popular among that group of students, with around 15% of the sample taking part in each of those activities. Heath (2007) argued that overseas experiences are particularly valued and occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of gap years, above paid work or volunteering in the UK.

Gap years can be taken at different points of life, including post-school, during university, post-degree, during or after postgraduate study, post-training or as a break from employment (Jones, 2004). The industry even distinguishes the so-called “golden gap years” taken during retirement (Gap360, 2012). However, this thesis is solely focused on gap years taken post-school, after Year 13 of UK education (usually by 18 year olds), that many identify as the original or most common form of gap year (Bagnoli, 2009; Simpson, 2004a). Due to the diverse nature of gap years, it is difficult to quantify the exact number of post-school gap year takers. UCAS provides annual data on the amount of people who defer university entry, but these figures do not explicitly identify gap year takers, as people may defer entry for a number of reasons. Moreover, calculations based on deferred entry do not include those who may be applying for the university *during* their gap year, rather than securing their place in advance; and those who progress to employment or other forms of education or training at the end of their year out, rather than going to university. Crawford and Cribb’s (2012) calculations were based instead on self-identification as a gap year student, although still limited to pre-university “gappers” only. They found that 6.6% of young people self-identified as being on a pre-university gap year in 2009, but this percentage excludes those who did not yet apply to university at the time the survey was conducted (for example because their “gap year” was longer than a year); those who took a gap year before commencing employment or non-university forms of higher education; and those on mini-gaps. Therefore, the scale of the post-school gap year phenomenon in the UK is likely to be higher.

In the UK, gap year takers tend to come from white, affluent, middle class backgrounds and from independent and high performing schools (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Jones, 2004). Jones (2004) also observed that there is an

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<sup>1</sup> Around three quarters of gap year takers in the longitudinal study analyzed by Crawford and Cribb (2012) expressed the intention to take a gap year a year in advance, which shows that the majority of gap years are planned.

overrepresentation of female students and those from higher education institutions located in the south of England. However, there was also some evidence that participation is becoming more diverse, with more young people from the state sector, ethnic minority groups and other geographical regions taking part (Jones, 2004). It is, therefore, likely that participation in gap years may become more mainstream over time.

These trends pose a challenge to mitigating against aviation emissions, as there is evidence to suggest that flying to long-haul destinations is a particularly favoured form of gap year travel. There is currently no academic research quantifying the most popular gap year travel destinations, so industry figures are provided instead. ABTA, the UK’s largest travel association representing travel agents and tour operators, publishes annual data regarding top gap year destinations, as reported by ABTA members specializing in gap years. Table 1 presents top destinations published in Augusts of 2013, 2014 and 2015, which represent data for bookings made over the 12 months prior to publication (ABTA, 2013, 2014, 2015).

As shown in the table, whilst some variation can be observed from year to year, the reported destinations were all exclusively long-haul. This data should be treated with a degree of caution, as it does not include bookings made outside of the specialist gap year providers – it is possible that some young people may plan their gap year through different channels and choose to travel to different countries. Nonetheless, this shows that at least for those who book through specialist providers, long-haul destinations are the most popular.

*Table 1: Top gap year destinations according to ABTA (2013, 2014, 2015), data for bookings made over the preceding 12 months, published in August of each year.*

	<b>ABTA 2013</b>	<b>ABTA 2014</b>	<b>ABTA 2015</b>
<b>1</b>	Thailand	Australia	Australia
<b>2</b>	Australia	Thailand	New Zealand
<b>3</b>	USA	USA	USA
<b>4</b>	South Africa	New Zealand	Peru

<b>5</b>	Peru	Peru	Vietnam
<b>6</b>	Vietnam	Bolivia	Thailand
<b>7</b>	Brazil	Argentina	Canada
<b>8</b>	India	Vietnam	Brazil
<b>9</b>	New Zealand	South Africa	Argentina
<b>10</b>	Fiji	Brazil	India

In their more broad analysis of the UK travel market, Tourism Intelligence International consultancy contended that The Far East and Australia are most appealing to gap year takers, who tend to seek unusual locations, Cambodia being of particular interest at the time the report was written (Tourism Intelligence International, 2005). This further suggests a degree of change over time, as Cambodia did not feature among top destinations reported around 10 years later by ABTA, as shown in Table 1. Moreover, the analysis by Tourism Intelligence International (2005) concluded that once young people “experience the adrenaline, freedom and flexibility of travelling independently, [they] are very likely to continue this pattern in their future travels” (p. 133). Indeed, a desire to “keep their gap year alive” has been documented among some gap year students, which can take form of return trips to visited countries (O’Shea, 2011). More broadly, travel literature suggests that episodic experiences of independent travel can lead to a thirst for more travel and an extended ‘travel career’, which results in a search for ever more challenging destinations (Richards & Wilson, 2003), and can even become a long-term lifestyle (Cohen, 2011). This is of relevance for sustainability policies, as even though a gap year is often considered to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, it can lead to more long-haul travel in the future.

Evidence suggests that the numbers of young people embarking on long-haul gap year travel are rapidly growing - in 2015 ABTA reported that gap year specialists observed more than 10% increases in bookings over the preceding twelve months (ABTA, 2015). It is difficult to assess whether these increases result from more people taking a long-haul gap year in general, or from more gap

year takers choosing specialist providers, but it is likely that the overall popularity of long-haul gap years is on the rise. This makes the issue of understanding and addressing the gap year travel phenomenon even more urgent, if we are to avoid further growth of demand for long-haul flying and the potential socio-cultural lock-in of such unsustainable travel patterns.

Beyond the definitional and quantitative contributions outlined in this section, which attempted to grasp the boundaries and scale of the gap year phenomenon and measure current trends, many researchers from diverse fields, including education, sociology and tourism, try to provide more in-depth understandings. However, literature in this field tends to be patchy, mainly because of the variety of activities in which gap year takers can engage and resulting problems with the gap year definition. Due to the complexity of the gap year phenomenon, when the term “gap year” is applied in academic research, its meaning varies from case to case. For example, whilst young people may combine different activities during their year out, many in-depth empirical accounts are limited to a specific endeavor, typically structured projects and volunteering in Third World<sup>2</sup> countries (Ansell, 2008; Griffin, 2013; O’Shea, 2011; Pike & Beames, 2007; Simpson, 2004a, 2004b, 2005), or, to a lesser extent, independent travel/backpacking (Huxley, 2004; O’Reilly, 2006). Thus, the “gap year” concept is often applied to refer to a very specific undertaking, rather than in its broader meaning as a stage in the life course, which can include various activities, and which was a definition adopted in this thesis (see Chapter 3 for more discussion on definitions). Thus, caution is required when translating insights from previous in-depth case studies into the context of this research. With those caveats in mind, the remaining of this chapter critically examines the most important findings from existing gap year literature, also drawing on evidence from broader fields of tourism, youth studies and education, particularly in cases where gap year-specific evidence was scarce. Section 2.4.3 examines the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Third World’ is a term used in this thesis following other gap year literature (Simpson 2004a, 2004b, 2005, Ansell 2008), although I acknowledge its contested nature, as it imposes homogeneity to very diverse regions (Tomlinson, 2003). As Ansell (2008) suggested, however, this term is preferred to “Global South” or “developing” world, with the former being geographically inaccurate, and the latter implying economic convergence, when in fact global inequalities are growing.

historical evolution of gap years, whilst section 2.4.4 reviews existing evidence regarding gap year destinations and mobility.

### 2.4.3 Historical evolution and current role

The nature of the contemporary gap year experience is perhaps best understood by exploring its historical evolution and continuity of some of the historical trends, as well as its relationship to the more recent global socio-economic developments. This section situates gap years within this broader context and through identifying historically shaped social understandings and other structural influences, it argues that a gap year can be successfully conceptualized as a social practice.

Commentators often identify the Grand Tours as its historical predecessor, which from the 17<sup>th</sup> through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century served as an extended educational experience for young, aristocratic men through exposure to classical culture (Bagnoli, 2009; O'Reilly, 2006; Simpson, 2004a). Gap year and other forms of contemporary youth travel draw on those traditions, where a period of travel is seen as a complementary stage of learning, and even referred to as “a gap year education” (O’Shea, 2011). Simpson (2004a) argued that there is a direct continuity between the Grand Tours tradition and modern gap years, and that these experiences are part of the “embodied history” of the middle and upper classes (p.62). Adopting Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, understood as taken for granted class-related assumptions and dispositions, Simpson contended that for some groups, taking a gap year is a social norm, an obvious life stage that does not necessarily require much decision making (Simpson, 2004a p. 61). It is a process through which middle class youth from affluent backgrounds can confirm their class distinction, by getting access to valuable cultural and social capital, which puts them at an advantage in university and job markets (Bagnoli, 2009; Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2004a). As an educational experience, gap years also draw on the long established philosophy of experiential education, where engaging in and reflecting on physical experiences serves to complement textbook knowledge and more traditional forms of learning (Dewey, 1938; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981).

Some also trace the connections of the contemporary gap year, particularly travel to Third World countries, to the colonial and/or missionary

traditions (O'Reilly, 2006; Simpson, 2004a). Simpson (2004a) argues that in similar ways in which missionaries exported their set of moral values and Western education to remote regions, gap year tourism spreads consumer-based capitalism as a value system, and gap year volunteers, just like missionaries, “come packaged with literacy and medicine” (p. 23). Moreover, whilst the colonial period has ended, the colonial gaze prevails, i.e. the simplistic and romanticized perceptions of members of Third World populations as the savage “Other”, which emphasize difference and downplay similarities to the European culture (Said, 1978). Tourism literature documents the continued legacy of the colonial gaze in contemporary tourism practices (e.g. Favero, 2007; Salazar, 2013; Urry & Larsen, 2011). In the context of Third World gap year projects, this gaze is mobilized by both the gap year industry and by gap year takers themselves (Simpson 2004a). The dichotomies between (Western) self and (Third World) Other provide legitimacy for volunteering engagement, promoting a particular approach to development, where change comes through intervention of Western outsiders (Simpson, 2004a, 2004b). Gap year volunteering engagement also has historical roots in voluntary military forces, as well as drawing inspirations from Victorian philanthropism, and is linked to more recent, broader practices of both domestic and international volunteering (Simpson, 2004a). Literature suggests a rapid growth in international volunteer tourism, as well as commodification of the experience, caused by the increase in the number of commercial, profit-driven organizations offering volunteering activities (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Moreover, gap years are often promoted by governments and industry as a form of civic education, where young people, through encounters with distant others, are expected to develop a sense of shared humanity and tolerance (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2011). However, as Simpson (2004a, 2004b) argues, gap year projects sometimes lack the necessary stage of critical reflection, instead opting for a simplistic notion of “experiential education”, where experiences are believed to speak for themselves. This, as she argues, often leads to the reproduction of neo-colonial, stereotypical perceptions of visited places and cultures. Lyons et al (2012) also contest the assumptions underlying the “myth of global citizenship”, arguing that it remains empirically unsupported. They warn that these ideals may be at odds with the neoliberalist context in which gap years take place, as the market-driven, competitive world reinforces

intolerance and distance from others, rather than promoting cosmopolitan values. Indeed, research suggests that encounters between gap year takers and local communities are often infused with simplistic, neo-colonial perceptions of the Third World (Griffin, 2013; Simpson, 2004b; Snee, 2013), although a degree of reflexivity and critical distance to such encounters, and more sophisticated understandings of cultural difference, can also be observed at times (Griffin, 2013; Jones, 2005; Snee, 2014).

Another historical precursor of the contemporary gap year, particularly backpacking, is the hippie, “drifter” travel of the 60s and 70s, which itself derived from the 19<sup>th</sup> century “tramping”, i.e. work-oriented travel of the lower classes (Cohen, 2003; O'Reilly, 2006). Drifter tourism resulted from the alienation of Western youth from their societies of origin, which led to attempts at creating alternative lifestyles (Cohen, 2003). Airlines quickly realized the enormous potential of this group of travellers and introduced cheap air-fares, which led to the rapid growth of drifting in the late sixties and early seventies (Cohen, 1973). Drifting was seen as a period of freedom and break from societal conventions, achieved by travelling without a purpose or goal in mind (Cohen, 1973). Depending on the level of “institutionalization” of travel practices, tourist experiences can be placed on a continuum from “organized mass tourist” to “individual mass tourist” to “explorer” to “drifter”, with “drifter” being the least institutionalized role, characterized by high levels of individualism and novelty (Cohen, 1972). Travelling on the budget without a fixed itinerary, outside of the mass tourism industry, and engaging in adventurous, risky activities remain widespread ideals of broadly defined contemporary backpackers (which include some gap year travellers), although Cohen (2003) highlights the distinction between the “drifter ideal” and the actual practice, which often resembles ordinary tourism. Today’s backpackers spend a substantial amount of time in various backpacker enclaves or hotspots, which serve as a base for trekking, riding or rafting trips and various excursions and attractions – as such they fulfill “a function parallel to that of vacationing resorts” (Cohen, 2003 p. 98). Nonetheless, the imaginations of adventure and risk remain an important aspect of backpacking (Elsrud, 2001). The perceived risks are also part of the allure of many structured gap year programmes, although safety is also a crucial element; in such projects,

risk-taking and adventure sometimes occur in highly controlled settings (Ansell, 2008; Pike & Beames, 2007).

Cremin (2007) argues that contemporary gap year provides young people with a desired sensation of “really” living, escaping the routines of everyday life and commodified limits of late-capitalism (so, it can be argued, serving a similar function to drifter travel), but without having to face any negative social consequences. On the contrary, time out has become commodified for the purpose of career advancement. Simpson (2004a) discusses the emergence of gap year as a product that sells experience and knowledge, improving competitiveness in the market place. It is now widely endorsed by the universities and graduate employers (Heath, 2007, Simpson, 2005). Thus, Bagnoli (2009) referred to a year out as a structured, “institutional way of moving” (p. 342). Apart from providing young people with a “personality package” of valuable skills, credentials and qualities (Heath, 2007 p. 93), forms of more formal accreditation and recognition are developing for some structured projects, where participants receive a formal qualification to demonstrate the value of their gap year experiences to future employers (Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2004a). The ability to gain distinction through unique experiences has become increasingly important in a world where academic qualifications are no longer sufficient (Heath, 2007). Therefore, rather than being a sign of resistance and rebellion, “a successful gap year returns us to the same”, reproducing neoliberal values (Cremin, 2007 p. 539). Similarly, Lyons et al. (2012) argue that neoliberal values penetrate gap years through their emphasis on skills development; reproducing patterns of privilege and elitism; and the commodification of volunteering through packaged experiences offered by commercial providers. Thus “even where individuals are determined to resist the market-mindedness of neoliberalism they are bound to run headlong into its hegemonic process” (Lyons et al., 2012 p. 369), which puts into question the perceptions of gap years and volunteering as an act of rebellion and an alternative activity.

Finally, it is the current role of gap years in young people’s transitions to adulthood that attracts the most academic interest. Many academics argue that in the period of late modernity, becoming an adult has become increasingly complex and de-standardized (e.g. Blatterer, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Roberts, 2009). The fall of traditional industries, the rise of service economy,

growing consumerism, demand for flexible and part-time labour, competition for jobs, weakening of traditional family and community ties led to a growing destabilisation of the life-courses. By contrast to their parents' generation, young people need to design and create coherent biographies for themselves and there are many available pathways to choose from. At the same time, opportunities are not equally accessible for all and traditional class and gender divisions, and other structural factors, continue to shape youth transitions, even if their influence may appear more obscure in the contemporary world, with its prevailing ideology of choice and individualism (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Researchers increasingly recognize the importance of spatial mobility in the process of becoming an adult (e.g. Cairns, 2008). Many scholars identify international youth travel, including gap years, as a form of contemporary "rite of passage" in transitions to adulthood, allowing young people to develop an adult identity (Ansell, 2008; Bagnoli, 2009; Desforges, 1998; King, 2011; O'Reilly, 2006; Simpson, 2004a). The "rite of passage" and personal transformation through an almost "heroic" journey of discovery, overcoming obstacles along the way, have also been found to be aspects of motivations for participating in volunteer tourism, often undertaken by "gappers" (Tomazos & Butler, 2010). However, as discussed earlier, gap year opportunities are characterized by a class dimension, allowing middle-class youth to strengthen their position of privilege (Bagnoli, 2009; Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2004a), thus they are not purely individualistic endeavors. Moreover, Snee (2014) argued that the perceptions regarding what is considered to be a worthwhile activity in the gap year context are socially constructed, and that young people tend to follow the shared "script" for action. She argued, that in the gap year context:

"the degree of choice available is questionable, as the imperative to do something worthwhile is pervasive. What is considered to be worthwhile aligns with the requirements of capital, in terms of being enterprising, or acquiring culturally sanctioned benefits. A discourse of choice does not mean that individuals are free to choose." (Snee, 2014 p. 858).

Snee (2014) found four socially shared narratives that make the gap year a worthwhile activity: being a proper "traveller" (as opposed to a tourist); gaining skills and knowledge; altruistic activities aimed at helping others; and having fun

away from home. These discourses were repeated across students' narratives in the travel blogs she analyzed. Thus, Snee (2014) questioned the common perception of gap years as an individualist, rational and reflexive identity formation. She found little evidence for critical self-awareness in her analysis and suggested that "just because young people present individualized accounts does not mean that they are engaging in reflexive identity work" (p. 845). At the same time, whilst for the most part students' discourses displayed a tacit consensus, there was also some degree of critical distance and reflexivity, particularly in relation to the moral aspects of the experience, although this was often inspired by interactions with others, e.g. blog commentators. Similarly, Shulman et al. (2006) and King (2011) positioned gap years as *both* a personal endeavor of identity formation and a socially shared rite of passage.

Together, the reviewed literature suggests that gap years are far from being a solely individualistic undertaking and "choice", but are deeply infused with historically shaped meanings and norms; involved in the reproduction of class privilege; and influenced by global socio-economic trends, including conditions of late modernity and neoliberal capitalism. There are shared social understandings and conventions regarding what it means to do a gap year, a shared "script", as Snee (2014) observed, which can be adopted largely unreflexively by participating students. This suggests that a gap year can be successfully conceptualized as a social practice. Indeed, elements of Bourdieu's habitus have been applied to the study of gap years on several occasions, and Simpson (2004a) referred to gap year volunteering projects as a loosely defined "situated practice" (p. 18). This thesis contributes to these sociological conceptualizations of a gap year by adopting a more rigorous practice approach: strong structuration, which, as discussed in section 2.3.4, allows also for examining the role of agency and scope for choice and critical reflection. In particular, it explores gap year conventions, or "script", in relation to mobility decisions, and to what extent prospective gap year takers are able to approach this "choice" in a critical, skilled and reflexive manner. The final section of this chapter examines existing in-depth understandings of gap year geography, identifying gaps in research.

#### 2.4.4 Gap year mobility

As outlined in section 2.5.1, long-haul destinations seem to be the most popular choice for gap year travel. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that gap years

may involve visiting several destinations in different parts of the world, as around-the-world multi stop tickets are now available for relatively low prices (O'Reilly 2006). However, the geography of a gap year has not been given much rigorous attention. Surprisingly little is known about gap year mobility, particularly in relation to available choices and constraints for prospective gap year takers. In this way, this thesis provides a unique contribution to existing body of research. Nonetheless, several previous studies provided meaningful observations, which informed the design, execution and analysis undertaken for this work, even if their application in this context was sometimes limited, due to differences in the research focus.

Simpson's PhD thesis and subsequent publications provide the most comprehensive understanding of gap year geography to date, although limited to structured gap year volunteering projects in the Third World, with a particular focus on South America (Simpson, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). The central point of her work were the origins of public imaginations of the gap year and knowledges that gap year takers themselves produced as a result of voluntary work and travel with Quest Overseas organization in Peru. Whilst bringing interesting insights, Simpson's work was limited in its focus on structured volunteering projects in Third World countries and it did not examine other types of gap year activities. As Crawford and Cribb's (2012) research revealed, only around 15% of gap year takers reported engaging in volunteering abroad. Moreover, as both Jones's (2004) and Crawford and Cribb's (2012) reports suggest, several activities, structured and unstructured, UK and overseas, may well be combined within one gap year, many of which may require travel. A further 60% of participants in Crawford and Cribb's (2012) analysis reported to have travelled, and 15% engaged in paid work abroad during their gap year. In order to fully understand gap years and gap year mobility, a comprehensive approach is required, one that is not limited to a single project or endeavor. It is important to explore how different activities relate to one another and how they are combined to form the overall gap year practice. It is also crucial to examine gap year geography beyond the Third World spaces and also styles and acts of mobility more broadly. As evident in ABTA's statistics (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015), many gap year takers also travel to the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, but these experiences tend to escape the scrutiny of gap year researchers.

Whilst other scholars did not dedicate as much attention to the geography of the gap year as Simpson (2004a), some insights, even if at times anecdotal, were also brought from various other empirical accounts. These served as a further sensitizing device during the initial stages of this research and analysis, to help identify the ways in which gap year geography is constructed, and which places and mobility patterns are included, and which excluded, from conventional ways of “doing a gap year”. The remaining of this section summarize existing evidence regarding gap year mobility. Insights are also drawn from broader tourism and backpacking literatures, particularly where gap year-specific evidence was scarce.

Literature suggests that romanticized place-myths inform the popular understandings of gap year taking. Indeed, research in tourism has long suggested that where people travel depends to a large extent on the so-called “tourist gaze”, i.e. the ways in which places are imagined as suitable for tourism consumption (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Even the most unlikely locations can become tourist attractions, such as a nuclear reactor or concrete, high-rise suburbs (Halgreen, 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2004; Sullivan, 2004). In her PhD thesis, Simpson (2004a) examined, among other things, “the discourses that determine places and spaces within which projects can exist” (p. 21). Simplistic constructions of Third World places, with homogenous descriptions of groups of people and cultures, were found in gap year industry materials, rooted in colonial gaze. Simpson (2004a) argued that geographical imaginations influence which places are taken into account by gap year takers:

“Potential destinations depend on the way they are 'imagined' by would-be travellers. Countries such as India with the allure of 'desirable otherness', or regions with reputations for danger and excitement, such as much of South America, have become the central geography of the gap year... Meanwhile, other areas such as Bangladesh, Panama or perhaps Siberia remain on the periphery of both imagination and hence the geography of the gap year.” (p. 59)

More specifically, Simpson (2004a) argued that the industry constructs gap year geography (in the context of Third World volunteering projects) on five broad

simplified notions in their promotion materials. These simplistic imaginations include: geography of experimentation (i.e. the construction of former colonies as places where young people can “practice” being an adult and a professional through engagement in volunteering work, in professional roles unavailable to them in the UK); geography of need (i.e. the perception that Third World communities have needs that can be best met by gap year volunteers); danger (simplistic constructions of Latin America as dangerous; danger is a marketed commodity actively sought by gap year participants); international classroom (the promotion of the value of experiential contact between gap year takers and visited “others” for producing global awareness and knowledge; even if in reality the knowledge produced through such encounters is often descriptive and simplistic rather than critical); and time travel (evoking perceptions of some Third World spaces as being backwards and existing in a “time wrap”, thus reaffirming the need for development engagement) (Simpson, 2004a).

Simpson (2004a) also explored how gap year students themselves responded to such place constructs developed by the gap year industry and how they produced their own geography of the gap year. In their accounts, South America was perceived as an attractive “unknown”, of which they claimed to have known little before arrival, other than having a broad idea of the continent they wished to experience. Such difference and unfamiliarity were important pull factors. Söderman and Snead (2008) also found that the perceptions of Latin America as unknown were part of the motivations expressed by gap year takers. In a broader study of Western long-term budget travellers, Elsrud (2001) found that backpackers sought encounters with novelty and difference to develop adventurous identities. These insights fit to an extent with Simpson’s (2004a) concept of the “geography of danger”. Elsrud (2001) found that the more the visited cultures were perceived as risky, the more valuable they were for backpackers’ identity construction as brave and experienced travellers. Backpackers built narratives of difference from both the savage, frightening “Other” they encountered and from “tourists” alike. Some places existed in travel mythology as particularly dangerous, such as the Thai island Ko Chang being “a hideout area for drug traffickers, “infested” with a severe form of malaria, full of superstitious residents, and the scene of at least four murders of travellers in recent years” (Elsrud, 2001 p. 608). India was also considered a particularly

difficult and risky place to visit. More specifically to gap years, Ansell (2008) examined the role that risk plays in transitions to adulthood through Third World gap year projects and she argued that “the risk is an element which young people are encouraged to draw on in identity construction” (Ansell, 2008, p. 223). There was some evidence to suggest that perceptions of risk (geography or risk) influenced where gap years took place – one gap year provider interviewed in Ansell’s study discussed that it was difficult to market Eastern Europe for British volunteers, as it was not considered “exotic” enough, whilst for those from Australia and New Zealand, those places had more allure. This further suggests the importance of exploring destinations from the perspective of the country of origin, and separating UK gap year takers from the broader international gap year phenomenon. Ansell (2008) found that providers were marketing risk as adventure, whilst also promoting safety of their projects. Altogether, these accounts suggest that the issues of novelty, difference and risk (but also safety) may be important gap year imaginations and that they can at times be linked to visiting specific destinations – this research drew on those insights by examining whether and to what extent such understandings are part of the “terrain for action” for prospective “gappers” at the moment of recruitment to gap year practice, when destinations decisions are made.

In addition, the broad backpacking literature suggests that high degree of mobility and changing geographical locations are one of the key characteristics of this form of travel (O'Regan, 2008). In Huxley’s (2004) study, broadly defined gap year backpackers wanted to see as much as possible, by travelling to many locations. At the same time, this sometimes compromised the authenticity of their experiences, which according to Huxley (2004) was another important motivation for gap year takers. Seeking authenticity normally meant avoiding “tourist traps”, thus supporting Snee’s (2014) observation that being a proper traveller rather than a tourist can be an important aspect of socially shared gap year ideals. Huxley (2004) found also that the quest for authenticity resulted in attempts to immerse themselves with local cultures (for example by living with local families), although this was accomplished with varying success. Whilst Allon (2004) did not examine gap year takers specifically, she argued that Australia has become a hot spot for backpackers partly because of the availability of working visas, which fits with backpackers’ desire for an authentic experience, allowing them to live and

work in one place for an extended period of time, rather than just visit as a tourist. This suggests that the quest for authenticity can impact on which destinations are considered appropriate in a given context, with some places allowing more authentic experiences than others. Backpacking studies also present a complex image of the phenomenon and the blurring of traditional divisions between travel and the everyday in this context, as periods of travel can be interspersed with work, study and residential experiences (Allon, Anderson, & Bushell, 2008; Clarke, 2005). Together, these accounts suggest that both high levels of mobility and dwelling in one location for longer periods of time may be important aspects of the gap year travel practice. These insights sensitized my analysis to the issues of authenticity and mobility, and the extent to which they formed part of the landscape of meanings for prospective “gappers”, including any impacts on destination and mobility “choices”.

Moreover, some students in Simpson’s (2004a) study perceived Australia and South East Asia as boring or passé gap year destinations, and by visiting South America they wanted to distance themselves from other “gappers”. However, others identified South America as the most recent “craze” in the gap year context and its popularity was part of the appeal. This suggests the existence of a certain hierarchy of gap year destinations and changing gap year fashions. In yet another study, broadly defined Western gap year backpackers were found to travel to “hotspots” and enclaves, usually recommended by fellow backpackers and travel guides, bumping into the same people along the way, which provided a relief from boredom, as well as security and safety brought by the company of others, although some opted to avoid other backpackers completely in a search for more authentic encounters with local populations (Huxley, 2004). This research aimed to examine to what extent seeking and/or avoiding the company of others, and following/going against travel fashions, formed part of the gap year “convention” for prospective “gappers” and whether this impacted on which destinations were taken into account.

As demonstrated above, existing accounts of gap year geography and mobility tend to focus mainly on shared discourses and imaginations that inspire and inform gap years. Whilst geographical imaginations and place myths (i.e. “meanings” in structuration theory) attracted substantial, if somewhat patchy, research attention, research is also needed to examine other structural influences

and constraints, as well as issues of competence and skill. Indeed, several studies hint that such practical issues are also important. Allon (2004) in her study of backpacking suggested that financial considerations are crucial for budget travellers – she argued that the decline in the value of the Australian dollar made it an attractive destination. More specifically to gap years, Simpson (2004a) found, for example, that the kinds of activities available in South America, particularly language learning opportunities, were important motivations for gap year takers (Simpson 2004a). Thus, the kinds of opportunities available and “objective” characteristics of a destination are likely to limit the scope for choice, depending on available resources and gap year aspirations. Söderman and Snead (2008) also identified wanting to learn a language as one of the key motivations to visit Latin America. Interestingly, they also observed that “at times it is not so much the destination but the experience as a whole, as well as the time of the year that it occurs, which proves to be the determining factor in deciding an experience” (Söderman & Snead, 2008 p. 126). In particular, one gap year taker they quote initially thought of going to Borneo, but visiting Latin America fitted better with the timescales he/she needed to fundraise money – this example shows that the practical requirements and constraints of the practice may be as important as place imaginations, individual aspirations and perceptions, thus further supporting the relevance of exploring gap year mobility from the social practice perspective. Whilst existing “post-factum” inquiries into the motivations for choosing specific destinations bring interesting insights, it can be argued that former or current students may not be able to fully recall all the factors that influenced their decisions; their perspectives are also likely to be altered by having already participated in the gap year. This study, therefore, aimed to explore to what extent various structural constraints, such as time, cost or specific opportunities available, impacted on gap year destinations and mobility choices as they emerged prior to the gap year itself. At the same time, the concept of a “travel career ladder” developed by Pearce (1988) suggests that as tourists/travellers accumulate experience and competence, their travel motivations and preferences may change. In the context of backpacking, it was found that as travel experience increases, backpackers are likely to visit more exotic and distant places (Richards & Wilson, 2004). It was expected that travel experience and competence would vary between individual students and thus

attention was paid to how, and to what extent, such differences impacted on mobility choices. Travel competence and taste can be conceptualized in light of structuration theory as part of the habitus, and therefore the focus of this study was not only to outline the structural “context” of gap year mobility, but also how students actively combined their understanding of this context with their transposable skills and dispositions (habitus).

Overall, existing literature provided interesting, if somewhat patchy, insights into gap year mobility and helped to identify some of the potential meanings, norms and resources that may influence gap year travel patterns (including imaginations of risk, novelty, authenticity, mobility, difference and issues of time, cost, competence/skill and access to specific opportunities). However, as demonstrated, important gaps remain to be addressed. The next chapter moves on to outline the focus of this research in relation to those research gaps and describe the methodological approach adopted in this thesis.

## **2.5 Conclusions**

In light of the limitations of psychological models of behaviour discussed in section 2.2 of this chapter, this thesis aims to provide an in-depth and socially situated understanding of long-haul flying. In particular, structuration theory, outlined in section 2.3, was adopted as a theoretical framework to shed a new light on unsustainable travel patterns. This approach allowed for examining the collective character of long-haul mobility, including existing social conventions, normative expectations and resources that constrain and enable possibilities for action, whilst at the same time acknowledging the skilled, active and knowledgeable character of agents. According to structuration theory, agents are not simply subjects to structural constraints, but are actively involved in (re)producing and (re)shaping those structures through participating in practices.

It is important to reiterate that the theoretical concepts derived from structuration theory are used here merely as a vocabulary, employed to assist the understanding and interpretation of the social world. Following Reckwitz (2002 p. 257), the role of social theories as vocabularies is to enable us to make some types of empirical statements (whilst excluding others). Thus, there are epistemological limitations to the kinds of knowledge that can be generated on the basis of structuration theory and the types of questions it can practically

address. As Stones (2005) argued, structuration theory is best suited to study meso-level phenomena, rather than macro historical and socio-structural forces. Due to the theory's emphasis on complex interrelations between external structures and active agency, „structuration studies will typically lean towards the deft and careful brush strokes of an artist intent on capturing the details of her subject” (Stones, 2005 p. 127). These requirements of detail and depth limit the scope of empirical application of this theory.

In line with these epistemological considerations, the focus of this research was narrowed down to an in-depth exploration of one specific social practice: post-school gap year travel, which is an increasingly popular phenomenon in the UK. As outlined in section 2.4, gap years tend to involve travel to long-haul destinations and have become institutionalized as a widely accepted rite of passage for young Brits. This research adopted the structuration theory to examine the interplay of agency and structure in relation to gap year mobility, identifying social rules and resources that shape its current long-haul character, as well as the role and limits of active agency in making destination and other travel decisions. The next chapter outlines the focus of this research in more detail, including the specific aim and objectives, and provides an account of the methodological approach which was developed to address them.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research focus and definitions**

This chapter aims to provide a detailed description of my methodological approach and guide the reader through factors influencing all the major methodological decisions. Before doing so, however, it is important to outline the focus of this research, including a precise definition of the object of inquiry. To reiterate, the primary aim of this thesis is to provide an in-depth and socially situated understanding of long-haul flying within the context of gap year travel, in order to advance strategies towards reducing aviation emissions. The specific research objectives were formulated in relation to this overall aim and on the basis of identified gaps in existing literature (see the previous chapter), as well as theoretical and methodological considerations, which are summarized below.

Adopting a social practice perspective to the study of gap years posed a number of challenges. One of the first issues to address was that of definition and boundaries of the gap year concept itself: in other words, to what extent different performances, which are never identical, can be seen as constituting a single practice? For example, can a gap year volunteering project in Nicaragua taken by an 18 year old and organized by a commercial company be meaningfully compared to a career break spent backpacking independently, without a fixed itinerary, around Australia and Southeast Asia? Previous in-depth accounts of gap years often focused on examining one or another form of activity, typically exploring either structured projects or those forms of gap years that can be seen as a subset of independent backpacking, not always making a distinction between travellers of different ages and nationalities. It has been suggested that rather than arriving at final definitions, practices should be viewed as provisional, but recognizable entities, defined depending on underlying research questions (SPRG, 2012). Thus, due to the focus of this thesis on air travel, a broad conceptualization of the gap year was adopted, without imposing any restrictions regarding the types of gap year experience. As outlined in the previous chapter, there are a number of activities that people can engage in on their gap years, which can be combined in various configurations, many requiring some form of travel. For example, people may fly to participate in work placements, language training, volunteering, paid work or simply to “travel for travel’s sake”. Thus, all gap year activities were of interest for this research. However, the focus of this

thesis was narrowed down to gap years taken after Year 13 of UK education, usually by 18 year olds, which are sometimes referred to as the original or most common form of gap years and have distinctive characteristics to those undertaken at other points in life (Simpson, 2004a; Bagnoli, 2009). It was beyond the scope of this study to examine career breaks, “golden gap years” or time out taken during or post-university, even though it is likely that many similarities exist between them, including patterns of mobility. Finally, whilst Crawford and Cribb (2012) referred to both planned and unplanned time out as a gap year (albeit recognizing their distinctive character), this thesis focuses solely on planned gap years. The experiences of those who drift into their gap years without having planned it, for example students staying on for another year in college to retake exams if they receive unsatisfactory results, were not examined. As Crawford and Cribb (2012) observed, the vast majority of gap years are planned and it is those who plan their gap years in advance and take it deliberately that are more likely to engage in travel, which is the main object of interest of this thesis. Therefore, whilst this study was limited by excluding the experiences of those taking unplanned gap years, this decision was justified as representing not only the most common form of gap year, but also most relevant to the travel and sustainability angle of this thesis.

It is also crucial to note that gap years are not a routine practice, performed over and over again by the same practitioners. This is by contrast to many everyday, domestic practices, which have so far been the main focus of research informed by social practice theory, such as everyday showering, commuting or eating. Gap years lie on the other end of the spectrum – they are often seen as “once-in-a-lifetime” experiences. As such, they differ also from frequent flying practices examined by Randles and Mander (2009), undertaken to participate in occasions, which, whilst not exactly “routine”, may occur fairly regularly (for example birthdays or stag parties abroad). The existence of the gap year practice lies in its ability to continuously recruit new cohorts of practitioners, rather than relying on a group of faithful and committed “carriers”. Therefore, the focus of this research was on the planning and organizing stage, centred around recruitment to the gap year practice, i.e. “how do individuals initially encounter practices and then become their carriers?” (Shove et al., 2012 p. 63). This involved considering how people learn about the practice and who is involved in teaching them (SPRG,

2012 p. 7). The focus of this thesis meant that this stage was of key importance, as air travel and many other mobility decisions (at least the rough, initial plans) need to be taken prior to the gap year itself. Tickets must be booked and more-or-less detailed arrangements made, before gap year travel is actually undertaken<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, it was important not to overestimate the hold that external structures have on the prospective “carriers” of the gap year practice and to analyze the extent to which agents are free to choose. This was to maintain the structuration’s theory focus on the skilled and reflexive nature of agents and the possibilities for choice that may exist between different forms of gap year. As Stones (2005) argued, agents’ knowledgeable ability can be placed on a continuum in relation to various practices. Whilst routine tasks are likely to have a taken-for-granted character, one-off events, such as gap years, may involve a degree of reflection and critical distance and result in creative responses to existing conventions. Moreover, more than one course of action may have systemic legitimacy in the gap year context, thus choice may sometimes not only be possible, but also necessary. Whilst statistics suggest that long-haul destinations are the most popular form of gap year travel, it was important to remain open to the existence of more sustainable forms of the experience, and how available choices are perceived by practitioners themselves. Accounting for the role of the agent also stemmed from acknowledging that access to various activities may not be equal for all, and not all may be equally free to choose among alternative possibilities. These issues are of relevance for examining the trajectory of the gap year practice-as-entity, as practices are always open to change as new cohorts of practitioners adapt, improvise and experiment.

Together, these considerations helped to develop the specific objectives of this research in relation to the overall aim outlined earlier, and to existing literature. As a result, the following objectives were developed:

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<sup>3</sup> As such, the major limitation of this study was not examining what happens during the gap year itself and to what extent participating students were able to fulfill all their gap year plans and arrangements. It is possible that these were prone to unexpected changes and alterations during the gap year itself. Nonetheless, this approach allowed insight into the kinds of meanings, norms and resources that form part of the terrain for action for prospective “gappers” at the planning stage, when they decide whether to take a gap year or not and make initial arrangements.

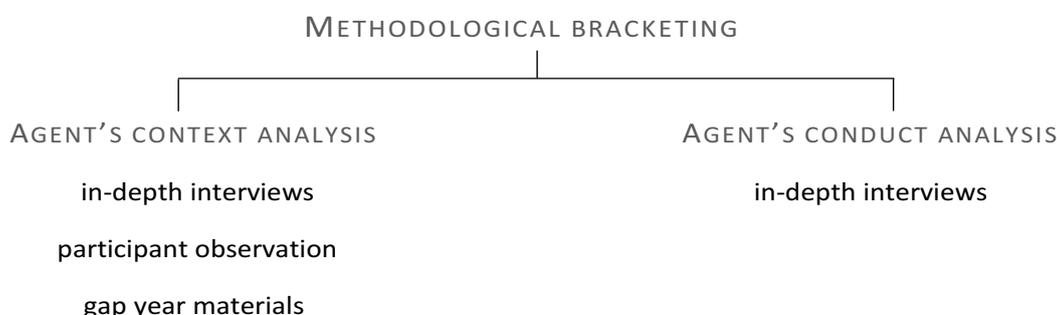
- 1) To describe the gap year as a form of social practice, identifying social meanings and norms surrounding this phenomenon, as well as various resources that prospective “gappers” draw upon at the moment of recruitment.
- 2) In particular, to explore the ways in which these meanings, norms and resources influence conventions regarding gap year mobility, including factors facilitating travel to long-haul destinations as a normal way of “doing a gap year”.
- 3) To examine the role of agency and its limits, particularly in relation to the issues of mobility choices and access to gap year participation.

The research design and other methodological decisions were always made primarily in relation to these objectives and are examined in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### **3.2 Research design**

Researching social practices has long been recognized as challenging from a methodological point of view, as there is no “well-defined package of research designs and no ready-made repertoire of methodological tools ready and waiting for the practice-based researcher to pick up and deploy” (SPRG, 2012 p. 3). One of the strengths of strong structuration lies in its engagement with methodology, which informed the design of this research. Whilst Anthony Giddens was preoccupied with the ontology of structuration, Stones (2005) developed the epistemological and methodological issues to a greater extent, perfecting the two forms of “methodological bracketing” identified by Giddens, which are essential “to release the substantive potential of structuration theory” (p. 123). This potential lies in the theory’s emphasis on the skilled and active character of agents, whilst acknowledging the existence of external social pressures that constrain/enable agency in performing social practices. As Stones (2005) argued, however, Giddens’s own conceptualization of bracketing missed some important facets of the theory of structuration. In particular, by contrast to Stones’s “agent’s context analysis” Giddens proposed “institutional analysis”, which, as Stones argues, was flawed in its treatment of institutions as chronically reproduced rules and resources. Institutional analysis did not recognize the need to examine the role of other actors and their conduct, as they are actively involved in shaping the terrain for action for practitioners (Stones, 2005, p. 123). Stones therefore

suggests instead the use of his “agent’s context analysis” to complement Giddens’s original “agent’s conduct analysis”, which allows for treating the context of action itself as more dynamic than in the original formulation. The research design adopted in this thesis was primarily based on these two forms of methodological bracketing, and further developed and refined on the basis of three interrelated considerations: theoretical, methodological and ethical (Cheek, 2008). The remaining of this section outlines the research design that emerged as a result of these considerations (Figure 3). The details of sampling, methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the issues of ethics, are purposefully omitted here and discussed separately in other sections of this chapter.



**Figure 3:** *Methodological bracketing and corresponding methods of data collection: a conceptual diagram [Source: author].*

### 3.2.1 Agent’s context analysis

Addressing the first two objectives of this thesis, i.e. describing the gap year as a social practice, with a particular focus on gap year mobility, involved mainly “agent’s context analysis” (Stones, 2005). This form of methodological bracketing served to “analyse the terrain that faces an agent, the terrain that constitutes the range of possibilities and limits to the possible” (Stones, 2005, p. 122). As such, individual agency and reflexivity in relation to gap year and mobility choices were “bracketed out” in order to analyze external structures (norms, meanings and resources) that constrain and enable gap year decisions (see Figure 2). It needs to be stressed, however, that this type of analysis does not simply view those rules and resources as chronically reproduced and static:

“It doesn’t assume the institutional properties of the settings of interaction to be methodologically ‘given’. It treats the immediate

meso-relational configuration of institutional position-practices as significant objects of investigation. In doing so it also recognizes the need to investigate ‘the skills and awareness of actors within this institutional context of action’” (Stones 2005, p. 123).

Therefore, agent’s context analysis might also involve elements of conduct analysis of networked others (see the next section). In this thesis, agent’s context analysis was employed to investigate the collective character of the gap year, building on previous observations that long-haul destinations are the most popular for this type of travel (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015); that there is a socially shared “script” for gap years that some young people adopt largely unreflexively (Snee, 2014); and that this script may in some cases include imaginations of appropriate “gap year geography” (Simpson, 2004a). The first two objectives aimed to advance existing understandings of the collective nature of the gap year, and mobility choices in particular, beyond shared imaginations and meanings, to include also normative sanctions and rewards, as well as various “resources”, including infrastructures and institutional arrangements; and to identify relevant networked others and their position practices influential in shaping the “context” for prospective gap year takers. The aim was also to broaden Simpson’s (2004a) understandings of “gap year geography” to incorporate other activities and locations, beyond structured volunteering in Third World countries. The results of agent’s context analysis are presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Data collection began with in-depth interviews with a group of final-year college students to explore how their decisions emerged during the year leading up to their gap years. This strategy was based on previous evidence from a longitudinal study in England, which showed that the majority of gap year takers expressed an intention to take a gap year a year in advance (Crawford and Cribb, 2012). Exploring students’ understandings of the “terrain for action” they faced (i.e. their conjuncture-specific internal structures), led me “outwards”, in Stones’s (2005) terms, to the external meanings, norms and resources that together shape the conventional ways of “doing a gap year”, and the possibilities and limits of action. Researching practices required tapping into the knowledge and understandings that are often taken-for-granted, but as Hitchings (2012) suggests, people can meaningfully discuss even the most mundane practices if prompted with the right questions. Therefore, interviews were considered to be a

useful method of data collection, to get insight into students' own perspectives on available choices and through this identify the external "terrain for action". Interviews have also been successfully mobilized by previous research, alongside other qualitative methods, to account for the moment of recruitment to practices (Truninger, 2011; Shove & Pantzar, 2007). More details on interview techniques and approaches to analysis can be found in sections 3.5.1 and 3.6.1.

Further research methods employed during this stage developed organically on the basis of unfolding insights as I began to make sense of the rules and resources shaping the context of action for prospective "gappers". It soon became apparent that the gap year is not a practice over which any one set of agents has absolute control, and that numerous actors were involved in (re)producing norms and meanings and enabling/constraining choices through the provision of resources. Moreover, recruitment to the gap year practice, rather than being a one-off decision or event, occurred over time and in a spatially dispersed manner. Thus, understanding the dynamics of the "terrain for action" that prospective "gappers" faced involved engagement with different actors and sites. The approach was to follow the connections and relationships identified through interviews across different spatial sites.

Indeed, social practice theories highlight the spatially dispersed nature of social practices. They are carried out by different agents, at different locations and different points of time, but nonetheless are characterized by shared understandings, know-how, resources, normative expectations etc. This thesis aimed to account for the spatially dispersed and dynamic character of the external structures, i.e. meanings, norms and resources, as shaped at different sites by various networked others and their position practices. Examining the dispersed meanings, norms, and resources, and various sites at which they were developed, required being similarly mobile. Methods of data collection involved participant observation at events where gap year information was being communicated and distributed, and travel skills shared; in-depth interviews with relevant agents, influential in shaping the gap year norms, meanings and providing resources; as well as the analysis of gap year information and promotion materials, including leaflets, brochures and various relevant websites. Again, details regarding these techniques can be found in dedicated sections of this chapter. Mixed qualitative methodologies have been successfully applied in

previous research exploring recruitment to new social practices, including participant observation, interviews and analysis of secondary material (Truningen, 2011; Shove & Pantzar, 2007).

By contrast to Truningen's (2011) study, where recruitment to cooking with Bimby (a food-processor) occurred at a demonstration event, it became clear during the research process that recruitment to a gap year practice occurs over time in an erratic, non-continuous way. Participants were informed and inspired by brief experiences of talks, gap year fairs, information found in leaflets, their previous travel, or conversations with tutors, family members or other relevant actors. Thus, the ethnographic technique of participant observation was adopted in a non-continuous manner and spread over an extended period of time, rather than conducting traditional ethnography which involves a long-term immersion in the community (Fetterman, 2008). More details on participant observation can be found in sections 3.5.2 and 3.6.2. Whilst I did not spend long periods of time at any of the sites (many of which had a temporal nature, for example a day-long gap year fair), this was exactly how prospective "gappers" themselves experienced that terrain for action. This also resulted in a heavy reliance on interviewing and analysis of gap year materials in data collection and analysis.

### 3.2.2 Agent's conduct analysis

The agent's context analysis was then complemented by the second form of methodological bracketing, namely "agent's conduct analysis". In particular, this methodological approach was employed to address the third research objective, i.e. accounting for the role of active agency in gap year taking, identifying variations between individual gap year performances and the scope for mobility choices, as well as issues of access to participation. The need for such analysis emerged from the way in which agency is conceptualized by practice theorists - agents are not simply carriers of social practices, but are at times capable of critical reflection, innovation and choice. Structures are not only constraining, but also enabling, and choice is often mandatory, when more than one course of action is possible (Stones, 2005). Thus, this form of methodological bracketing "draws upon the ontology category of knowledgeability (as part of an agent's internal structures) in a way that leads us back to the agent herself, her reflexive monitoring, her ordering of concerns into a hierarchy of purposes, her motives, her desires, and the way she carries out the work of action and interaction within

an unfolding sequence” (Stones, 2005 p. 122). It is a process of negotiation and reconciliation of general dispositions with the specific context of action (e.g. of general attitudes towards the environment, or transposable travel skills and competence, with the gap year practice at hand), which can lead to the (re)structuring of the practice-as-entity over time. This form of analysis is also in line with prior observations that gap year takers, whilst often following a “script” for action, are at times capable of critical reflection (e.g. Snee, 2014). However, it needs to be stressed that the concept of general dispositions differs from an individualistic focus on “lifestyles” or value systems, as it is recognized that there can be multiple dispositions within the agent, often contradictory, and that they are not static, but shaped by participation in past and present practices in which agents take various subject-positions. Here, the primary method of data collection involved in-depth interviews with prospective gap year takers, this time exploring participants’ travel skills and past travel experiences and their impact on gap year planning; individual aspirations, desires, concerns and constraints; as well as general dispositions towards air travel emissions and their influence on gap year mobility choices. Results of this analysis are presented in Chapter 6.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, elements of conduct analysis were also employed as part of the context analysis to address the first two research objectives, as the terrain for action involved also many network agents and their position-practices. Following Stones (2005), the “context” was therefore not simply seen as static and chronically reproduced meanings, norms and resources, but as actively shaped by position-practices of various networked others, which themselves became the object of inquiry. In-depth interviews with relevant others allowed to tap into the individual perceptions and views of relevant agents forming the “terrain for action”.

### **3.3 Sampling**

Participating students were recruited in one of the state colleges in the South-West of England in November 2012. Most of the recruitment took place face-to-face, in the classrooms, where with lecturers’ consent I provided a brief summary of my research, distributed consent and information sheets, as well as a short questionnaire inquiring into students’ post-school plans (all documents are included in the Appendices). Students were encouraged to participate by getting a possibility to gain a first-hand experience of the research process and a chance

to learn about doing a PhD, careers in academia and higher education more broadly. Moreover, they were informed that a prize-draw would be organized at the end of the research period, with an opportunity to win one of the two £250 Amazon vouchers, as an additional incentive to participate. Questionnaires were distributed in the classrooms to gather contact details from those interested in participating in the study, as well as to help with the selection process, where the main emphasis was placed on recruiting students who stated that they were likely or very likely to go on a gap year (although several young people who had other plans or were still undecided were also recruited to help identify potential constraints and barriers to participation). Selected students were then contacted and arrangements made for in-depth interviews. Efforts were made to maintain contact via e-mail with participants until their graduation from college, although this was met with varied success, as I lost touch with a few students towards the end of the research process. This could have been due to the workload demands of the final year of college and perhaps potential benefits of participation were not a sufficient incentive to keep them engaged with the study for a prolonged period of time. Five of the A2-level students were interviewed twice to account for changes and developments in their gap year plans as reported via e-mails. In addition, as during initial interviews several students recalled having already planned to take a gap year in the first year of college, a second wave of recruitment was carried out among first year college students. Overall, 18 AS and A2-level students took part in the study.

Further sampling for interviews and other methods of data collection (which included participant observation and the use of secondary gap year materials) was conducted throughout the research period. "Making the cut" was carried out on the basis of the economic term "satisficing", which was borrowed by Falzon (2009) from Herbert A. Simon (p. 11). A satisficing approach: "strikes a compromise between a grand holistic ambition (in our case, maximizing to study the whole 'system') and a nonchalant way of 'making the cut'. It requires cut to be good enough, or, in Simon's terms, satisficing." The number and type of visited sites, interviewed agents and materials collected for analysis emerged as a result of unfolding insights, existing literature, theoretical and methodological considerations, as well as practical issues of access and resources. As such, this research unavoidably had its self-imposed limits and should be seen accordingly,

rather than as a holistic account of recruitment to the gap year practice. The sampling process was facilitated by recommendations by existing participants, through the process of “chaining” (Firmin, 2008). I advanced from person to person, from one event to another, and from ideas emerging from secondary gap year materials, thus gaining insight into various aspects of the gap year phenomenon.

In particular, the initial interviews with students recruited in the classrooms led to contacts with other young people in the process of gap year planning (all attended the same college), as well as to identifying groups of relevant networked others important in their decision making, for example through communicating norms and meanings, developing skills, and providing resources; some of these actors were then interviewed to allow greater insight into their positions towards gap year taking and their role in shaping the “terrain for action” for prospective “gappers”. Overall, 10 “networked others” were interviewed, including College staff, representatives of gap year organizations, and members of staff at one of the universities (see Appendix 8 for a full and more detailed list of participants).

Interviews with students and relevant others also helped to identify the sites where recruitment to gap years took place; I got access to and carried out participant observation at six such sites (see Appendix 9). However, this is by no means an exhaustive list of the types of sites at which recruitment to gap years took place and where prospective “gappers” encountered and learnt about gap year norms, meanings and resources. It became apparent through interviews with students that the process of recruitment is not limited to the final year of college or formal, dedicated events such as gap year fairs and talks, where the participant observation took place. Some participants claimed that they “always” wanted to do a gap year, with their decisions taking shape a long time in advance of this study, often as a result of unplanned events and encounters. For example, some were inspired by a school trip they took part in, which helped develop travel skills and confidence or provided specific destination ideas; or were informed by an informal chat with a personal tutor or a family member, or by watching a TV programme. Gap year decisions emerged in an erratic manner, through encounters and conversations with various, dispersed others at numerous sites. Thus, the visited sites, which had a more formal and purposeful character, provided only a partial glimpse into the sites where prospective “gappers” can

learn about the right ways of “doing a gap year” and gain necessary skills and knowledge to do so. Initial plans regarding research design involved developing a closer relationship with prospective gap year takers and a greater reliance on participant observation to gain first-hand insight into some of the less-formal aspects of that terrain for action. However, this was not possible due to the issues of access and College restrictions discussed in section 3.3. Therefore, the study ended up relying heavily on students’ own accounts of their decision-making through in-depth interviews and accounts provided by networked others. Nonetheless, it was possible to access some of the more immediate, relevant sites where gap year imaginations were shaped and resources provided.

Visiting the sites and interviewing resulted also in identifying gap year information and promotion materials which (re)produced the conventional ways of “doing a gap year” and provided information and resources for prospective “gappers”. These brochures, leaflets and websites were the third and final method of data collection (Appendix 10 contains a full list of brochures and leaflets).

### **3.4 Access**

The College in the South-West of England where the fieldwork commenced was accessed through a gatekeeper, John<sup>4</sup>, one of the College lecturers and a head of Geography department. Initially, I planned to recruit students from both state and independent sectors, however despite numerous attempts I did not manage to establish connections in any of the independent schools I approached. One possible explanation for this was the subsequent finding that some schools, which participants knew of/attended in the past, did not recommend gap years to their students, preferring their graduates to go to university without delays (see section 4.5.2 of this thesis). It is possible that schools that did not respond to my inquiries were among those with a more reluctant attitude towards gap year taking, and this should be taken into account when reflecting on the findings of this study, particularly in relation to the amount of formal support available for prospective “gappers” at schools and colleges, which is likely to vary.

John was keen for his students to take part in this research and proved to be very helpful throughout the research process. He served as an intermediary in discussions with the College administration to ensure that the proposed

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<sup>4</sup> John is a pseudonym, as all participant names provided in this thesis.

research design meets their health and safety criteria and other regulations. As a result of these discussions, I had to re-model my initial research design – the ideas of adopting a more “immersive” approach were dropped in favour of a heavier reliance on interviews and gap year materials, because continuous access to the College grounds and informal chats with students turned out to be impossible to carry out without supervision. Similarly, participant observation of students’ Facebook accounts, which was initially planned, was excluded on safety grounds. I also had to complete the criminal records check procedure (CRB), which resulted in a slight delay in commencing the research process (interview recruitment began in November, rather than October). Once the necessary formal and administrative procedures were completed, cooperation with the College continued without further delays, and John remained a useful contact throughout. He enabled recruitment of students in his department<sup>5</sup>, agreed to participate in an interview, introduced me to several other relevant members of staff and alerted me to gap year-related events taking place in the College.

Accessing other sites for participant observation and establishing contacts for further interviews relied on contacting other relevant gatekeepers (who were sometimes participants themselves). As with any research adopting such a strategy, this resulted in many dead-ends and failed attempts at generating contacts and accessing relevant sites, but nonetheless the resulting sample generated a “patchwork of rich data” (Firmin, 2008).

### **3.5 Methods of data collection**

#### **3.5.1 In-depth interviews**

The primary method of data collection were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students and other relevant networked actors. Overall, 33 interviews were conducted (23 of which were with 18 participating students, as five students were interviewed twice). Most interviews took place in coffee shops, several in participants’ offices and one at a careers event; all were audio-recorded with participants’ consent, although in one instance a recorder broke during the interview and the remaining conversation was noted down from memory.

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<sup>5</sup> As such, the sampling was heavily skewed towards, though not limited to, young people taking Geography A-levels.

Interviews were guided by loose themes developed around core objects of interest, rather than following a structured set of questions (see Appendices 6 and 7 for lists of themes/question types). Participants were able to take the interview in new directions and I followed relevant threads by asking additional questions to further probe information which was considered useful to the analysis (Cook, 2008). As such, initial data analysis was carried out during the process of interviews themselves, guiding the direction in which they developed. Audio-recording assisted this process, allowing me to think creatively while the interviews were taking place, without being distracted by note-taking (Firmin, 2008). All interviews were conducted in a conversational manner in order to establish a better rapport with participants. As such, my approach involved interspersing interview questions with informal, easy-going chat (Spradley, 1979).

Interview themes were generated in relation to the specific objectives. Those aspects of interviews with students which were to inform the “agent’s context analysis”, i.e. to identify external structural “terrain for action”, revolved around inquiring into perceived gap year meanings, norms and resources and identifying relevant agents and sites where they were (re)produced. Interviews with other agents focused on the interrelations between their professional or other social roles and gap year taking, and their interactions with prospective “gappers”. Efforts were made to elicit the taken-for-granted assumptions and conventions by probing “matter-of-fact” statements with additional questions.

The second methodological bracketing, “agent’s conduct analysis”, i.e. focusing on individual reflexivity, transposable skills and dispositions, resulted in developing additional interview themes. Here, students were questioned about their travel skills and past travel experiences; broader aspirations and plans for the future; as well as any environmental concerns regarding aviation emissions resulting from air travel. Interviews with relevant others focused on their personal attitudes towards gap years and reasons for engagement in promoting various gap year meanings and norms or providing resources (where relevant).

In addition, an alternative approach to interviews was piloted with two of the prospective gap year takers who were interviewed for the second time, to encourage them to elaborate on their plans and inspirations and to identify further relevant Internet resources. For this purpose, I asked participants to use my

laptop to guide me through the websites that they found useful in their planning and the kinds of Internet searches they would normally carry out. This strategy brought some interesting results, but due to the limited number of second interviews was not adopted on a larger scale.

### 3.5.2 Participant observation

Whilst in-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection adopted in this thesis, I also carried out participant observation at six field sites. They included a gap year fair; a fresher's day at the College; a gap year talk at the College; a career's event for Year 9 students; a Christian youth festival; and a series of talks organized for prospective travellers in a high street office of one of the travel providers, which was popular among gap year takers (see Appendix 9 for more details). Participant observation served to observe these events in their natural context and gain a deep, first-hand understanding of some aspects of the "terrain for action" faced by prospective gap year takers. As such, participant observation involved a variety of methods, including observation of the behaviour of visitors and representatives of various organizations participating in the events; observation of the physical features of the settings; informal interviewing of relevant actors and subsequent analysis of leaflets and brochures distributed at these events (McKechnie, 2008). Informal interviews were used to discover how people conceptualized their culture and to organize it into categories (McKechnie, 2008), but also to identify further actors for interviewing and new fieldwork sites.

In the majority of cases, encounters between gap year representatives and participants were brief – most visitors simply gathered brochures and leaflets, or listened to the talks and left, with some asking brief questions of stall holders or those delivering talks. Very few engaged in lengthier discussions or interactions. As such, the field experience involved mainly collecting brochures and leaflets, note-taking during talks delivered to groups of prospective travellers and observing the (often limited) interactions between visitors/audiences and hosts. I also carried out informal interviews with stall holders and those delivering talks whenever possible, to inquire into their experiences of working for a given organization and their perspectives on gap years and gap year mobility.

Participant observation involved taking field notes on the spot to record information gathered by senses, including observations of the surroundings,

behaviour of visitors and “hosts” and relevant excerpts from informal interviews. I also generated memos, which involved initial impressions and ideas for analysis (Firmin, 2008). The often busy and hectic nature of the sites meant that it was not always possible to take notes immediately, thus I often retired to a quieter spot for the purpose of note taking. I assumed an overt role when interacting with members of the public and representatives of various organizations and institutions present at the events and sites, explaining the details of my research and leaving contact information for those interested in remaining in touch. On one occasion, this led to a subsequent e-mail exchange with one of the gap year representatives, who wanted to clarify the views he previously expressed in an informal interview. Excerpts from this e-mail were also employed in the analysis and writing, with his permission.

### 3.5.3 Gap year materials

Participant observation at various events resulted in gathering a substantial amount of gap year materials. Many of the visited sites relied heavily on distribution of leaflets and brochures at the stalls and for many visitors interactions with stall holders were minimal, reduced mainly to collecting available materials for later reading. Some of the interviewed students recalled using such materials gathered at various events and on various occasions, regardless of whether they were considering taking part in advertised projects – some used them simply for information and to help with planning an independent gap year. As such, gap year information and promotion brochures and leaflets were an important part of data collection for the agent’s context analysis, providing an insight into official instructions on how to do a gap year, including communicated understandings and norms relating to gap year mobility, as well as providing resources in the form of information, knowledge and practical tips on how to go about organizing various experiences. When collecting relevant materials, I always assumed an overt role and asked permission, explaining that the materials will be used for the research purpose. Overall, 100 individual brochures and leaflets were collected at all events (any duplicates were excluded).

In addition, participants often mentioned the Internet as a useful resource and recalled doing random web searches when looking for information. In those instances, I asked for links to specific addresses and resources they used, which several students wrote down from memory or sent via e-mail after the interviews

- these relevant websites were also analyzed. In some instances, participants were not able to recall the exact resources they used, instead providing details of the kinds of searches they carried out. Additional websites were generated from the two interviews, where I piloted using a laptop to gain insight into students' use of Internet resources (see section 3.4.1 for more detail). In addition, I also conducted my own Internet searches throughout the research period regarding the opportunities and organizations mentioned by interviewees, or specific themes emerging from the data. For example, to follow up interview leads about the role of universities in shaping the "terrain for action" for prospective gap year takers, I looked into the kinds of information available on universities' websites regarding their attitudes towards gap year taking and deferred entry. All these Internet materials were included in the analysis.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

A range of analytical methods have been adopted in this research. Agent's context analysis was informed by all three data sources discussed in the previous sections. These were compared to one another for consistency in identifying social norms, meanings and resources, and to search for any discrepancies. As such, the emphasis was on identifying patterns of thought and action displayed by various players (Fetterman, 2008 p. 291), as well as to distinguish the widely shared gap year understandings and conventions from individual variations of the experience. These individual performances were, in turn, the object of interest of agent's conduct analysis, which relied solely on interview data.

#### **3.6.1 Interview transcripts**

The preliminary analysis of interview data began during the interviews themselves (Roulston, 2014). The immediate interpreting of participants' answers guided the process of asking further questions and probing in search of relevant information. Then, in order to prepare collected data for further analysis, recorded interviews were transcribed. The analysis was carried out following the three analytical phases identified by Roulston (2014): data reduction, data reorganization and data representation.

The first stage involved reducing the vast amount of textual data into categories in order to distill and interpret its meaning. Repeated readings of recorded transcripts resulted in reducing the empirical material into categories

(Benaquisto, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Roulston, 2014). This allowed for trimming the amount of material, focusing on selected aspects relevant to the aim and objectives of this research. Initial categories were generated on the basis of existing literature and guided by structuration theory, whilst I made sure to remain open to what was in the data. I kept notes on new ideas and stayed alert to new possible concepts, patterns and themes (Benaquisto, 2008; Roulston, 2014). Agent's context analysis, which was carried out to address the first two research objectives, focused on identifying structural features of talk, and similarities between participants' narratives. These included meanings, norms and resources, which form part of the external structural terrain for action. Whilst individual understanding of such structures differed, it was nonetheless possible to identify the relatively stable, enduring characteristics of the gap year practice. "Meanings" were identified as those aspects of text (transcribed interviews, field journal or secondary materials) that described some form of shared understandings of the nature of the gap year experience, and which were to a greater-or-lesser degree consistent across analyzed material. The emphasis was placed on unifying characteristics rather than degrees of difference in performances of the gap year - these were temporarily "bracketed out" and explored separately through agent's conduct analysis. "Norms" were identified as shared understandings of rewards and/or sanctions to occur as a result of participating in gap years. Finally, "resources" included power over material and non-material resources available to students at the moment of recruitment to the gap year practice, on which they could draw upon to produce action. Agent's conduct analysis, on the other hand, paid attention to instances of critical reflection to, and differences in agents' understandings of, the external structural context, including any instances of innovation, degrees of choice available to different agents, contestations of dominant frames of meaning, outlining the influence of individual habitus/ dispositions on agents' behaviour and perspectives, as well as relationships with other practices from which transposable skills or understandings were "borrowed". Here, the emphasis was placed on the internal variations of the practice-as-performance to identify the dynamic character of the practice-as-entity and its possible future trajectories. Whilst reducing empirical material into categories invariably lead to the loss of

some information, it also allowed me to get a sense of how collected data related and compared to one another.

The second stage, data reorganization, involved reassessing and reorganizing the codes and categories, thus modifying the coding frame. This iterative process was informed by emerging findings, reading, reflection, writing, rereading and making links between categories, which allowed me to begin to develop assertions regarding research objectives (Roulston, 2014). As such, coding was a dynamic and non-linear process. After repeated reviewing and coding of the data, a more refined and focused coding frame emerged, with more solidified codes and relationships (Benaquisto, 2008). I also adopted a strategy to search for exceptional cases that could disprove the findings, in an attempt to limit the impact of my preconceptions on the analysis (Roulston, 2014).

Finally, assertions and propositions developed during the first two stages of analysis were considered in light of prior research and theory to develop arguments (Roulston, 2014). Data was organized into themes, which were supported by quotations from interview transcripts. Excerpts from transcriptions used in this thesis have been edited for clarity, removing word repetitions and some of the utterances such as “um” and “like” (Roulston, 2014). Word omissions are inserted in square brackets for clarity and non-verbal behaviours and action are described in regular brackets, e.g. (laughter).

### 3.6.2 Field diary

Descriptions included in the field diary (including observations of human interactions, field settings etc.) were in themselves “analytic”, as it is impossible to make a sharp distinction between observation and analysis. As Marvasti (2014) argued, “there is no such thing as ‘raw data’” (p. 359). What was included and excluded from the notes reflected my theoretical and conceptual orientation and thus the process of observation occurred in conjunction with analysis.

Further analysis occurred in the process of writing, which helped to clarify and organize my thoughts and sort out ideas and relationships (Fetterman, 2008). In line with approaches adopted to interview analysis and the analysis of gap year materials, analyzing observations was an inductive process (Marvasti, 2014), aimed at moving from specific observations to generating concrete findings. This process was guided by structuration theory, existing literature and informed by

insights from all three data sources. Meanings, norms and resources were identified in the same manner as with interviews – i.e. paying attention to broadly shared understandings, rather than fine details and degrees of difference. Effort was made to remain open to alternative interpretations of observed events and avoiding imposing theoretical concepts onto the findings (Marvasti, 2014).

### 3.6.3 Gap year materials

The textual, but at times also visual and audio-visual content of gap year materials was analyzed following an inductive and iterative process similar to the one adopted to the analysis of interviews and observations. The analysis centered on both direct and indirect instructions for gap year taking communicated to potential “gappers”, dominant understandings and meanings included in those materials, as well as practical information, knowledge and tips. Deep and close reading and re-reading of the materials resulted in identifying themes relevant to the “agent’s context analysis”. A framework approach to thematic analysis was adopted (Bryman, 2008), wherein recurring motifs were categorized under themes and subthemes. Theoretical concepts derived from strong structuration were used “as a springboard” for developing themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003 in Bryman, 2008). These included, once again, meanings, norms and resources that form the structural terrain for action for prospective gap year students. “Meanings” related to recurring depictions of the gap year in analyzed material; “norms” referred to advertised benefits of a well-spent gap year (or sanctions, if the gap year was not planned according to suggestions); whilst resources included, among others, information about activities and places, tips on how to plan the gap year, raise funds, and avoid negative experiences or consequences of a gap year; funding opportunities; and expert guidance. The analysis of interviews, gap year materials and field notes informed one another, as I became sensitive to the new concepts emerging from all data sources.

Gap year materials were treated as documents that provide “a mechanism and vehicle for understanding and making sense of social and organization practices” (Coffey, 2014 p. 367). Providers of structured programmes and travel packages, as well as various organizations and institutions delivering gap year information, funding or assistance, were seen as shaping the “terrain for action” for prospective gap year takers through communication via various documents.

As such, gap year materials were understood to be “products with purpose” (Coffey, 2014 p. 374) and the analysis always located them in their social context.

Moreover, some limited quantitative content analysis was carried out on gap year leaflets and brochures distributed at various venues and events, as the volume of collected materials of this type allowed for adopting such an approach. The purpose of this analysis was to ascertain the extent to which long-haul destinations feature in such materials, as compared to European and UK opportunities. It involved dividing brochures and leaflets that included references to more-or-less specific destinations into three categories: those centred solely on long-haul destinations; those centred solely on short-haul destinations; and those where both short-haul and long-haul destinations featured. The latter category was further divided on the basis of the emphasis given to long-haul and short-haul destinations respectively; this was achieved by paying attention to print-space and visibility given to various locations, as well as a number of advertised projects (where relevant). Results of this analysis can be found in Chapter 5.

### **3.7 Ethics**

The main ethical considerations of this research related to working with human subjects. As such, ethics were linked to the principle of individual human rights (Preissle, 2008). In particular, the right of liberty meant making sure that participants had the right not to be studied. They could decline an invitation to participate in research and were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Written consent was obtained from those participating in audio-recorded interviews. In addition, as some of the interviewees were under 18 at the time of our interviews, parental consent was necessary. As parts of the fieldwork were carried out on College premises, I followed the requirements of College administration, obtaining parental consent regardless of the age of participants, i.e. also for those who were over 18. Verbal consent was sought from other participants when conducting informal interviews in the field (Fetterman, 2008).

The right to privacy meant participants' control over information they chose to share during the research process (Preissle, 2008). Anonymity was conceptualized as a price for access to the interviewees' thoughts and feelings

and thus it was considered to be a crucial issue (Gregory, 2003). Volunteer participation was seen as directly linked to the issue of confidentiality, as participants gave their consent to take part in the study convinced about its anonymous character. Thus, I made sure to store all the data in a secure manner and use pseudonyms in all the writings, presentations and publications that followed.

The right to justice centred on a fair distribution of the benefits and risks of the research (Preissle, 2008). In return for their time and engagement in the study, I offered all participants an opportunity to get access to research findings upon completion of this thesis, and gathered contact details from those who expressed such interest. In addition, some students were interested to find out about the details regarding doing a PhD, funding and university life more generally. I encouraged and readily engaged in such conversations, seeing any assistance I could provide in students' university and career choices as a way to thank them for their participation in this study. In addition, student participants were included in the prize-draw, as their engagement in the research was the most demanding and time-consuming.

Finally, research ethics involved also questions of professional integrity, which included two main issues: first, ensuring that the data and research procedures were accurately represented in any subsequent writings and presentations, including this thesis; second, reflecting how my own position (including age, gender, nationality etc.) and my preconceptions, attitudes and beliefs impacted on the research process. Whilst the former point is relatively straightforward, and was assisted by keeping a detailed record of all the major steps in the research process and ensuring accuracy of the data, the issues of reflexivity and positionality deserve further exploration.

All researchers bring their own preconceptions to the research they carry out. Traditionally, it was thought that the more similar the researchers were to the researched in terms of culture, gender, social class, age etc., the more they were in the position to gain access, ask more meaningful questions and develop a deeper understanding of the studied culture (Merriam et al., 2001). On the other hand, coming from the "outside" was widely believed to help with adopting a more critical perspective, being more curious with the unfamiliar and getting access to

more information through not being aligned with any of the subgroups (Merriam et al., 2001). However, as Merriam and colleagues (2001) argue, the distinction between insider/outsider is more complicated. In particular, the researcher can be an insider in some aspects and an outsider in others, and his/her position can shift and change throughout the research process. As a young Polish woman, whose own experiences of the British culture began around the time I turned 19, through work and then higher education in the UK, thus someone who has never sat A-level exams, attended a British college or taken a gap year, I was often confronted with the unfamiliar. However, this did not mean that I was a complete outsider. When the study commenced, I had already lived, studied and worked in England for 6 years and I was not free of preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes resulting from popular media, social interactions, as well as previous studies and reading, including of course those undertaken for this research. Moreover, as my research involved interacting with actors of different occupations, ages and genders, my position was often not straightforward. Whilst being Polish was the major source of cultural difference between myself and study participants, there were also some commonalities, which at times granted me an “insider” status and allowed access to specific types of information. For example, it seemed that my relatively young age and lack of affiliation with the College or any immediate subgroups in the field contributed to the kinds of information that students felt free to share with me: I heard honest accounts of their decisions and uncertainties regarding their future life choices, including gap years; critical perspectives, and sometimes even mockery regarding their experiences of interactions with various organizations, institutions and individuals. The trust I was often granted was evident in students sometimes bringing up intimate details of their lives in our interviews, including relationships, family problems, friendships or health issues. These unexpected topics required sensitivity on my behalf, which involved allowing students to tell their stories in the way they saw fit, and expressing empathy in relation to their experiences and problems, whilst ensuring that the conversation does not diverge too much from the interview themes. Finally, as I became more familiar with various groups of actors, their practices, perspectives and concerns, my position changed and developed, thus the reflexive process continued throughout the duration of this research.

To maintain awareness of the issues of positionality and to assist the process of reflexivity, I kept notes on my thoughts and feelings regarding interactions with participants and all the methodological decisions I made. In addition, during data analysis I adopted a strategy to search for instances which could disprove my findings, to minimize the impact of my preconceptions and beliefs, whilst being aware that, as Roulston (2014) argued, “any analysis is a partial representation of the data set” (p. 307). Thus, the reflexive practice undertaken at all stages of the research process helped to develop awareness and minimize the impact of some of the potential biases, rather than to unequivocally “solve” the problem of positionality.

## Chapter 4: Gap year as a social practice

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to addressing the first objective of the study – to describe a gap year as a form of social practice, i.e. not as a purely individual choice, but a social phenomenon, characterized by shared understandings, rules of conduct, conventions and expectations and facilitated by existing resources, infrastructures and institutions. To this end, this chapter outlines the external structures (see Figure 2), i.e. meanings, norms and resources that prospective gap year takers draw upon and which constitute the “terrain for action” (Stones, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, these external meanings, norms and resources are internalized by practitioners and exist as memory traces within them, forming conjuncturally specific internal structures, i.e. agents’ *knowledge* of the specific context of action (Stones, 2005). Whilst the level of this knowledge and understanding can differ between practitioners, it is nonetheless possible to use it as a platform to identify the external structures, which are autonomous from individual agents. Therefore, the chapter draws heavily on the interview material with students that allowed to tap into these knowledges and through them identify and examine the external structures facilitating gap year travel. For this purpose, agent’s context analysis was employed (see Chapter 3 for more details), “bracketing out” students’ knowledgeability (Stones, 2005). This means that the focus was on identifying the relatively enduring “scripts” for gap year travel, as well as material and non-material facilitating resources, which pre-exist individual enactments of practice. The role of active agency in gap year participation, i.e. the questions of how individual students make choices available within the boundaries of the practice; how they employ their previous experiences, general dispositions and transposable skills; and how gap year practice fits with other projects, concerns and practices in their lives - were purposefully “bracketed out”, and explored separately in Chapter 6. As such, following Shove et al (2012), gap year practice is provisionally treated here as a stable entity, and this chapter is not concerned with whether and how external structures are challenged, approached and (re)produced by practitioners, and thus these issues are temporarily set aside.

However, external structures involved in the reproduction of the gap year practice include also many other social practices of networked agents. As such,

they are subject to transformation as new understandings, norms, technologies, competences and infrastructures arise in various arenas of social life. Other actors, who are not themselves practitioners of gap years, such as schools, teachers, parents or gap year providers, adopt different orientations towards gap year travel, based on their own roles and social positions. These actors are more-or-less directly involved in shaping the rules of conduct and/or providing resources. This chapter therefore also draws on interview and other fieldwork material concerned with identifying those networked others, their relevant social practices and orientations towards gap years.

Finally, it is important to highlight that this chapter purposefully leaves out the analysis of those of the external structures that underlie the long-haul character of gap year travel. These are fleshed out and discussed in detail in Chapter 5, which is dedicated to addressing the second objective of this thesis – to explore the ways in which existing meanings, norms and resources influence conditions regarding gap year mobility, including factors facilitating travel to long-haul destinations as a normal way of “doing a gap year”. Instead, the following sections attempt to paint a broader picture of the gap year practice and as such can be seen as a necessary background to understanding the importance of long-haul destinations and flying in a gap year context. This analytical distinction allows for separating those elements of gap years that are responsible for their long-haul character, to avoid simply discrediting the whole practice as “unsustainable”, and to identify potential areas for intervention aimed at promoting a more sustainable version of gap year travel.

The various concepts, distinctions and divisions discussed above were of course only possible to be made at the abstract, analytical level. In reality, all these issues are closely interlinked in the cycles of structuration (see Figure 2). Therefore, the reader is urged to read each section of this thesis as part of the bigger picture, always situating the findings back into the cycle of structuration and keeping in mind what is *not* being discussed and which type of methodological “bracketing” is being applied, rather than drawing conclusions on each of the chapters or sections separately. This is necessary for keeping the duality of structure at the heart of this thesis and to avoid falling back into the agency/structure dichotomy.

## 4.2 Meanings

In this section I review the meanings, or *structures of signification*, i.e. shared understandings and interpretations, which students draw upon when making their gap year plans. These include understandings of the conditions and consequences of gap year decisions, as well as predictions of interpretative conclusions that others are likely to make in relation to students' choices. It is important to stress that these judgements are often taken-for-granted and do not necessarily involve conscious deliberation (Stones, 2005). It was one of the challenges of the study to tap into these taken-for-granted understandings, even if they were not immediately expressed in a discursive manner.

Also, at the individual level, the knowledge and understandings of the interpretative schemes may and do vary, as discussed in Chapter 6 - performances of social practice are never exactly the same. Students also bring in their "habitus", i.e. their generalized world views, transposable dispositions, typified recipes and principles of action, which are shaped by various past and present practices, and which can result in differences between individual gap year choices. It is nonetheless possible to separate the habitus from the enduring conventions and understandings of the gap year practice, which have an existence autonomous from participating students. They form a kind of socio-cultural "script" of what it means to go on a gap year and what constitutes a normal, expected way of gap year travel (even if students can have different levels of understanding and ways of applying this "script" and different levels of critical distance towards it). Thus, the "meanings" discussed below can be seen as what Stones (2005) calls "irresistible causal forces" – theoretically, agents can always "do otherwise" and choose not to follow the accepted social conventions and interpretations, but real people are less able to do so than abstract agents. In order to resist these forces, the agent would require adequate power to do so (whilst still realizing the core commitments of a gap year), knowledge of alternatives and critical distance (Stones, 2005). Such understanding of external structures makes their hold upon agents less strong than in traditional structural accounts, but is still far from voluntarism. With this in mind, I move on to discussing the meanings associated with gap year travel that were identified in the analysis of research data.

#### 4.2.1 Break from education

The first set of shared meanings identified in this research relates to the perception of a gap year as an acceptable break from education, a chance to relax after A-Level exams, before committing to several more years of hard work at university. A number of respondents talked about the necessity to take some time off, expressing the view that carrying on with education without a break is not a desirable thing to do. In the following extract, Charlie, a first year college student, reported an advice given to him by his aunt, a university lecturer, as a reasoning behind his decision to go on a gap year:

"She said basically, something along the lines: 'you can't just study and study for years, and years, and years, it will just weigh you down. It helps if you have a bit in the middle when you can go off and not have to worry about it. And basically have freedom for a while, forget about all the stuff that is going on.' And I guess that was the general idea that she proposed to me."

This perspective was shared by Sarah, a second year college student, as the following interview extract suggests:

"Sarah: I personally wouldn't be ready to go to university this year. I want to go and I'm excited to go, but not yet.

Researcher: Right, how come?

Sarah: Partly I'd like a break, as such, just have a bit of time out from exams all the time and having to be learning everything all the time."

As these responses indicate, having a break from education is narrated as an acceptable choice, it does not signify laziness or lack of commitment to studying - Sarah was excited to go to university, but "not yet", as one needs a break before taking on new responsibilities. Taking a gap year was seen as an understandable decision, which all participants discussed openly, without giving excuses or elaborated justifications – it was presented as one of the conventional paths to take after college. What is more, gap year was often supported and advised by authority figures (such as Charlie's aunt, a university lecturer), further legitimizing it as an acceptable break. Kath, a Progression Officer at the College, whose job

was to assist students in making post-college choices, provided a prime example of such sentiment:

“I think they [gap years] are a good idea. Especially for students, who, you know, they just come off the academic treadmill, and go for school-college-uni - I don't think that's necessarily a good idea.”

At the heart of these examples lies a distinction between formal education, which is seen as an “academic treadmill”, something that can “weigh you down”, a chore (“exams all the time and having to be learning everything all the time”) and a gap year, which is an opportunity to “have freedom for a while” and forget about everything else. However, taking a gap year is far from being an act of rebellion against the rigid educational and social structures. It is now a popular and socially accepted thing to do, endorsed by authority figures, such as Charlie's aunt, or the Progression Officer in the College. These findings are thus in line with previous accounts of gap years, which highlighted their character as a widely recommended social activity, rather than an act of “dropping out” from education (e.g. Simpson, 2005; Heath, 2007; Cremin, 2007). This is in contrast to how such decisions were viewed several decades ago. Kath, for example, said that “it's a completely different mindset to when I was growing up” and recalled a friend of hers who “proudly says that she's the person who invented the gap year” by taking a year out in 1974 to travel to Russia and France. As Kath said “it was absolutely unheard of” at the time. This analysis, therefore, highlights the dynamic character of social life and that new (unsustainable) mobility practices can emerge and gain popularity over a relatively short period of time.

The extent to which gap years are now a normalized stage in the life course is evident in the following extract from my interview with Amy, a second year college student, where she found it difficult to explain the origins of her gap year decision:

“Researcher: Could you pin-point where the idea to go on a gap year come from?”

Amy: Um. I think I probably started to think about it last year. I just felt like I needed to get away from education for a while. And people just recommend it to you and say it's great. I don't know,

I think it just gradually evolved over time, there wasn't one point where I decided 'oh, I should go on a gap year'. It's just one of those things that have always been at the back of my mind and recently it's just coming forwards."

The implication here is that going on a gap year clearly goes beyond simple individual decision-making – it is now a part of the landscape of acceptable life paths for young people. It spreads as others who participated, or who believe in its value, "recommend it to you and say it's great". For Amy, there was not a single point in time when she decided to go on a gap year, it was something that has "always" been there as a potential choice.

Katherine, an Environmental Studies lecturer at the College, linked the current popularity of gap years to changing attitudes to higher education, which she considered to be caused by the introduction of tuition fees:

"I think the way in which people see education had changed a lot. And I think in the last 16 years it's become much more the right rather than the privilege. And I think up to then going to university was seen as a privilege, and was, you know, the government paid for you, and you had a grant. So you went and did this. And then when you started having to pay, so you started to having to pay for fees, and the grant went down, then I think people started to think about it as a right. This is my right to go to university, I'm paying. And it's my right to have a year off if I want to. And, studying is really hard and I'm going to have a year off because I deserve it. And it almost became a real sea shift in how students viewed education, and how they viewed their rights and their responsibilities."

Indeed, there is literature suggesting that the more recent increases in university tuition fees can be at least partially responsible for students adopting a consumer-approach towards higher education (Tomlinson, 2014). It may well be the case that these changes contribute to the perceptions of gap years as a "right", as Katherine suggested, but more research is needed to explore these issues in greater depth. Participating students did frame their gap year choices as something they deserved, as a legitimate reward for their efforts and hard work

and they did not express any doubts about their entitlement to postpone going to university – it was discussed as a taken-for-granted right.

What is also important to emphasize is that whilst it was acceptable for young people to take a gap year, anything longer than that might have been less desirable or socially approved. In part, this was linked to the expected age at which young people were to start university and employment – too much of a deviation from the “norm” was a cause of concern for some. The following extract from my interview with Lauren provides an example. Here, she talked about her friend, who could potentially join their group of gap year travellers, but was having doubts due to her age:

"She is not sure. Because she's quite old for our year. And her course is a four year course, so if she deferred it, she wouldn't really finish university till she's quite old. So she's a bit unsure."

Mark, who initially planned to take a gap year but changed his mind during the research period, cited his age as one of the reasons for his decision:

"It's just that I'm doing a third year of college, erm, I'd already be one year older than everyone else, and, if I do a gap year as well, I'll be two years older. So there would be such an age difference. I just think it would be really... almost awkward."

These examples highlight the existence of a social script for gap year taking – individual choice is constrained by what is considered normal and conventional in this context.

#### 4.2.2 Why travel? The hierarchy of gap year experiences

The overall picture emerging from the previous section is therefore one in which it is now entirely justified, if not expected, for students to take a break between school and university. Further analysis revealed that whilst there are a number of potential gap year activities, travel tended to be portrayed as a particularly desirable undertaking in this context, to the extent that “taking a gap year” was almost synonymous with travel. UCAS, an independent charity providing educational progression advice to young people and managing university and college admissions, included information about gap years on their website (UCAS, 2014). The dedicated section opened with the following sentence:

“Travelling is a great way to get an insight into a new culture. You could go abroad to teach English or learn a language, or to work, volunteer or join a conservation project.” (UCAS, 2014)

This illustrates that international travel is often understood to be a key component of the gap year. Local activities typically featured as alternative or additional choices in gap year promotion and information materials, and were not as visible as travel opportunities (see Chapter 5 for further analysis regarding gap year destinations promoted in such materials). The aforementioned UCAS website contained sponsored content from gap year organizations, which were all exclusively travel-oriented. STA (Student Travel Agency) ad opened with “travel the world, your time is now!”; Gapyear.com described itself as “the best backpacking website in the world, committed to providing everything you need to know about taking the ultimate gap year”, which conflated the related concepts of backpacking and gap year; whilst Gapforce ad stated that it specialized in “volunteering, adventure and work placements overseas” (UCAS, 2014). Similarly, an information brochure from Ethical Gap Years\*<sup>6</sup>, a non-commercial organization dedicated to promoting ethical and constructive gap years, provided the following guidance to prospective gap year takers:

“We suggest to young people that a well-spent gap year (which in practice lasts fifteen months) should have three components: raising the money required themselves, *low cost overseas travel*, and a period when they are committed to a project or programme in a working situation (such as teaching or community work overseas, environmental projects and expeditions, caring for the disadvantaged, industrial and commercial placements, advanced skills courses, outdoor pursuits and sport, and children’s camps). Most universities and many employers strongly favour applicants who have experienced structured gap years along these lines.”  
(Author’s emphasis)

The implication here is that an ideal gap year should include several stages: including raising money, independent travel and a “project” (e.g. expeditions, work placements, volunteering), which can also take place overseas, thus

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<sup>6</sup> Organization names marked with “\*” are pseudonyms.

requiring additional travel. Many of the participating students designed their gap years roughly along these lines (see Chapter 5 for more details on their itineraries), which suggests that these understandings shape gap year performances in powerful ways.

Katherine, the Environmental Studies lecturer suggested that a gap year which does not involve travel might be less worthwhile and valuable:

“The ones I feel sorriest for, are those people who just go and work for a year, doing something that they will think is going to make them money, and I think after a while they realize, money really isn’t everything and they’d missed out on that opportunity.”

For Katherine, it was travel that “made” the gap year a worthwhile, potentially life-changing activity - those who “just worked” were pitied for missing out on this opportunity. Together these findings seem to support Heath’s (2007) argument that overseas experiences occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of gap year experiences, over paid work or volunteering in the UK.

These understandings are at least partly linked to the long established position of travel as a legitimate leisure activity and the continued desire for physical travel observed in contemporary societies, despite the growth of opportunities for virtual presence granted by the new technologies (Urry, 2002). Urry (2002) contended that corporeal travel and experiencing people, places and events directly (i.e. “face-to-face”, “face-to-place”, and “face-to-moment” interactions) are essential for people to be full, active members of society, participate in socially valued practices and acquire social capital. More broadly, Pine and Gilmore (2013) argued that there has been a noticeable shift in Western values over the last several decades, a shift from service economy to what they called “experience economy”. They contended that collecting experiences and memories is now of greater importance to consumers than acquiring consumption goods and material objects. In this respect, the gap year could be viewed in relation to those broader consumption and mobility trends.

Indeed, all interviewed students expressed a keen interest in travel beyond their gap years. Even those, who for various reasons were not planning a gap year at this time and did not have much previous travel experience, expressed a willingness to travel in the future. For many, taking a post-school gap year was

just a perfect chance to fulfill their lasting desire to travel, due to its unique timing in the life course (see section 4.4.4 of this chapter for more details). For example, Charlotte, a second year college student, said that she always wanted to travel and that “it’s become a thing that that’s the time to do it”. Moreover, a number of respondents in this study talked about gap year travel as a way to gather invaluable memories. The following extract from an interview with Ellie, a second year college student, provides a prime example:

“I’d like to see something of the world. I’d like to see different cultures, see different traditions, meet different people and think, you know, “I’ve been there, I’ve been there, I’ve been there, that was amazing.”

Here, she emphasized the value of travel for collecting memories, anticipating pleasurable feelings associated with looking back at what she had experienced. In this sense, the memories are treated as commodities, something to collect, worth investing in, in line with Pine and Gilmore’s (2013) theory. Similar sentiments were expressed by a number of other participants. Susie’s response highlighted the excitement associated with direct, first-hand experiences of different places around the world:

“I love trying new things and being somewhere different and experiencing new things... Like, when you’re here you can watch it on TV and you can see documentaries about a place, but you can’t really experience it. And I think experiencing it is so, just, exciting.”

Susie’s comments about the necessity of physical travel also seem to support Urry’s (2002) argument that rather than replacing physical travel, “increased virtual and VR information about different places and their unique characteristics will probably heighten the desire to be corporeally present at the place in question and hence to travel there” (p. 22). In another example, Charlie made a direct link between his experiences of various places through media, and his desire for corporeal travel:

“I’ve always been looking into travelling abroad and general stuff like that, since year 6 really, primary school. Because I’ve always been very media aware, aware of what’s going on around us. So

I've always been very interested in seeing the stuff happening.

So it kind of all stems from that."

Overall, it is clear that travel in the gap year context is not detached from broader social trends and meanings. In this way, gap year travel can be seen as just one of the many travel and tourism practices, which allow for generating valuable experiences and memories, and experiencing enjoyment associated with physical co-presence in different locations. However, gap years also occupy a very unique position in the life-course, and as such are associated with other, more specific understandings and norms, as well as facilitating resources, which clearly position it as a distinctive social practice.

#### 4.2.3 Transitions to adulthood

The previous section examined the links between gap year travel and other travel practices, related to the more general position of travel as a legitimate, valuable leisure activity and the ways in which experiences and memories are increasingly treated as commodities. In this section I consider a more unique set of meanings that distinguishes gap year travel from other forms of tourism. It has already been argued in section 4.2.1 that a gap year is widely understood to be an acceptable break from education; the following discussion illustrates the distinctive place that this break occupies in the life course. Post-school gap years are undertaken in a very specific moment of transitions, to adulthood and to higher education. Previous research suggested that young people may use their gap year experiences in the process of identity formation, to distinguish themselves from both their past selves and their peers (e.g. King 2011). This analysis revealed that prospective "gappers" expected and hoped for various transformations to take place during their gap years, and that these expectations were an important aspect of the landscape of meanings and conventions, promoted in gap year materials and by relevant others. The expected benefits of gap years for transitions to adulthood included two broad themes: figuring out what to do in life (or, alternatively, achieving a greater certainty that the right choices were made); and developing an adult identity through becoming more mature and independent.

In our first interview at the beginning of her second year of college, Amy talked about being unsure about which university course she would like to take and reported her hopes that a gap year will help in making this decision:

“I'm not really sure yet. I'm leaning towards geography cause... I like geography. But I'm hoping I'll find clarification when I'm on my gap year. Because I'm not really sure what I want to do.”

Several other participants expressed a similar perspective, believing that a gap year can serve to clarify their decisions, even if it was not always clear *how* exactly it will happen. This is illustrated by Thomas's statement:

"I don't know, maybe just seeing a bit more of the world, might kind of open my eyes a bit, or, open my mind as to what to do."

Here, it can be seen that the expected process of figuring out what to do can be quite vague – travel was described as an eye-opening experience, potentially helping to make important life decisions on “what to do”, but Thomas, a first year college student, was unable to provide any more details. Earlier in our interview, he expressed his concern about university fees:

"I don't know [if I want to go to uni], but obviously the fees put me off. And I want to be totally sure, and I'm not. I mean, I've got a sister that went to X uni actually, and, you know, it was the right path for her, so she is really pro-uni, but I don't know yet to be honest.”

In his case, going on a gap year served to postpone an important life decision, associated with a high financial cost – quite understandably, he wanted to be “totally sure” before making such a commitment. It is possible that increases in university fees may have strengthened the meaning of a gap year as an acceptable life stage, a time to review and rethink important life choices, even if a gap year itself is also likely to incur a relatively high financial cost. An information brochure for parents, produced by Ethical Gap Years\*, described the gap year as “a chance to rethink their future (many change their university and career plans during a gap year)” (Ethical Gap Years\*, n.d.-a). This additional time to ensure that the right decision is made may be particularly valuable in light of the increases in university costs.

A second family of widely shared understandings related to youth transitions was centered on psychological transformations to adulthood, i.e. identity formation and developing qualities traditionally ascribed to adults, such as maturity and independence. Gap year travel was often believed to contribute to these processes in a meaningful way, which is in line with previous accounts of gap years, which highlighted the relationship between gap year taking and identity formation (e.g. Ansell, 2008; Bagnoli, 2009). The following participant testimony found in a leaflet distributed at one of the gap year fairs, provides a prime example of how such expectations were promoted:

“I had the most amazing time in Vietnam. My Lattitude experience taught me so many new skills, but most of all I think it teaches you important lessons about yourself and who you are. (Amy Cullen, Vietnam 2008)” (Lattitude Global Volunteering, n.d.-a)

As this statement indicates, the promoted value of volunteering goes beyond helping others or personal enjoyment (“the most amazing time”), but can help you figure out who you are, which can be of particular importance for young people at the moment of transitions to adulthood and higher education. Similar views and understandings were found in various other brochures distributed at gap year and other events, as well as online on gap year websites. A slightly different take on the same theme featured in promotion materials of Christian gap year programmes, which apart from personal transformation, brought a promise of spiritual development:

“Doing a post-uni gap year was the perfect thing for me, and I’ve now learned things that no amount of university life can teach you, about God, myself and other people. As a result, I now feel equipped for the rest of my life in a way that I certainly didn’t before my degree. I’ve found myself being used by God in contexts I never thought possible.” (Youth for Christ, n.d.-a)

Whilst this particular participant testimony related to post-university gap years, it underlined the importance of gap years for transitions to adulthood, which is a process that does not end with university enrollment. Moreover, for Christian gap years, promotion materials emphasized that personal development and growth

do not relate solely to learning about the self, but also about God and others. Overall, however, the message was broadly in line with those promoted in other gap year materials – if you take a gap year, you will be “equipped for the rest of your life” and learn things that cannot be taught at the university.

Interviewed students echoed such understandings in our conversations. Amy described the kinds of personal qualities that she believed gap year travel can develop:

“Amy: It teaches you... I don’t know, independence. You get more mature really. I’m not really mature at the moment (laughter). So, yeah, life experience and all that.

Researcher: So what is it about it that you think will make you more mature?

Amy: Just doing things by myself, handling my own finances and where I’m going. And actually, my life is in my own hands. I can’t be bailed out or anything. I’m in this one country, with no people to help me, just, yeah, doing it my own way I guess.”

Earlier on in the interview she described feeling “sheltered” and wanting to do things by herself. Such sentiments were present in the narratives of many other students. Escaping the rigid educational structures through travelling was thought to bring important life skills and serve as a first step towards independence.

Overall, this analysis showed that gap years are often believed/portrayed to be an important step in transitions from school to university and from youth to adulthood, serving as a period of time to stop and re-think career choices and develop personal qualities traditionally ascribed to adults, such as maturity and independence. Gap years are therefore perceived not in opposition to education, not simply as a “break” from responsibilities, but a break with a valid purpose. In fact, the study identified that beyond these personal benefits, gap years were also believed to be purposeful in a number of other ways, bringing very tangible social rewards to participating individuals, which are examined in the next section of this chapter.

### 4.3 Norms

In this section I examine the norms, or *structures of legitimation*, which are the normative beliefs of how networked agents are likely to behave in response to agent's choices, i.e. the assessment of existing norms and the likely sanctions or rewards (Stones, 2005). These were linked to the perceptions of the distribution of power in the context of the gap year practice and beyond. Again, as with the meanings, such norms do not hold absolute power over participating individuals. Instead, they are always negotiated against individual normative dispositions and beliefs, hierarchies of concerns and other practices in which agents are involved, but these issues were purposefully omitted here, and are discussed in Chapter 6.

What follows is an examination of social norms specific to the gap year practice that, next to the meanings and resources, formed part of the "terrain of action" for practitioners. The following sections attempt to paint a general view of the norms identified as important in the gap year context, even if individual perceptions and awareness of such norms, critical distance and individual power to resist, differed somewhat between practitioners.

These normative perceptions were partly linked to the ways in which gap year is often believed to contribute to employability and improve students' job and university prospects, which Simpson (2005) referred to as "the professionalisation of youth travel". In this sense, a break stops being simply a "break". A break is only desirable if young people can situate their experiences within the broader context of their life and career goals. Young people are encouraged to think about their gap years in a constructive manner, rather than simply as a time to go travelling, relax or have fun. Cremin (2007) has previously argued that gap years occupy an unusual position as both a break from, and a constructive stage in, education and careers. This study identified four broad ways in which gap years were widely promoted and perceived as constructive by prospective gap year takers and relevant networked actors: improved employment prospects; improved university prospects; improved university performance; and gaining valuable social and cultural capital. These are discussed in turn in the following sections.

#### 4.3.1 Improved employment prospects

The first set of normative understandings was linked to the perceived competitiveness of the job market and the need to “stand out from the crowd” in order to secure employment after university. Young people are now encouraged to think of their careers even before they begin higher education. The following extract from the “Young People” section of the UK Government website provides a prime example:

“Even if getting a job seems a long way off, taking a gap year can also look good on your CV. Potential employers see that you have spent time broadening your horizons and learning new skills.” (UK Government, 2012)

Again, the implication here is that a gap year is more than just a break from education and a leisure pursuit. It is an investment in a future career. Young people are encouraged to take a year out to “broaden their horizons” and learn new skills, and this endeavor has a strong normative element – it will be appreciated by future employers. Such sentiments were also included in many commercial gap year promotion materials, but their presence on the government website arguably gives them greater legitimacy. This is line with Heath’s (2007) argument, that gap year experiences have become a way to gain distinction and advantage over others, as educational qualifications are no longer sufficient, considering the fierce competition for graduate jobs and university places.

Apart from developing soft skills and “broadening horizons”, there was a widespread understanding that a gap year should ideally be directly aligned to a desired career, as Katherine, the Environmental Studies lecturer, pointed out:

“I think the job market is such now, that if you want to break from your intended career, you ought to be doing something that's aligned to it...”

Indeed, among structured projects promoted at gap year events I attended, almost every possible career path seemed to be catered for. Tailored gap year courses, work placements and volunteering opportunities were available in many fields including teaching and languages; journalism; business; medicine; veterinary medicine; gastronomy; sports; archeology; art; human rights and law,

to name a few. For example, a Projects Abroad (n.d.-a) brochure included the following advertisement of their journalism projects in South Africa:

“If you would like to gain an edge on others in the competitive world of Journalism, our programmes in Cape Town are for you. As a volunteer on a Journalism Internship in South Africa you could find yourself working for a weekly football newspaper, a general interest magazine or for Projects Abroad’s very own magazine, Cape Chameleon. You will help to research stories, write articles and conduct interviews. You may also be involved in proof-reading and editing text. Along with being published, and building an impressive portfolio of work, you’ll gain first hand experience of the overall running of publications, which will prove valuable to your job prospects or University course.”

The emphasis here was on gaining advantage over others in a highly competitive job market. Interviewed students themselves often reflected that gap years are considered to be “good for your CV” and talked about their potential value for future employment, as this extract from my interview with Tara illustrates:

“A lot of people don't have that advantage of saying on their CV. Other than that you can get kind of general CVs that kind of look the same, they went to high-school, college, university, that's it. I mean, if you have something different, it kind of stands out more.”

At the same time, there appeared to be strict rules to follow if the gap year experience was to be viewed in a positive manner by future employers. For example, the distinction between what constitutes a well-spent gap year and a non-desirable gap year was highlighted by the following gap year advice entitled “What do employers think”, found on the University of Birmingham’s (2013) website:

“Employers feel that time out is beneficial especially if you:

- Spend your time out constructively
- Identify the skills you have gained
- Highlight significant achievements.
- Sell the experience to your potential employers.”

The website then went on to encourage students to also take into account the possible negative impact of a gap year:

- Giving the impression you drifted into a year out and are still not sure of your career direction is extremely off-putting to potential employers.
- Taking a second period of time out could cause a potential worry for employers and they would want to see very good reasons for the second period of time out.” (University of Birmingham, 2013)

What is notable about the above extract is that whilst students are encouraged to take a gap year to “find themselves” and figure out their future career (as discussed in section 4.2.3), they are not to disclose those doubts to their future employers. Gap year is to be presented as a thought-out and constructive enterprise if it is to bring tangible benefits, and students should by no means appear as “drifting”. Also, it is important to highlight that whilst a year is an acceptable period of time “out” of education, more than a year could be interpreted by potential employers as worrying. This analysis underlines again a highly social character of gap years – some types of behaviour are likely to be socially rewarded, whilst others may be punished. This arguably further constrains opportunities for choice in this context.

#### 4.3.2 Improved university prospects

A second family of “constructive gap year” norms revolved around the idea that gap years can help students secure a place at the university by boosting their personal statements, which are required in the UK as part of the admissions process. Whilst not all university courses took personal statements into account in their recruitment procedures, in some cases a good personal statement could really make a difference. For example, personal statements constituted 20% of the overall score for undergraduate courses in Geography at Bristol University for 2014 entry, and 50% for the Economics & Politics course (University of Bristol, 2014). The criteria for Geography personal statements included the following:

“We look for a clear and convincing enthusiasm for Geography as a focus for academic study, consistent with the nature of the

programmes provided at Bristol. This should be reinforced by evidence of initiative in extending this interest beyond formal classroom provision.” (University of Bristol, 2014)

Whilst these criteria do not explicitly favour gap year applicants, going on a gap year can provide evidence for “initiative in extending interest beyond formal classroom provision”, which was required. Indeed many gap year programmes and volunteering opportunities are tailored to specific university courses and careers (see section 4.3.3). Other criteria that could be met by taking part in a gap year include those required for Economics, Finance and Management courses at Bristol: “non-academic achievement or experience”, “voluntary work”, “work experience”, “interest in hobbies or pastimes”, “reading or research beyond the A-level (or equivalent) syllabus” (University of Bristol, 2014). Again, whilst not specifically favouring gap year travel experiences, such criteria arguably serve to reinforce the perceived benefits of taking a year out. Gap year projects are often marketed to tick-box many of those requirements, which can be more difficult to obtain through other channels, particularly during the school year.

Gap year promotion materials often tap into young people’s insecurities and anxiety related to finding their career path and securing a place on their dream university course. Frequently, gap year experiences were portrayed as helping students stand out from other applicants and impressing admissions tutors. The following participant testimony from Project Trust (n.d.-a) brochure was entitled “Rachel applied for university on her gap year and got in!” and provided an account of an applicant for a Physiotherapy degree, who took part in a medical volunteering project in South Africa on her gap year:

“I had watched my friends struggle to write a personal statement, find references, choose specific unis and courses and order them a certain way. I was so pleased not to be in that rat race. Instead I chose to apply in a place that I felt at ease, empowered, respected and that I was being useful. This process felt natural because it was now something I knew I wanted to do and it wasn’t a chore. I spoke about my work and I feel sure that my passion for it came out in my writing, because I was lucky enough to receive an interview for my first choice. This had to be done by

phone and they asked me simply to describe my motivation for wanting to be a physio... I feel strongly that the experiences from my year got me into university and I was lucky to find what I wanted to do so young, but also that it's not a problem to need more time to decide and that a new place and independence can play a huge part in that decision."

Evocative testimonies like the one described above reinforce the perception of gap years as an asset that can help secure a university place. Which other physiotherapy applicant could impress the interviewer in the way that Rachel did, being able to report on actual patients she helped take care of? The following extract from the interview with Ellie is an excellent example of how young people may learn about the necessity to align their gap year choices to the assumed perceptions of university admissions tutors. Here, she recalled her meeting with one of the Progression Officers at the College:

"Ellie: I was speaking to my Progression Officer... It's someone that's linked with College and he can talk to you about UCAS, what your course may entitle you to, what you could do after doing your course... I didn't really have much to talk about my gap year, but he said 'Make sure you do something with it rather than not doing anything'. If they go up to you and say 'what did you do on your gap year?' and you said 'Well, I worked a bit and that's it', they don't really want you to do that..."

Researcher: Who are 'they'?

Ellie: Like, the universities may not want you if you've just done nothing with that year, because they think that you might be a bit of a layabout, you might be lazy, you might not, you know, be as ready to do stuff as much. So that's why I said I chose music, because a lot of universities will say 'What have you done in your gap year?' I'll be like 'Well, I've toured here, here, here, booked all the gigs, done all the gigs'. And yeah, it's beneficial. And same with travelling as well, they like to see that you're travelling, you have to organize it yourself, get yourself work for yourself, save up for yourself, basically being independent as well."

What emerges from the above analysis is the widespread perception that a “well-spent gap year”, i.e. one that is constructive, and ideally aligned to the student’s chosen career, is likely to be viewed in a positive manner by university admissions officers and even help secure a place at a desired course. This is by contrast to a gap year spent doing very little, for which students can be punished by being labelled a “layabout”. As another student, Sarah, pointed out: “they [universities] don’t want you to do one if you are just going to be lazing around at home or something”. She herself planned to volunteer in hospitals overseas, which was aligned to her chosen career in medicine. In fact, all of the prospective gap year students I interviewed had plans that extended beyond just travelling – most wanted to do volunteering, some type of learning courses or work experience. Whilst most narrated their decisions in terms of personal choice and interest, this analysis suggests that many were very aware of the need to do something constructive with their year, and as the interview extract with Ellie showed, these perceptions can directly influence gap year activity choices.

Even though the impact of gap years on university admissions was mostly seen and portrayed as positive, the advice given to students by tutors, progression officers and on university websites, was to always check with admissions tutors whether they accept gap year applicants. It was believed that whilst most would be happy to accommodate students’ choices, some universities and courses frowned upon applicants who had a year out. Students were in these cases dissuaded from taking a gap year. Kath, the Progression Officer, shared her knowledge of how gap years are viewed by different university courses:

"I think it's maths as a subject, doesn't really like gap years. So when students are applying for maths they are dissuaded from gap years. Because maths as you probably know it's one of those things that you've got to keep at, and you can get rusty if you're not training and using the procedures and the formulae and the rest of it all the time. So maths doesn't like it particularly, not everyone, I mean I've known a girl do a gap year and she's doing maths and French. Cambridge don't like gap years for medics. There's very, very few."

### 4.3.3 Improved university performance

The previous sections established that a well spent gap year is widely believed to bring students tangible rewards in the form of better university and employment prospects, whilst not conforming to accepted conventions can result in social “sanctions” (e.g. if students appear as drifting, take more than a year out, or choose to take a gap year before one of the few courses where they are not viewed in a positive manner, they may be punished by not securing a desired job or university place). The third normative “rule” related to further advantages that a gap year can bring *after* securing a university place, by improving the learning experience and allowing students to make the most of their chosen course and university life. Many students reflected on their hope that after a period of travel they will be more ready for the university, which was often linked to the expected personal developments discussed in section 0, such as gaining maturity and independence. These qualities were considered to be of particular importance when coping with university life. Georgia, an AS student, talked about not being ready for university as one of the reasons why she wanted to do a gap year. Later on in the interview, I asked her to elaborate:

“Um, I think it’s cause [at the university] you’re independent, really independent, obviously you’re moving away, and it’s working on your own, living on your own, everything is like, you’ve got to be that type of person that you deal with not having your mum or dad there to do stuff for you. Like, working alongside university, and thinking about debts and stuff.... I think you’ve got to be really adult to be able to deal with that situation.”

The implication here is that in order to cope at the university, one needs to be mature and independent enough, to be “really adult”. Rather than seeing university as a place where those qualities develop, it is desirable if students get prepared somehow for the new, independent life and arrive “ready”. Here, gap year travel comes as a buffering stage, preparing young people for the transition to higher education, which will be rewarded with a better university experience. The following extract from the “What universities say” section of the Year Out Group (2015) website, provides a prime example. Year Out Group is an umbrella organization of independent gap year providers, dedicated to promoting models

of good practice, in the form of what they call well-structured and worthwhile gap year projects:

“Students who take a year out before university arrive refreshed, focused and, if they have made full use of their time out, they will be better able to make the transition from dependence to independence. Although girls are more likely to pursue a structured gap year than boys both are arriving at university better prepared to tackle more challenges and to achieve their full potential.” (Year Out Group, 2015)

Whilst in the above extract the listed benefits are all positive – being refreshed and invigorated, more mature and independent, and better equipped to tackle university challenges – some materials also highlighted the potential that gap years might put people off education and make it harder for them to adjust back to work. Charlotte, a second year college student, highlighted the double-sided consequences she expected from her gap year:

“Getting back into study: that will be quite hard... I think I will be ready to study, but find it quite hard to work as well.”

Typically, however, the potentially negative gap year consequences were expected to be counterbalanced by positive gains, as this extract from the UCAS (2014) website suggests:

“Admissions tutors know that some students may take a little time to readjust back to studying, but most former gap year students are generally more focused and responsible”.

Apart from the small possible drawback of having to “readjust back to studying”, the image that emerges from this analysis is one in which gap year students are expected to have advantage over their peers in the university setting. In addition to developing desirable personal characteristics, these perceived advantages included also acquiring course-specific knowledge and skills. There was a widespread belief that a gap year spent gaining experience in the chosen field of study would translate into better university performance. In this way, gap year was seen as another stage of education, not simply a break from learning. This is illustrated by the following statement provided by an Admissions Tutor for Biological

Sciences in a video entitled “Advantaged of taking a gap year” available at the University of Birmingham’s (2014) website:

“I’m a big fan of gap years. I took one myself so I’m probably biased. I think if you’ve got something you want to do in the year before you come to university, that you should do it – and a lot of students who want to study a biology degree actually want to go off and travel and perhaps work on a conservation project and of course that’s all very good, it will contribute towards your degree and your preparation for that and then when you come to us you’ll be ready for your studies.”

Coming from the Admissions Tutor, this is indeed a very strong message communicated to young people. Gap year is a preparation for your degree and it will make you “ready for your studies”.

A similar message was communicated to prospective students during open days at one of the universities, as this quote from an interview with George, an Admissions Manager, indicates:

"We say at the open day talks - and it's true - that we do think someone taking a gap year, depending on what they do, is likely to make them a better student and be able to contribute more."

Interviewed students were also very aware of these potential benefits, and were actively structuring their gap years along the “constructive” lines. This extract from my interview with Sarah provides an excellent example:

"I think I would like to experience a bit more medical stuff and healthcare stuff. Because even though I have done work experience and volunteering, I think I would really benefit from that when I start uni, on that course, if I've already been in hospitals and very different countries. I think that's something that would help me."

Charlie also shared that sentiment, reflecting again on the advice given to him by his aunt, the university lecturer. He wanted to witness a tornado season in the US during his gap year and possibly also “do some volcanology” in Hawaii:

"If you target it on certain things, like, I want to go do geographical things, it will help in your studies, if you want to do writings around the things you've experienced. So, I mean, that's the sort of thing she suggested to me."

These responses are indicative of the established position that gap years now occupy in the transitions from school to higher education and from youth to adulthood. The advantages gained in the form of more maturity, independence, as well as course-specific knowledge, experience and skills are believed to bring very tangible rewards when at university. Gap year can therefore be seen as simultaneously a break from education (understood as structured learning) and another stage of education (a form of experiential education), where textbook knowledge is complemented with first-hand experiences and development of new skills. This is part of the long established philosophy of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Joplin, 1981). Indeed, university courses themselves often include a period of time spent at a partner university abroad as part of their programme, and there are student exchange opportunities such as ERASMUS. There was some evidence to suggest that these can in some cases dissuade young people from taking a gap year. Lara, for example, decided not to do a pre-university gap year in the end, after realizing that most of her chosen university courses offered the study abroad option. Similarly, Sarah said that her older sister did not take a gap year, citing the following reason:

"I think the main reason was because she studied French and Spanish at university, so with that she got a year abroad within her degree."

The implication here is that the gap year practice is linked to other, related practices, and can be in some cases substituted by institutional forms of travel and learning.

#### 4.3.4 Social and cultural capital

Sociological accounts of tourism and mobility point out that physical travel can be a way of forming and maintaining social capital, by facilitating access to international networks of friends and family (Urry, 2002). This study found that establishing such networks constituted another set of expected rewards from gap year participation, expressed by students and various relevant others. Gap year

was often believed to be a period of time when life-long friendships are formed, in particular with fellow travellers. Access to and connections with different groups of people were often narrated as one of the enticements to participate in gap years. Katherine, the Environmental Studies lecturer, described how in her opinion such friendships develop through shared experiences, which is the message she communicated to her students:

“Especially at that age when you’re likely to meet people, either from their own country or from other countries, when you’re travelling and you’re away from everything else, you tend to form very strong friendships, don’t you? I mean lots and lots of my friends came from when I was in America for a year, and even though it’s thousands of miles away, we’re still good friends. You do make those really, when you’re doing something unusual, you do make those very close friends. And that’s what I say to them [students], you know, ‘it’s really going to be a life changing experience, if you do a gap year’.”

Promotional materials from many gap year programmes echoed such sentiments, emphasizing the value of joining an organized project, which ensures being surrounded by like-minded people:

“The greatest reward of AgriVenture is the people and Trainees you meet along the way. You can make connections for a lifetime and know you have people to visit all over the world. You will never forget your experience of travelling and if you’re like me, it will become the centerpiece of your life.’ Katie Partlow, Trainee from the USA 2010” (Agriventure, n.d.)

This extract suggests that having friends “for life” in different countries may have a strong influence on future travel – by building a network of “people to visit all over the world” young people will be able to make travel a relatively affordable and permanent feature in their lives. For those with particular interests, gap year can serve as an access point to international networks of like-minded people. Art History Abroad (AHA) went on to describe in detail how people who join their courses usually form lasting bonds, promising prospective “gappers” access to a global community of fellow art lovers:

“AHA attracts students from around the globe who have a thirst for knowledge, a sense of adventure and a desire to extend their academic horizons... Our close knit family of alumni testifies to the lasting value that our courses provide – ex-AHA students don’t stay away from art or Italy for long and they usually stay in touch.” (Art History Abroad, n.d.-b)

The implication here is that the impact of a gap year is believed to stretch beyond enjoying the company of others during travels – although this is an important aspect of the experience as well. Friendships and connections are supposed to last a lifetime and often facilitate future travel – whether to visit gap year friends, or further travels with them to places of interest. A number of interviewed students also talked about the friendships they expected to establish, even when travelling independently. Susie, for example, said that she: “would love to join the travel community”. Indeed, the expected camaraderie of fellow travellers was often seen as an important part of the gap year experience, as this extract from my interview with Ellie, a first year college student, indicates:

"I'd love to meet other people out there. It could be that if I booked a train ticket out somewhere, stayed in a hotel for the night and met some travellers and they said "Oh, we're going here next week or tomorrow", I'd be like "Yeah, I might as well join you", if I've got the money. Yeah, I'd love to, it'd be great. I don't think I'd like travelling if I did it all on my own, I'd love to meet people out there to travel with if I was on my own."

Together, this analysis indicates that the imaginations of a romantic travel community, open to befriending fellow travellers, and expectations of a shared experience and getting to know new people, which can strengthen young people’s social capital by developing an international network of friends, are an important aspect of a gap year practice. Chapter 5 explores how these meanings can impact on destination choices.

Finally, gap year also carried a promise of improved cultural capital. O’Reilly (2006) has previously noted that gap years and backpacking can serve as a way of accessing or reinforcing middle-class identity, expressing particular taste, knowledge of the world and acquiring valued experiences. Whilst the ideas

of becoming “better” than peers were not expressed directly by the participants, many hinted that a gap year could serve as a marker of being a cultured, well-rounded individual with interesting stories to tell. “I want to become more cultured” said Amy, whilst Jonathan, another second year college student, admitted: “I just want to be able to say I’ve been there”, when discussing his travel plans to Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, even in the preparation stage, there were some tangible social rewards to be gained – having gap year plans allowed access to peer groups of other “gappers” with similar interests and plans. For example, Lily discussed it in the following way:

"It's also a good conversation starter as well, like, if you don't know someone very well, to ask them if they are going to go travelling or where they want to go.... Well, for me, anyway, especially because I'm quite interested in it. So I like talking about it. So it's what I talk about with people."

It seems that whilst at university, this advantage can continue, with gap year experiences allowing access to a different, “better” set of friends. Kath, the Progression Officer at the College, recalled how her own daughter, who took a gap year, was put in university accommodation with other gap year students:

“They were all gap year students put together... They were all a year older, which she said was so nice, because they were not all silly and shouty, and screamy, giggly girls.”

Here, Kath’s daughter distanced herself from those who did not participate in a gap year – she was more mature, not a silly and giggly girl. These findings echo those of King (2011), who found that gap year students use their experiences to build a distinctive identity whilst at university. It seems that these distinctions can be reinforced by accommodation strategies at some universities, separating gap year students from others. Whilst none of the interviewed students mentioned a desire to access such groups at university as an incitement to take a gap year, it is possible that the stories of such tangible rewards can spread with time and reach prospective students, further strengthening the position of gap years as a ladder to develop valuable social and cultural capital.

## 4.4 Resources

The final set of external structures or the “terrain” that students face when making gap year decisions are resources or *structures of domination*. These are power relations in the form of control over economic/material resources and control over people. In short, young people rely on available infrastructures, institutional arrangements, sources of information and material resources - these have a very strong impact on shaping opportunities that are open to students at the moment of recruitment. They constitute what Stones (2005) calls “independent causal influences” – those parts of external structures that are completely autonomous from individual agents they affect. These are in contrast to “irresistible causal forces”, i.e. norms and meanings, where agents at least theoretically have the freedom to “act otherwise” (although as discussed in section 2.3, real people may be less able to do so than abstract agents, especially if they are committed to performing a given practice).

What follows is an examination of resources available to students at the moment of recruitment to the gap year practice. As with norms and meanings, individual knowledge of and competence in drawing on those resources differed somewhat between practitioners, depending on their habitus and previously acquired skills – these issues are outlined in Chapter 6. What is also missing from these accounts are the numerous social practices of networked agents, who are involved in providing the resources – they are discussed separately in the final section of this chapter.

### 4.4.1 Deferring university entry

One of the factors facilitating gap years as an acceptable stage in transitions from school to university was the possibility to defer university entry. A choice to postpone university entry for a year is now catered for and facilitated in the university admissions processes. The implication is that young people are now allowed to secure a university place before they go travelling and have a guaranteed place waiting for them upon return. This procedure allows students to use the support of their school or college in filling in university application forms, including sorting out references and other important documents and then go on a gap year relatively worry-free. John, the Geography lecturer, discussed the advice he gives to his students:

"My advice always is 'do your application form and defer entry, and then you can cut it if you choose not to go, but you've got something waiting for you' - so that would be the way I'd always channel students – 'you know, you can change your mind, but at least you've gone through the process and you know what to do. So when during your gap year if you decide to change your mind, all the paperwork is ready, you just copy it, rather than doing it from leaving, and feeling isolated and on your own, and there's nobody to ask. You know, at least you've been through it once.'"

Emily, Head of Widening Participation and UK Student Recruitment at one of the universities, said that deferred entry also has additional advantages when it comes to courses that require interviews as part of the admissions process:

"If they are successful in getting a deferred place, they don't have to worry about it. Off they go for a year and it's all done... If they want to go travelling, and they suddenly find themselves in Vietnam and they are called for interview, you know, (laughter) it all becomes a bit more tricky."

Most university courses that participating students applied to, accepted deferred entry applicants and provided detailed information during their open days and/or on their websites regarding their policies towards gap years and deferred entries. Such transparency arguably removes the uncertainty and further establishes gap years as an acceptable choice – if universities are going out of their way to enable participation, then it must be a perfectly legitimate, if not advantageous, activity to undertake. Katherine, the Environmental Studies lecturer, reflected on the changes she observed over the last 15 years:

"I think you could always defer it, but if you applied saying that you won't come straight away, they [universities] would be like 'What?!? We'd offered you this wonderful place'... People would apply to university and get their place, and then, if they wanted to defer, they would wait a lot later, after they got their place, they got their agreement, and then they'd say 'Oh, can I defer for a year?'"

In her opinion, deferred entries were not as acceptable some years ago as they are now – it was considerably more difficult for students to defer and it was a bit of a gamble to know how universities would treat such applicants. Many would therefore opt for applying upon return, rather than deferring entry, but that came with problems as well. Katherine discussed how colleges were struggling to deal with growing numbers of graduates from previous years asking for references and assistance with their university applications – this was often problematic, as some teachers would have retired in the meantime and thus obtaining references was not always possible. The removal of such obstacles and the official incorporation of deferred entry in the admissions system undoubtedly contributes to their current popularity. As argued in the recent paper by Wu and colleagues (2015), lack of institutional support and endorsement for pre-university gap years in China is one of the contributing factors why the young Chinese are more likely to take time off to travel in their late 20s or early 30s instead, as a career break.

However, the study found that not all UK universities and courses welcomed gap year applicants, although these seemed to be a minority. In my interviews, students often considered deferred entry as their right and were not happy to find out that some courses were not willing to accommodate their choices. In some cases, this led to their decision not to apply and choose a different university instead. For example, in the following extract, Charlotte talked about visiting Durham University on their open day, as she was considering studying history there:

“Charlotte: I didn’t like Durham University itself because I felt they were very much, like: “we don’t need you, you need us”. But they very much said: “we don’t accept deferred entries, even for history”.

Researcher: Oh, Durham?

Charlotte: They said: “unless you can prove to us exactly how it will help you with your degree, we don’t accept deferred entries”.

Which is really interesting.

Researcher: That is interesting.

Charlotte: I hadn't heard that from anyone else. So I found that really interesting."

Later on she elaborated:

"Charlotte: I wouldn't even think of applying there. So their attitude, they very much felt like we needed them, they didn't need us. They didn't really care. They'd have enough applicants, so they could be picky, sort of thing.

Researcher: Okay.

Charlotte: Also, the fact that they were so against gap years, really."

Here, Charlotte displayed a view that universities should cater for students' needs, they should be "for the students", rather than the other way round. Such sentiments can be seen as an example of a "consumer-style" approach to higher education that Katherine referred to earlier, where gap years are viewed as a right (see section 4.2). The instances in which interviewees were not able to get a deferred entry, however, were the minority – most of the interviewed students took advantage of the opportunity to defer entry, whilst a few, who were particularly unsure about their choices, decided to postpone the application process until they came back from their gap years.

#### 4.4.2 Organized programmes and other travel resources

Travel, work and volunteering overseas have never been so easy for young people. There are numerous resources that "gappers" can now draw upon. It was found that the "project stage" of a gap year was catered for by a large number of specialist gap year providers, who offered volunteering opportunities, expeditions, conservation programmes, internships, work experience as well as language and other learning courses to gap year students, designed to bring both enjoyment and constructive benefits. Available programmes covered a whole array of fields and interests, from camera operator training, through volunteering in hospitals, to conservation programmes, drama courses and Christian gap year missions. Organized opportunities varied greatly in length, from just a week to several months or even a whole year. As such, the project stage may take up a different proportion of students' gap years, depending on their preferences and

available budgets (see Chapter 5 for a detailed overview of plans and itineraries of participating students). Support available on such organized gap year programmes tended to vary, depending on the course. At one end of the spectrum were highly organized, structured opportunities, which offered pre-arranged work experience, volunteering or missions, together with training, accommodation, food and around the clock supervision. For example, Raleigh International offered 5, 7 or 10 week sustainable development expeditions for people aged 17-24 (Raleigh International, n.d.-a). They provided food and accommodation and promised safety and expert leaderships throughout their programmes:

“We are safe – safety is at the heart of everything we do. On expedition, all our venturers receive in-depth safety training and are supported full-time by permanent staff. Head office also provides 24 hour emergency cover and support.” (Raleigh International, n.d.-a)

Raleigh also had a strict no drugs and alcohol policy and warned that those who do not comply can be expelled from the expedition (Raleigh International, 2014).

For those who wanted flexibility and did not want to commit to the constraints and around-the-clock supervision of a structured programme, more flexible options were available. Charlotte told me about an organization called Original Volunteers that she wanted to sign up to during the independent stage of her travels. Her main project was volunteering with International Citizen Service (a UK government-funded development programme dedicated to fighting poverty). After that, she planned to travel independently, whilst still having the possibility to take part in different programmes and volunteer, but this time without having to commit to staying in one place:

“I would like quite a lot of plans, as in – quite a lot of options that I could do, but not have anything I had to really stick to... I'd like to be able to... if I decide to go there, or if that doesn't quite work out, I'd have another plan, so it's not too structured.”

Original Volunteers indeed seemed to offer just what she was after, as I discovered on their website (Original Volunteers, 2015). They offered affordable and flexible volunteering programmes, starting from just one week, which were

not restricted to strict start dates, and were as cheap as £37 a week including accommodation. Whilst one could argue that such short programmes are unlikely to contribute in a meaningful way to local communities or environments, they promised to provide volunteers with “life-affirming experiences around the globe” at “unbeatable prices” (Original Volunteers, 2015). During their stay, students were also offered training and support by local coordinators, with entertainments such as salsa lessons being also provided. The website also included an online “Buddy List” social networking scheme, which allowed prospective volunteers to connect with other travellers and check who is coming for each of the programmes in advance.

There were also opportunities for those, who preferred to be fairly independent and flexible, but wanted to participate in a meaningful project without having to pay high fees. For example, Susie wanted to go hitchhiking across Asia and Australia and do conservation volunteering along the way, but many programmes she came across on the Internet charged more than she was able to afford. They also did not seem to facilitate the kind of free, unrestrained experience she was after:

“So I was looking, but I wasn’t really sure what to do. And then I had a one-to-one with my tutor, and um, she showed me WWOOFing [World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms]... it’s just so perfect. Not having to pay for accommodation and food. They, like, accommodate you and feed you, you just have to work there. Um, and you can do it literally everywhere. As soon as she told me, I went home and I looked it all up, and it looked soooo cool.”

Overall, this analysis underlines how available resources make it relatively easy for students to travel and get work/ volunteering experience on their gap years, sometimes in exchange for food and accommodation, which is “perfect”, in Susie’s words, for those on a limited budget. Moreover, encounters with other travellers, an integral part of the experience as discussed in section 4.3.4, are facilitated by organized programmes and social networking schemes such as the aforementioned Buddy List. These extracts also highlight the role of the Internet as an invaluable resource for independent gap year travellers – not only to

browse for opportunities, but also through sites dedicated to linking people together, such as WWOOFing - a fee-restricted site enabling establishing contacts with farmers who are looking for volunteers.

Some students were also able to use the Internet in more creative ways than signing up for existing programmes and schemes. A few were able to create opportunities for themselves, contacting relevant companies or organizations directly, rather than joining a pre-designed structured project. For example, Charlie, the AS student who wanted to do volcanology and tornado chasing on his gap year and possibly some journalism in the Middle East, talked about how he envisaged organizing his travels, which he planned on doing in the last year of college:

"I know there is a lot of online companies that are specifically designed for gap years. I'm not sure, the whole thing about me going to America, I'm not sure they'll have one, so might have to organize it with USGS [United States Geological Survey]... Or, if not, I'll have to contact one of the actual chaser teams that operate around. Like one of the teams of storm chasers. I'll have to probably directly contact them, like, e-mail. I know the whole volcano idea, you can actually get special companies, that would do gap years to them. And Middle East, I know a lot of news companies and the journalists travel around and they sometimes take interns, so you basically help them out."

Of course it was not known at the time of our interview whether any of these plans would be accomplished. This extract shows, however, how the Internet allows students to access distant places and organizations, and that for some, their dreams and aspirations appeared as being at their reach, just an e-mail away. Indeed, another student I interviewed, Miriam, managed to secure a job internship in the US for what she referred to as her "mini-gap" (she didn't want a full year out so decided just to take part in projects over the summer). The internship was with a famous company that restores classic cars, which was a passion of hers. She saw their TV series and decided to contact them directly:

“Um, I’ve sent an e-mail through, after they did one thing when they customized a classic mini. And I’ve sent a thing through, I was saying about my mini and our club and stuff like that...”

As a result of this e-mail exchange, she got invited to “go over there and work there for a little while”.

The overall picture is therefore one in which there is now a breadth of resources facilitating the project stage of gap years, catering for almost all possible interests and goals. Support varies from highly structured programmes that provide accommodation, food, training and around-the-clock supervision, to more flexible opportunities for those who want to incorporate volunteering or work experience into their travel in a more ad-hoc, spontaneous way. Students can also use the Internet to create opportunities for themselves. Of course the extent to which different students were able to take advantage of these resources and whether they had the awareness and competence to make the most of them varied. The issues of access and inequality are discussed in Chapter 6.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that there were additional resources available for independent travellers that young people could draw on to ensure their independent travel stage was safe and well-organized. This included support available on various websites, leaflets and at different events, for example expert advice on required jobs or safety information related to military conflicts and cultural conventions in destination countries. Resources also included travel insurance and more direct support in case of emergency. For example, STA Travel offered 24/7 helpline for independent travellers:

“How does this sound: you go travelling around the world, while we cover your back. Pretty good, right? At STA Travel, not only do we specialize in sourcing you the best adventures and destinations in the world, we also offer 24/7 support while you’re away. We have hundreds of stores around the globe, bursting at the walls with friendly travel experts. But what if you’re 1000s miles from the nearest store? No problem! Pick up the phone and call our Global Travel Help team.” (STA Travel, n.d.-c)

Safety issues were important not only to those planning to go on a gap year, but also often to their parents and guardians. Whilst many gap year students are 18

by the time they embark on their travels, they are often still at least partly dependent on their parents financially, and therefore their support is often necessary. David, a representative of Youth Travel\*, elaborated how the organization's high street location helped make parents feel safer:

"Sometimes they [parents] will literally come in, maybe at the end, when they're about to pay and book it all, and sort of, ask a few questions. And once they meet us... I think people like the fact that we're here, so if anything goes wrong, which happens all the time, they come back and they're like "this has happened, what can we do?" So it's part of. I mean, people can book on the Internet, but you don't have anyone to help. So. I mean, I think people do like that."

Apart from information and support related to safety, independent travellers could rely on a big infrastructure of hostels, bars, day trips and excursions, as well as events, such as Half Moon and Full Moon Parties in Koh Phangan, that bring tens of thousands of travellers together. Some students also mentioned planning to use the support of organizations such as Hospitality Club, which connect travellers with local hosts, who are willing to invite them to their homes and often show them around the local area. The overall picture is therefore one in which independent gap year travellers can now easily organize their travels, utilizing some of the numerous travel resources catering for the backpacker market, which are there to ensure safety, convenience and fun; and can take part in various more-or-less structured projects, to ensure their gap years are constructive.

#### 4.4.3 Information

The study identified numerous channels of information assisting students in making gap year decisions and plans. Several participants mentioned discussing their plans with College tutors, lecturers and Progression Officers, as well as teachers at their old schools. In many cases, they were able to point them in the direction of relevant resources or suggested organizations they knew of – for example Susie was told about WWOOFing by her tutor. There were also gap year talks organized in the College, where gap year representatives and/or former gap year students were invited to share their knowledge and experiences and answer students' questions. Students also recalled receiving gap year information at

UCAS conventions, i.e. events where higher education institutions and a limited number of other organizations are invited to showcase their courses and opportunities. Some participants also mentioned finding out information about gap years on university open days. There was also a stall of one of the gap year providers during a freshers' fair at the College. A career event for Year 9 students in the South West also included a gap year information stall. Ethical Gap Years\* were invited to parents' evenings in the College to advise both students and parents regarding their options. Finally, there were specific gap year fairs organized across the region, showcasing different companies and opportunities available; as well as talks and "open days" organized by main high street gap year and travel providers. Moreover, more targeted gap year opportunities were showcased at various events dedicated to certain groups or communities of interest. For example, Jonathan learnt about a skiing instructor gap year course at a skiing/snowboarding show in London that he visited with his family, and about Christian leadership gap year course at a Christian youth festival. As part of the fieldwork, I attended some of these events, carrying out participant observation to get a first-hand experience of the kinds of information, messages and support available. Most of those events took form of either talks or/and stalls, where practical tips and information were mixed with very evocative testimonies aimed to inspire and educate prospective "gappers". In many cases, these opportunities were showcased by those who participated in previous years.

Lily recalled her memories from a UCAS convention, where one of the gap year organizations was advertising their programmes:

"From what I can remember, it was basically a stall with, like, you could enter a competition to win a flight, and then just, like, stacks of magazines of different places. And they just gave them out and said: 'Yeah, you should travel, it's really good'."

Even though Lily did not intend to travel with a commercial organization, she was happy to use their information and resources to plan her travels independently:

"I've been to the STA Travel shop, and spoken to the guy in there. Just to sort of get an idea of the times of year, the best times of year to go and, like, what else is on offer. But it's just so expensive the things that they offer, their trips, it's like 3 grand,

for, like, 3 weeks to travel with them. And they kind of try to persuade you to do it, but I kind of feel like, ‘no, I’m just going to use your information and your leaflets on the places’ (laughter)”.

This extract suggests that commercial companies may influence even those “gappers” who do not participate in structured projects or travel, including ideas regarding appropriate gap year destinations. Most students also mentioned doing Google searches to find information, inspiration and travel tips. Some subscribed to websites such as [www.wanderingearl.com](http://www.wanderingearl.com) (a travel blog by a self-described “permanent nomad”), [www.bootsnall.com](http://www.bootsnall.com) (information about places around the globe), [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) and many others. Several mentioned using Lonely Planet guidebooks. Parents, older siblings, friends, family and teachers were also important sources of travel information and guidance. Of course not all the students had equal knowledge of, access to and competence in using various sources of information (these issues are discussed in Chapter 6), but the overall picture was one in which all interviewed students had access to at least some information and travel materials, even if the quality and scope of them varied.

#### 4.4.4 Financial resources

Conventionally, one of the main barriers to many types of leisure travel are available financial resources. However, this constraint seemed to play a less significant role in the context of gap years. First of all, students normally still lived with their parents prior to going on a gap year, which made it easier for them to save money from part-time and full-time jobs. Many interviewed students reflected on this being a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” and the commonly expressed view was that after the university they will most likely have to work, cover their living expenses and pay off their university debts, and therefore will not have as many opportunities to save money to travel. In this sense, the time period between school and university can be seen as a unique life stage in terms of available finance, facilitating travel in ways that might not be possible at other points of time. In the following extract, Lily explained why she did not want to put off her gap year until after university:

“It would be so much harder to travel after uni because of so much debt, and stuff like that. It would be harder to live, work and save up money and pay back uni stuff.”

Moreover, the study identified a number of resources that assisted students in saving up for their gap year, such as the “Gap Year Fundraising Guide” distributed at one of the gap year events (Ethical Gap Years\*, n.d.-b). “Even in these ‘credit crunching’ times IT IS POSSIBLE!” advised the leaflet, providing expert tips on how to plan a realistic budget (estimated at £3850). Ideas on how to carry out fundraising were also included, ranging from car washing, through organizing parties and fashion shows, to “sponsored leg wax or head shave”, next to advice on how to find paid employment, as well as information about grants and funds available from various organizations and tips on how to get sponsorship from local businesses and charities. Indeed, the study identified a few gap year scholarships/bursary schemes that were advertised to students. For example, the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) offered £4,000 scholarships towards overseas gap year experiences for students who otherwise would not be able to afford it. The scheme also promised to provide trained mentors to assist participants in planning their gap years and “to remain a source of advice and guidance during and after the gap experience” (Royal Geographical Society with IBG, 2015).

Several other organizations also offered scholarships and bursaries for those who would not normally be able to afford to go. Sometimes contribution from a student was also required. Lily and Charlotte were both successful in their applications for volunteering with International Citizen Service. Lily described in detail how she filled in an online application form on the Internet, was invited to an interview in London (travel expenses to attend the interview were covered), and got accepted to do a 10 week volunteering project in Nicaragua. She still had to raise some money, but it was significantly less than other programmes she looked into, as she explained:

“You have to fundraise a certain amount of money according to your household income. So I have to fundraise £1,500.”

International Citizen Service programme is mainly funded by the UK government’s Department for International Development (DFID) and partly by volunteers’ fundraising (International Citizen Service, 2015). They provide a fundraising team to support participants “every step of the way” and plenty of information and advice about gathering necessary funds on their website.

Another student, Mark, was offered financial support from his local church, although in the end he decided not to take a gap year. The same church had previously contributed to his friend's gap year, which she spent volunteering with children in Peru:

“My local church, which I go to, has said that they would... that they have a fund for things like this. So they will contribute a little bit, £400-500 to me going away.”

Together, this analysis suggests that there is a number of financial resources available to young people when planning their gap year travel, in the form of grants and scholarships, as well as support in planning budgets, fundraising, getting jobs and saving money. In addition, the specific time that the gap year occupies in the life course creates a unique opportunity for young people to save up enough money to embark on long periods of travel to often multiple, faraway destinations. However, not all students were equally skilled and able to make the most of those opportunities. Many relied on financial support from parents, who were able to at least partly fund their gap year activities, or had savings, inheritance money, or other sources of funding. Chapter 6 provides more discussion on the unequal access to gap year experiences. Nonetheless, this analysis showed that gap years provide unique opportunities for making travel more affordable, which may not be available at other points in life.

#### **4.5 Networked others and their practices**

It is already becoming clear from the above discussion that there are many agents involved in shaping the ideas about what it means to do a good gap year, different actors who sanction/reward gap year takers for their choices, and others, who provide resources. These agents have different orientations towards gap years, which result from their own social practices and roles/positions they adopt, as well as their own habitus, developed through past experiences and dispositions. As such, in line with strong structuration, these agents were conceptualized as part of external structures, or “terrain for action” for gap year students. This is a different understanding of the context from some of the traditional structural accounts, as here context is seen as dynamically shaped by numerous position-practices, which can then become the object of investigation in itself – and, therefore, also a site for policy intervention. The in-depth character of this study

did not allow for exploring those position-practices in much detail, but it was nonetheless possible to map the main groups of actors involved and get an insight into some of the practices at play. The accounts considered below do not present a full picture of different goals, concerns, practices and beliefs of networked agents, but they do give an idea of a variety of approaches to the gap year phenomenon and how different actors are involved in shaping the external structures, i.e. the meanings, norms and resources. The main implication of this analysis is that strategies aimed at promoting more sustainable forms of gap year may need to address those variously positioned actors, rather than limiting policies to gap year takers themselves.

#### 4.5.1 Commercial and non-commercial organizations

The first set of agents identified in this study were various organizations providing and/or promoting gap year opportunities. At one end of the spectrum, there were profit-making gap year providers and travel companies. At the other - non-profit organizations, such as international development agencies, volunteering groups or church organizations, which for various reasons believed that gap years were worth promoting, either because they were perceived to be good for young people taking part, for the communities they visited, or both. The study found that different organizations were actively involved in perpetuating positive images of a gap year, often addressing and debunking the negative perceptions of such travel. They also sometimes provided scholarships or bursaries to contribute to the cost of a gap year, or assisted students in different ways during their funds gathering stage. Moreover, they were frequently involved in developing necessary travel skills and providing information, thus training new practitioners to take part. Resources and information for parents were also often available through these channels. Some organizations made links with schools, appeared at parents' evenings in the College and at gap year events or UCAS conventions. Some had high street shops, others organized talks and workshops in various locations. Through those different activities, these organizations can be seen as facilitating the continuous reproduction of the gap year practice and recruitment of new participants.

The following extract from my interview with David, a representative of Youth Travel\*, one of the biggest providers of gap year and travel opportunities

for students, shows how the company's marketing practices lead to specific types of resources being available to young people:

"I mean, as a company, we don't spend much on advertising. So you've probably never seen an advert for Youth Travel\* on television. We do a lot of local marketing. I think it's just, I mean, it's kind of what we do as well, we like to help people and give them advice and stuff like that, instead of just booking their trips. So going into sort of schools and colleges and stuff like that, it works both ways, it helps with our sort of awareness, people know who we are and what we do, but it also gives them information."

The company also organized talks in their high street shop, where young people could come and get information about different travel opportunities available and multi-stop flights they offered. Here, David described one of the events, which I later attended:

"The one in February, we'll have suppliers, they will come in and they will talk about sort of what they do, what they offer. So, say, for example, it's a bus company in Australia... But they do talk as well about destinations and things to do in Australia. So they will try to make sure it's not so much about selling stuff, it's giving people information. But we try to cover everything. From what to do, where to go, options to... And then we'll normally hang around if people want to come speak to us about what we've done, and obviously we're here to answer questions."

Of course the ways of attracting new customers/ volunteers and marketing practices varied between organizations. For example, some required or encouraged their ex-volunteers to carry on community work and become spokespeople for the programme upon return, thus helping to recruit future participants. Such strategy was adopted by International Citizen Service, which required young people to take part in what they called "Action at Home" when back in the country, which could take various forms, such as organizing a photo exhibition to share stories from the gap year or getting involved in community projects at home (International Citizen Service, 2015). Such outreach work is

often presented as an additional work experience, and thus beneficial both for the volunteer and the organization. Regardless of recruitment strategies, however, all these organizations contributed in a greater or lesser extent to the development of meanings and norms and providing resources, which prospective gap year students face as part of their “terrain for action”. For example, many leaflets and brochures I picked up at various events had practical tips, safety guidance, information for parents, participant testimonies and quotes from employers and university admissions tutors, which promoted the positive image of a year out as a constructive and desirable thing to do (as described in sections 4.2 and 4.3), and also something that with the right skills and effort can be within reach and financial possibilities for all. Former gap year takers present at many of the events I attended spread ideas of appropriate gap year activities and inspired prospective “gappers”. As argued in section 4.4.3, even those who did not enroll on structured projects or purchased travel packages, were sometimes found to use the resources provided by various organizations. Thus, gap year organizations have a strong role in shaping the landscape of meanings related to gap year travel, as well as providing resources and developing travel skills.

Whilst for commercial companies attracting new customers was necessary for making profit, non-commercial and non-profit organizations had a variety of reasons and agendas. For example, Ethical Gap Years\* was a small organization run by gap year enthusiasts on a volunteer basis, which encouraged young people to take part in what they saw as meaningful gap year experiences. I talked to Ian, one of the founders, who described in detail how the organization operated and its intended purpose. Ethical Gap Years\* did not provide any gap year programmes or courses itself, but was there to assist students in making their plans, sharing their expertise and knowledge about travel, advising on which volunteering and work experience courses to choose, as well as giving advice on fundraising, budget planning and providing information for parents. Ethical Gap Years\* gave talks at various schools and colleges and their representatives were sometimes invited to parents’ evenings. They worked closely with the College I collaborated with. In the following extract, Ian talked about the organization’s aim to reach out to students from less privileged backgrounds:

“We have always tried to get more interest in comprehensive schools. In a way, independent schools can look after

themselves. Grammar schools, yes, we go into them if they invite us. But just the ordinary comprehensive schools, that's where we would very much like to do more work and persuade more people, because it's all part of a structure of education which puts young people from advantaged families – you know what I'm saying, the advantage carries right the way through the school system – more likely to take a gap year, more likely to get into a top university, and very often, through parental connections, get the best of the jobs available for graduates. And we try, as far as we can, to put a bit of pressure the other way, in favour of the people from less-advantaged backgrounds.”

Ian also made sure that gap year providers that they pointed students to provided genuine educational experience for the participants and genuine development benefits for the communities they volunteered or worked in. He himself travelled a lot in his life and believed that well-planned gap years can be very good for students – giving them a break, an opportunity to re-think their university choices (and make them less likely to drop out), make friends and boost their future employability. Websites and brochures of some other non-profit organizations, for example those dedicated to bursary/scholarship schemes with RGS with IBG, Raleigh International or Lattitude Global Volunteering, expressed a similar sentiment of empowering those people who would not normally be able to access such experiences.

Many other organizations were involved in promoting gap years for a variety of reasons. For example, some offered Christian gap years (e.g. Year for God, BMS World Mission, Mission Africa, Youth with a Mission, Youth for Christ, Latin Link or Soul Edge). Their programmes varied from short/medium term missions, evangelism and community work, to character building, leadership and worship programmes, or a mixture of those. Matthew, a missionary and a representative of one of the organizations, whom I met during participant observation I carried out at the Christian youth festival, explained that mission-based gap years aim “to lead people into an understanding of the God who created this world and each individual in it”, as well as to help people in practical ways. It was beyond the scope of this research to analyze all gap year organizations with their different interests and agendas, but this analysis gives a

sense of a variety of actors with a vested interest in promoting gap years for multiple reasons, and the kinds of efforts they go into to attract and train new practitioners. Their practices proliferate gap year conventions and resources and are part of the context that students face at the moment of recruitment to gap years. Thus, managing gap year mobility may require working closely with various organizations which are involved in shaping its current form.

#### 4.5.2 Schools and colleges

In this section I review the evidence related to the role of schools and colleges in facilitating recruitment to the gap year practice, based mainly on the College I collaborated with, but also at times reporting anecdotal evidence suggesting different principles and practices that may exist in other educational institutions. The analysis involved examining the perspectives and practices of College lecturers, Progression Officers, tutors and other agents. Depending on their roles and practices associated with those roles, as well as their individual dispositions, skills and beliefs (i.e. their habitus), they were found to be involved to different extents in the (re)production of gap year meanings and norms as well as providing resources for students.

Susanne was a Head of Advice and Recruitment at the College, but her role involved also organizing first year's parents evenings at which gap year information was provided as one possible pathway of progression beyond college. Susanne regularly invited Ethical Gap Years\* to those events, who distributed gap year material and sometimes brought ex-gap year volunteers to deliver talks. Susanne saw showcasing gap year opportunities as part of the assistance with progression decisions that the College provided for their students. Ian from Ethical Gap Years\* was the contact she inherited from the person who was organizing those events in the past and she felt that the information he provided was so comprehensive that there was no need for inviting other companies. We then had a broader discussion about different gap year talks organized across the College by other members of staff, who sometimes took initiative to invite ex volunteers or representatives from gap year organizations. Susanne explained how such activities fit with Ofsted's requirements (the UK Office for Standards in Education, Children's Education and Skills):

“Ofsted want progression, employability, these next steps after college, which is high on the agenda. So actually it has to be on the agenda for all faculties.”

Elisabeth, a Lead Tutor of the Humanities Faculty, organized several gap year talks for her students. She explained in detail how she decided that such events were valuable and necessary and what made her become proactive in organizing such talks:

“I mean, I’ve been friends with John [the Geography lecturer] for a long time, we started at College together, and I know both himself and his children’s school that his children go to, very much promote going on a gap year and volunteering, that sort of thing. So it’s primarily I think because of him that I originally thought students need more than just a pamphlet put underneath their noses. That maybe if we can offer a real life person to come along and talk to them. I suspect things get offered centrally, maybe there’s some open evenings when people come and represent organizations for gap years, but it passes students by, unless they happen to be there on a parents evening or an open evening, they happen to see a stand. And I didn’t want to leave it to chance. I wanted every student in our faculty to hear a talk. Because you never know, they might say ‘oh, I fancy doing a gap year’”.

Elisabeth later elaborated that lead tutors are allowed “free reign” and decide what they organize for their faculties. She was being proactive because of her personal belief in the value of those programmes and saw it along the same lines as sending students progression information about universities, which they are obliged to do. She later explained:

“[Students] they’re increasingly needing to sell themselves with particular experience, and things they actually have on their personal statements, so you know, that would be beneficial on a gap year, just to spend few months of your life offering your services freely. So I’m starting, next year I think I’ll start to incorporate that a bit more, that’s to first years, right at the

moment they get here. One of our sociology teachers sent me an article... about the difference between the qualities of personal statements between students who have gone to independent schools versus state schools... And I think because we are an open access college, a state sector college, we get students from all walks of life and obviously majority of whom had “normal”, whatever the better word, parents, as opposed to super rich parents. So they can’t make the most of having these opportunities like gap year, and volunteering and work experience. It all kind of ties in together really.”

Thus, similarly to some of the non-profit organizations discussed in the previous section, Elisabeth was motivated by wanting to ensure that students from a state sector have equal opportunities as those from independent schools. Similar sentiments were expressed by lecturers John and Katherine, who felt that they did not want their students to miss out on what they saw as valuable opportunities, both from the perspective of future careers and university opportunities, as well as personal growth and learning about the world more broadly. The following extract from my interview with Katherine provides a prime example:

“I wouldn’t want to go backwards, I wouldn’t want to not have the opportunity to travel and I would want my students... because I still do greatly believe that a lot of prejudice in the world is caused by people not knowing what another country is like and making assumptions by having a holiday there. So only seeing one part of it. Whereas when you travel, you’re not on holiday, you see people, you talk to people, you have experiences. And you work. I mean, generally, most people on a gap year do some sort of work... I think once you make friends in another country you do have a bond in that country. And you listen to the news and you’re like ‘oh yes, I’ve been there’, ‘yes, I remember that’, and you know the name of the president, and you understand something about the political situation. ”

Katherine's beliefs in the value of gap years made her assist her students in their planning. Having an extensive travel experience herself she was able to advise and point them in the direction of appropriate resources and organizations. In the following extract she explained how she helped her students, emphasizing also how the Internet and modern technology assisted her in this process:

"If I have a tutorial with them, I sit there with my iPad and I go: 'have you thought about this, have you thought about that?', and we can do it in 5 minutes."

In other cases, teachers were able to use their personal contacts to put students in touch with specific organizations, making travel and volunteering easier and more affordable. For example, Charlotte was hoping to do some volunteering in a Nepalese school, through connections of one of her lecturers:

"He's been to Nepal quite a lot. I have spoken to him about it. But, basically, it wouldn't be like an organized trip.... He has contacts over there and he would let them know I am coming and they would show me round the school and things like that."

I later inquired how she ended up discussing these plans with her lecturer and she explained that she came to him with a vague idea of gap year travel and he was able to assist with the details:

"So his view was that he could get it a lot cheaper and that he would be able to organize it in a way that would really help people. So that's how that came up. I was, like, 'I'm going travelling'. And he was like, 'Do it this way'."

This analysis suggests that lecturers and tutors can be important agents, assisting students in their gap year planning, both in very practical ways, but also by educating students in the issues related to travel and volunteering ethics. Other actors within the College were also able to assist students in gap year decisions in different ways. Kath, for example, the Progression Officer, shared her knowledge on which university courses accept and which might frown upon gap year applicants. Twice a year she did a "higher education talk" at parents' evenings where she advised those who were thinking of a gap year to always check with unis whether they were happy with their choices.

In the accounts considered above, lecturers and other College actors were able to utilize their own skills, knowledge and experience to assist students in gap year planning. This was often seen as part of their professional roles to provide advice on progression and next steps after college, supported by the overarching Ofsted agenda, but many initiatives resulted from their own motivation and personal beliefs in the value of gap years. Altogether, these findings are in contrast to Heath's (2007) suggestion that gap year takers from the state sector do not get as much direct encouragement and support from their institutions as those from the independent sector. Of course the experiences of one College are not representative of other state sector schools and the support provided can vary. Nonetheless, this shows that at least some state sector colleges can actively support gap years as a way of bridging the gap of privilege and ensuring their students get experiences and opportunities that are valued in the job and university markets, and in the society as a whole.

Indeed, there was anecdotal evidence that some other schools in the area were not so encouraging of gap years and that included independent, grammar and state sector schools. Several students I interviewed recalled their previous schools having a negative view on gap years. For example, Chloe talked about her old, private, "snobby" school, as she described it:

"Chloe: Because at my school they were like 'what's the point of gap year?' sort of thing.

Researcher: Was that their approach? That's interesting. So they didn't recommend it?

Chloe: No, they were like 'once you're in the working mode, you're going to be still in the working mode for university'. And I was like 'well, so many years of education, you'd need a break' sort of thing."

Ian from Ethical Gap Years\* also said that some schools his organization tried to contact never get in touch, although he also observed increasing interest:

"I think, increasingly, people are realizing, and key people like heads of sixth form and careers are realizing, that we are producing far more graduates than there are genuine graduate

jobs for people, and to have something extra to offer employers is really important. And increasingly, I think key people like that and head teachers are realizing the benefits [of a gap year]. But there are still many, many schools, I mean in our patch in the West Country, from whom I never get any response to anything I send to them, or whatever, and in some cases we know they just say 'No, we do not recommend gap years', and we haven't succeeded in changing their minds."

I did not manage to speak to anyone at those other schools, so the reasons why this could be the case are anecdotal. In Ian's perspective, there could be a variety of reasons: parental wishes for their children to go straight to university or lack of time and resources in schools and colleges that are now under "relentless" pressure and can see providing gap year support as "yet another thing".

Apart from direct forms of support discussed above, it was also found that sometimes students were assisted in their gap year travels in a less direct way, through taking part in school trips. The analysis revealed that overseas school trips were sometimes a source of confidence and travel skills, as well as an inspiration (see also Chapters 5 and 6 for more discussion). John saw empowering students to travel as part of his role as a Geography lecturer. In the following extract he talked about the trip to Morocco that they organized every year:

"We run a trip most years abroad, and for many students it's their first time abroad. So part of my job I think is just to open students' eyes to how easy and safe it can be. And one thing we really focus on trips like that is to say: 'don't avoid risk, just manage it. Know how to be careful, know how to go into the souks of Morocco that's really crowded, and just keep yourself safe'. So that's part of my unwritten job, that's what I do."

Later on he commented on how such school trips may empower students to go on a gap year: "I could do that' - this makes gap year seem much more accessible."

Organizing school trips abroad and the value of travel and seeing new places was not limited to Geography only, some other lecturers also saw them

as an integral part of their professional role. Nigel, for example, who taught Sports Science at the College, organized a skiing trip to France every year, motivated by sharing his passion for skiing with his pupils. He reported getting professional pride from the fact that students who had never travelled before could get that opportunity:

"As an example, we had a student seven years ago who didn't come from a particularly wealthy family, hadn't really travelled. He, literally, had never been out of the South West; he had never been further than Y. He came on the ski trip, sat on the coach all the way, got to The Alps and was like, 'Oh my God.' He was one of those real rough diamond kind of guys. But he's now a qualified teacher, and so on. I saw him, God, probably about a year ago just walking through X. And he still skis. He still does that. And he's trying to organize a ski trip in his school, and all those kind of things. He said it was solely because he went on that [ski trip]."

Trying to empower students to travel and allowing access to other socially valued practices (such as skiing), developing travel skills (e.g. teaching how to be safe in Moroccan souks) can be interpreted as concerted efforts to improve students' social and cultural capital. Such efforts are in line with Urry's (2002) idea of a "good society", i.e. the one that appreciates the value of travel and enables its members' participation in corporeal travel. The College I collaborated with was very engaged in opening up those possibilities for their students.

In addition, school trips also fitted with other practices and concerns within the school, as suggested by Nigel:

"I think that's why we do so many trips, because we know it supports learning. The students then, their feedback they give to Ofsted is normally quite positive, say, 'Oh yeah, we went and did this'. As a college, when we do marketing events – I've got one tomorrow, we've got a school coming in, about 200 Year 10 students coming in, or Year 11 – I do a talk about enrichment, but I also start off by asking them about what they remember about school – what was the good things. It's always trips."

Thus, whilst school trips may be organized partly to empower students to travel in the future, including taking part in gap years, this is not their sole purpose - they also bring tangible benefits to colleges and schools by assisting the learning process and improving student satisfaction. The development of travel skills and confidence is only one of the expected outcomes of school trips.

Together, this analysis underlies several important points. Firstly, the support available to students at schools and colleges may vary. Whilst some do not recommend gap years, the College I worked with put a lot of effort into ensuring their students get the same opportunities as those from more privileged backgrounds. Various actors at the College provided information on gap year programmes, invited experts and ex-volunteers to give talks to students, helped with planning and researching opportunities, utilized personal contacts and experiences to assist students in their choices. These efforts were not organized in any top-down manner, although they did fit loosely with the progression/employability agenda promoted by Ofsted, as gap years were often viewed as being good for boosting students' future work and university prospects. However, people I spoke to provided such support on their own accord and mainly due to their personal beliefs, rather than having it written into their job responsibilities. In Elisabeth's words, they were allowed "free reign". Personal passion, connections, experiences and the ways in which they viewed their professional roles, seemed to be of key importance here, rather than top-down directives. Indirect support was also available in the form of school trips, through which some lecturers aimed to help develop students' travel skills and empower them to travel in the future, including taking a gap year. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that other schools have different policies, with some state, private and grammar schools mentioned by several participants not being interested in promoting gap years, and in some cases even dissuading students from such decisions, preferring their pupils to go straight to university instead.

#### 4.5.3 Parents

In this section I consider another important group of actors – parents and guardians. Many of the interviewed students relied on financial support from parents to at least partly contribute to their gap year expenses. In this way, parents were directly enabling participation for some. On the other hand, those students who were determined to gather all the necessary funds themselves, still

relied on parental support whilst working and saving up money, as most lived with parents when in college, as discussed earlier. Parental support and approval of gap year decisions was therefore of paramount importance, even if they did not contribute to travel expenses in a direct way. Moreover, parents were often influential figures in making post-college choices more broadly, providing guidance and advice, which sometimes included sharing their own travel skills and competence (albeit support provided varied between participants from different backgrounds – these issues are discussed in Chapter 6). For example, Lily was able to fall back on her stepdad’s support in booking visas and flights:

“My stepdad will probably help me a lot because he’s travelled a lot. So he knows what he’s doing, a little bit.”

Whether parents are able to provide various forms of travel support is likely to depend on the resources they have access to, their own travel competence, their beliefs about the value of gap years and how they view their role as parents. Interviewed students reported that their parents had predominantly positive attitudes towards their gap years and most were supportive of students’ choices. In some cases they even directly encouraged them to take a gap year. In the following extract, Jonathan recalled his mother’s advice:

“Jonathan: She’s said to me, like ‘I want you to go away, I want you to have that experience of being independent and exploring, like, not life, but yourself sort of thing, before you go to uni’. So she doesn’t want me to... she wants me to have a gap year, she doesn’t want me to go [to university] straight away...”

Researcher: All right. Why do you think is that?

Jonathan: I think it’s cause her upbringing wasn’t the best. Cause she was born in London, it was quite a poor area of London. Um, and she’s worked really hard to sort of turn it around. She’s always regretted, well, like, she hasn’t had the chances to do things. And she’s like ‘If I had the chances to do things, like, now, I’d 100% do it’. She wanted to go to uni, she’s been thinking about going to uni, doing, like, adult classes, just cause of... she didn’t have the chance to, like, study education further. So she wants me to make the most out of it. So I think that’s the reason

why she wants me to take the chances while I got them. Because they won't come around again. May not come around again.”

The above extract shows that the perceptions of a gap year as bringing self-reflection and building independence, as described in section 4.2.3, can be reproduced and communicated to students by their parents. Jonathan's mother was not talking through experience – she did not have those opportunities herself - therefore she must have learnt about the value of gap years through other channels, possibly stories of other parents or gap year marketing. The extract also shows how supporting gap years can be seen as fitting with the role of a good parent, making sure children do not miss out on positive experiences.

In some cases even those students who did not want to participate were being pushed in the direction of gap years, which illustrates how strongly some parents believed in their value. Katherine, the Environmental Studies lecturer, told me about one student of hers who was very hard working, and how both she and the student's mother were trying to persuade her to go on a gap year:

“One student.... She just works, and works, and works, and I can see that she's getting jaded. She's just, you know, she's looking for four A\* at A-Level, that's what she wants. And she looks tired now. And I'd like her to have a gap year before she goes to university... Her mother's been trying to persuade her to go, to do a gap year, but she's... it's strange. She's just driven, I think she loves her subject.”

However, not all parents were equally supportive, even though the majority of students reported varying levels of support and encouragement. Tara was the only one who told me that her parents did not want her to defer entry and go on a gap year, which would have been her desired choice. Without their support, she was still unsure about her plans and was considering going straight to university and having her gap year after she graduated or half way through her course instead. Later on she elaborated how she felt that going straight to university was a natural, normal choice in her family, established by her older siblings, and that her parents were reluctant for her to deviate from this path:

“I think it's because they wish they'd gone to university so they want me to do it. And everyone else in my family has gone to the

university. I mean, I have an older sister and an older brother, and then I have a twin sister. And my twin, she's really strict about going to university, and she's like straight A student, and she wants to go to Oxford and I'm just like, I don't know. I want to go abroad. But I think it's just because I'm not following the tradition more than anything. Because they'd worry what I'd do."

Tara's parents seemed therefore to have a different perception of their roles as parents and how the gap year fitted in that role. Rather than a year out being seen as a positive experience, Tara felt that for her parents it was a source of "worry", potentially diverting her from university, which in her view they prioritized. Kath, the Progression Officer whose daughter also went on a gap year, spoke of one of the major concerns that parents tend to have:

"Parents seem to be a little bit more resistant to students having a gap year, because I think they feel, and this is quite a concern actually, that students get out of the habit of studying. They just relax too much during their gap year, and certainly my own daughter and a couple of her friends who had gap years, I think they found it a bit. I mean it took them a good few months to get back into it, and you know, engage the brain again."

However, in her view, the benefits of a gap year were much greater and overshadowed that one drawback. In Kath's perception, her daughter became independent and mature and also "found her way with alcohol" on her gap year, so was not drawn into the "ridiculous" and "out of control" drinking culture at the university, which can be a major concern for parents. Another positive consequence in Kath's perception was that she became more confident and, inspired by her experiences, signed up for a study abroad year, which was an option available on her university course, but which she did not want to consider before. Parental practices were not explored in-depth in this research, but Kath recalled talking to her friends about their children's gap years – it is likely that this is how the perceptions and understandings of gap years from a parental perspective spread and positive stories such as Kath's can reinforce the favourable perceptions of gap years among parents.

The importance of parents as key agents was also recognized by both commercial and non-profit organizations, which were appealing to their role as care givers, trying to convince them of the value that gap year experiences can bring to their offspring. For example, Ethical Gap Years'\* brochure "For parents: are gap years worth it?" stated the following:

"Above all, a young person with a good gap year story to tell is at an advantage in the jobs market. There are not enough genuine graduate jobs for the numbers graduating. A good degree is not a passport to a job. Employers receive hundreds of applications from qualified graduates, so they will look for applicants with something that makes them stand out. A challenging gap year experience indicates that the applicant is likely to have the skills, personal qualities and work experiences that employers are looking for." (Ethical Gap Years\*, n.d.-a)

The above extract underlines again the positive value of gap years, appealing to the role of parents to equip their children with necessary skills and experiences in order to succeed in life and secure employment. Gap years are often portrayed as a near necessity in today's job and university markets. The same document then listed and debunked a number of negative gap year stereotypes that can be off-putting from the perspective of a parent, such as gap year making young people forget how to study, put them off university or be a "self-indulgent, booze-ridden travel". Whilst admitting that in some instances this could be the case, the benefits of a well-spent gap year were outlined as overwhelmingly positive. Advice was also provided for parents on how to make sure that their children's gap years are meaningful and beneficial.

Many other gap year organizations also recognized parents as important actors and appealed to them in their advertising material. Apart from boosting employability, messages also focused on personal gains and development. The following extract is a parent's testimony from the "Experience is Everything" by Africa & Asia Venture (n.d.):

"The life lessons our daughter learnt on AV will serve her well for the rest of her life. Some things cannot be taught, only experienced."

The above extract again stresses the role of a gap year as a unique opportunity to learn – another stage in life education that will bring tangible benefits. It is something that traditional education is not able to provide – it “cannot be taught, only experienced”. Whilst the message is quite vague (it is not clear what kind of life lessons will be provided, and how exactly they will impact on future life), the message for parents is clear – your children will miss out on important experiences and lessons if they do not go on a gap year.

More research is needed to provide a more detailed insight into how parental roles and practices impact on the performance of a gap year. Nonetheless, the preceding analysis suggests that parents are an important group of agents, facilitating or constraining their children’s participation in gap year travel, either through providing/withdrawing resources (e.g. financial support, assisting in travel arrangements, sharing information and knowledge) or proliferating understandings and meanings of gap years as a valuable/or not a valuable thing to do. The importance of parental support is recognized by many organizations, which are actively involved in trying to convince parents that gap years will be beneficial to their children.

#### 4.5.4 Recruitment practices – admissions and employment

The final cluster of relevant actors were people involved in recruitment practices at different institutions and organizations.

In terms of university practices, it seemed that whether deferred entries and gap years were accepted or even favoured in the admissions process varied substantially between institutions and even between different courses within the same institution. For example, whilst, as discussed earlier, Charlotte recalled History at Durham University having a negative attitude towards gap years (indeed their website stated that they “strongly prefer applicants to apply in the correct cycle”), the approach varied from course to course, with Chemistry Department, for example, informing students that they “welcome the maturity and knowledge that you will gain in a well-planned gap year”, although they recommended prospective students doing some maths refresh works before arrival (University of Durham, 2015a, 2015b).

Also, whether gap year experiences could indeed boost students’ personal statements and result in greater chances of securing a place, depended on how

much personal statements mattered in the admissions process at each course and university. Whilst in a lot of advertising material gap year opportunities were presented as being impressive to admissions tutors, at some universities information contained in personal statements was not being taken into account when making recruitment decisions. George, the Admissions Manager at one of the universities in the South West, told me that they do not look at personal statements at all, unless in a very unlikely scenario when they have to make a decision between two equally qualified candidates. However, as he said:

“In my time, that hasn’t... I’ve been here four years. That’s never happened. I can’t see that we would run out of other things which we would prefer to use and would fall back on using the personal statement to discriminate between applicants.”

That particular university had a centralized admissions process, where grades and other quantifiable qualifications were the main selection criteria, and in this respect, as George contended, they were an “outlier”, with most universities trying to score the personal statement somehow. However, even though at this particular university gap years did not make any difference for the selection criteria, they still believed that they were a valuable experience, and that was the message they communicated to students at the open days:

"We say at the open day talks - and it’s true - that we do think someone taking a gap year, depending on what they do, is likely to make them a better student and be able to contribute more. At the same time, we don’t factor that into our decision making."

Other institutions indeed had different policies, for example at some courses at the University of Bristol personal statements accounted to 50% of the overall score, with extra-curricular activities, volunteering or additional research being able to influence admissions decisions (see section 4.3.2 for details). Students applying for such courses might be more enticed to undertake constructive gap year programmes to boost their prospects of securing a place.

Accepting deferred entry applicants can help universities ensure the appropriate intake. George, the Admissions Manager, explained that whilst they officially had a rule of not accepting more than 10% deferred entry applicants, in practice this was unlikely to be a constraint:

“We would normally look to ensure there is no more than 10% of the subsequent year’s intake taken up by people who applied the year before... I think, as an institution as well, to be honest, even if it exceeded that 10%, the decision would probably be, well, do we know for certain how many applications we are going to have next year? No. So is it better to have 15% of applicants for next year already in the bag rather than wait until the next year and worry? So I can’t see it, really, that constraint kicking in.”

This quote therefore suggests that it can be beneficial for universities to accept gap year applicants – to ensure that they have filled in all the places for a given course. Not accommodating for gap year could mean losing applicants, as many other universities are willing to accept deferred entries – this is important in the system where universities compete with each other for the numbers of students they attract. Some of the interviewed students indeed based their university decisions on whether they accepted deferred entries or not. As mentioned before, Charlotte was not impressed with Durham’s “attitude” and she decided not to apply for their history course. Similarly, Cardiff Metropolitan University’s decision not to allow deferred entry made Jonathan decide to accept one of the other offers:

“We’ve rung them up, and they definitely don’t defer entry. So... And that was one of my main, that was one of my main options. So that’s sort of made me... but I think going away [on a gap year] would be better than going to that course. And there are another two courses that I really want to do.”

The above analysis makes it clear that admissions processes and approaches to gap years and deferred entry vary greatly between universities and even between courses at the same university. It was beyond the scope of this study to analyze the reasons in detail, but it seems that issues such as the number of applicants, personal attitudes to gap years of admissions tutors, perceived benefits (such as maturity and experience) versus perceived drawbacks (forgetting important skills, need for revision) were some of the factors influencing the approach of university courses towards gap years. These various approaches and messages communicated to students in admissions criteria documents and university open

days were a part of the “terrain for action”. The predominant view among the interviewed students was, however, that gap years would be appreciated by admissions officers as long as they are constructive, and they reacted with surprise when finding out that their desired courses did not allow it.

A second family of recruitment practices related to graduate employers. Some gap year promotion material included quotes from employers, such as this extract from “What the employers say” section of Gapforce (n.d.-a) brochure:

“We place a huge value on gap years which very often help candidates to distinguish themselves from the competition’ Keith Dugdale, KPMG”

It was beyond the scope of this research to look into why employers such as KPMG favour gap year applicants, and how exactly their selection processes work, but such descriptions of the recruitment practices play an important role in perpetuating norms associated with going on a gap year. Similarly, at one of the talks organized at the College, Rosie (an ex gap year student) was describing how employers always wanted to discuss her gap year at every job interview she attended and how her experiences were welcomed with interest and curiosity. Employers’ selection processes and their ways to sieve through CVs and assess interview performances communicated to students through such stories and in gap year marketing materials, arguably perpetuate the perceptions of gap years as a valuable addition to one’s CV.

#### **4.6 Conclusions**

From the preceding analysis, two broad points can be noted: first, that gap years can be seen as a form of social practice, facilitated by external structures in the form of meanings, norms and resources; and second, that these external structures are shaped by various networked agents, who adopt different orientations towards gap years, guided by the logics, concerns and resources associated with their own social practices and the different roles and positions they adopt in their lives (e.g. as a parent, a teacher, an admissions tutor, a graduate employer or a gap year provider).

The socially shared meanings of gap years identified in this research supported and extended those provided by previous gap year literature. It was found that gap years were widely understood as a constructive break from

education and an acceptable, perfectly normal life stage, to the extent that some students were unable to state when and how exactly they made that decision, as it was “always” on their minds. From the perspective of this thesis, the most important finding was that international travel was commonly perceived as a desirable, if not key, aspect of a well-spent gap year. Taking a gap year was sometimes almost synonymous with engaging in some form of travel. The analysis revealed that a gap year should ideally consist of three stages: gathering funds; some form of a “constructive” project (which can take place abroad); and independent travel. Most of the participating students designed their gap years roughly along these lines, which suggests that rather than being driven solely by individual aspirations and motivations, prospective gap year takers follow to a large extent an existing script for action when making their plans.

A well spent gap year was believed to bring tangible personal benefits at the moment of transitions to adulthood and higher education, namely gaining greater certainty regarding future careers and university courses, as well as developing an adult identity, i.e. becoming more mature and independent, particularly through engaging in travel. Constructive gap years were also widely portrayed and perceived as bringing rewards from relevant others. These included improved prospects of securing a place at a desired university course; being able to perform better and make the most of university life; an improved social and cultural capital; as well as landing a dream job after graduation. Wrong gap year decisions could, on the other hand, result in social sanctions: being perceived as a drifter and a layabout.

Beyond socially shared meanings and normative rules, gap year choices were also enabled/constrained in powerful ways by available material and non-material resources. In particular, the possibility to defer entry being now built into the admissions process and accepted by most university courses, enabled worry free travel after securing a place on a desired programme. Moreover, the project stage was found to be catered for by numerous more-or-less structured, shorter and longer terms, and more-or-less affordable gap year programmes, tailored to an astounding variety of potential interests and careers. Students were also sometimes able to use the Internet to create individual opportunities for themselves. In addition, existing tourist infrastructure, particularly that catering for the backpacker market, makes it increasingly easy to travel independently. When

planning their gap years, students could also rely on a breadth of information available through both formal and informal channels. Bursaries and scholarships were available for those who could not afford to take part otherwise, and information and assistance on fundraising and saving was provided. Occupying a unique position in the life course, pre-university gap years provide what was often seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gather necessary funds and engage in long-term travel.

Overall, the most important implication here is that students do not reinvent the wheel when making seemingly individual gap year decisions, but are informed by existing conventions, normative expectations and are empowered/limited by available resources. Moreover, structuration perspective allowed for accounting for this context not as a static reality, which is often the case in traditional structural accounts, but as an assembly of networked others and their position practices. The analysis made it clear that gap year is not an activity over which any one set of agents has absolute control. Commercial and non-commercial organizations were actively involved in shaping the terrain for action and promoting gap year activities for a variety of reasons and agendas, from profit-making, through ensuring equal opportunities for young people from all backgrounds, to delivering help in areas of perceived need (more information on destinations can be found in Chapter 5). The analysis also found that some schools and colleges may be actively involved in assisting students in their planning, both in direct and indirect ways, although others might be more reluctant to do so, or even dissuade them from taking part. Parents and guardians were identified as another group of influential actors, with different attitudes to gap year taking, enabling and constraining participation (although most students reported encouragement and support, suggesting that positive attitudes may prevail). Finally, university admissions and employment recruitment practices were found to shape the landscape of meanings and normative perceptions of the gap year. The overall picture is therefore one in which various agents are seen as first and foremost practitioners – always in the midst of interrelated position-practices. Gap years to some extent overlap with position-practices of various individuals and institutions – the implication here is that anyone trying to shape the development of the gap year phenomenon might need to take into account and address different groups of relevant networked others.

Paying attention to external structures required temporary “bracketing” of the role of practitioners themselves. Whilst the context for action described in this section may by itself appear stable and perhaps overly deterministic, further analysis employing the other form of “bracketing” made it clear that the meanings, norms and resources were not uniform, and that opportunities for choice, innovation, and reframing of the practice also existed. As Stones (2005) highlighted, each part of the analysis of cycles of structuration presents only a shard of the overall picture. It is important to keep in mind when reading through this work that each chapter represents a different way of looking at the gap year and that only in its totality we can begin to grasp both the dynamics and (relative) stability of the gap year practice, thus unraveling the “duality of structure” as intended by Giddens. Whilst such analysis requires a level of skill and reflexivity from the reader to refrain from drawing conclusions from each of the sections separately, the model of the cycle of structuration (Figure 2) provides a reference point and an organized and systematic way of switching back and forth between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance, which is sometimes needed to account for the dynamics of social practices (see Shove et al. 2012).

This chapter thus began to examine the nature of recruitment to the gap year practice, by outlining the context of action faced by prospective gap year students. As discussed in Chapter 2, the existence of practice-as-entity relies on continued recruitment of new cohorts of practitioners, and this is particularly important for one-off practices such as gap years, where performance does not depend on routinized, habitual and non-reflexive daily actions performed over and over again by the same individuals. Whilst people normally provide individualized accounts of their travel choices and motivations, this chapter began to unravel the shared and enduring scripts for action, and various actors involved in their (re)production, which shape the performance of the gap year practice by new cohorts of students each year. What is missing from the accounts considered above is, firstly, the specific role that long-haul mobility plays in the performance of a gap year practice and how this form of a gap year came to be particularly popular; and, secondly, the role and limits of agency in gap year participation and mobility choices in this context. These issues are the subject matters of Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

## **Chapter 5: Long-haul mobility in a gap year context**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter described a gap year as a form of social practice, shaped by a number of external structures, i.e. meanings, norms and resources, which were in turn shown to be influenced by various individual and institutional agents. This chapter is dedicated to addressing the second objective of the study and explores the ways in which current gap year meanings, norms and resources facilitate visiting long-haul destinations as a normal way of “doing a gap year”.

As such, this chapter presents further results of the “agent’s context analysis” (Stones, 2005), which this time is focused specifically on gap year destinations and mobility. It examines how long-haul travel is often believed to be necessary, most appropriate or convenient, particularly in relation to the benefits associated with gap years, as outlined in Chapter 4; and explores the ways in which the social organization of the practice limits the possibility of agents to “act otherwise” and make alternative mobility choices.

Again, as in the previous chapter, the external structures are not treated here as a static entity, but are seen, in line with strong structuration (Stones, 2005), as being shaped by numerous social practices of networked others, which also form part of the “terrain for action” that students face when making their gap year plans. The influence of those actors and their practices is examined alongside other findings, where appropriate.

Finally, the “agent’s context analysis” (Stones, 2005) outlined in the following sections, purposefully omits the knowledgeability of agents and any variations between individual enactments of the gap year practice. Whilst young people’s “habitus” (see Figure 2), i.e. their generalized world views, background, transposable dispositions, skills, typified recipes and principles of action (shaped by past practices), also affect gap year decisions, including specific destination choices, it is temporarily “bracketed out”. In other words, the emphasis of this chapter is on gap year practice “as entity” rather than “as performance” (Spurling et al., 2013). As such, “agent’s context analysis” is used here to “analyse the terrain that faces an agent, the terrain that constitutes the range of possibilities and limits to the possible” (Stones, 2005 p. 122). The issues of unequal access, of how individual students draw on existing rules and resources, how they employ

their previous experience and transposable skills to make mobility choices and how gap year practice fits with other projects, concerns and practices in their lives - are purposefully left out and explored separately in Chapter 6.

## **5.2 Participants' itineraries**

Out of 18 students that were interviewed during the research period, 12 were planning to take at least a full year out (with Susie, Lily and Thomas considering potentially prolonging their travels and postponing their university entry even further). Miriam had plans to take what she herself referred to as a "mini-gap" (i.e. take part in overseas projects over the summer), and was only going to take a full gap year if she did not get accepted to the university. Another participant, Chloe, an AS student, was still undecided as to whether she wanted to take a gap year, postponing making a decision until her final year of college. Abbie and Jack were not taking a gap year and planned to go straight to the university, whilst Lara and Mark initially wanted to take a year out, but changed their plans during the course of the research period (see Chapter 6 for a discussion on the issues of access and internal variations of the practice). Out of the 14 students who were either taking a full year out, going on a mini-gap or undecided, the most popular destinations under consideration were Thailand (six participants) and Australia (also six), followed by the US (four) and India (four). All these places also appear among the top gap year destinations according to ABTA statistics, as shown in Table 1.

The majority of participating students wanted to visit several countries during their gap year and typically the desired itineraries included at least one long-haul destination. Apart from the top choices of Australia, Thailand, the US and India, other long-haul countries under consideration included: New Zealand, Canada, Kenya, Vietnam, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Philippines, Laos, Indonesia, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador and Nepal. Several students talked about travelling around broader regions, geographical locations or routes rather than stating specific countries - these included Africa, Southeast Asia, Central and South Americas, Borneo and the Middle East. A few were considering travelling "around the world", contemplating the purchase of one of the multi-country passes that are now available, which allow visiting several destinations on different continents at a relatively cheap price (as compared to individual flights).

It needs to be stressed, however, that participating students were at different stages of their planning, and some were more advanced with their plans than others. The destinations discussed here include therefore both those already planned and booked, as well as a “wish list” which was not yet supported by the bookings, with some students aware that it might not be realistic to visit all the desired locations. Efforts have been made to maintain contact with students after the initial interviews and provide the most updated version of their gap year plans as they changed and became clearer throughout the study period. However, the extent to which they were indeed able to visit all of their desired destinations on their gap years is unknown, particularly for those students who planned to travel in a more spontaneous way, without making too many bookings in advance.

Table 2 shows gap year plans and aspirations of the interviewed students. Fields shaded in blue indicate plans that were already booked at the time of last contact, whilst rows showing initial plans of Mark and Lara, who changed their minds during the study period and decided not to take a gap year in the end, are shaded in grey. The distinction is drawn between the “project stage” and the “independent travel stage”. Whilst gap year activities varied, most plans included these two stages, reflecting the current framing of gap years as a *constructive* break (as discussed in Chapter 4). However, the amount of time, resources and consideration given to each of those stages by individual students varied. Some attached greater importance to the project stage, which took up most of their time off and available resources, and the rest of their gap year was planned around it – in two cases (Miriam’s mini-gap and Chloe’s potential gap year) the independent travel stage was skipped altogether, as they gave a clear priority to their projects. Some others mainly wanted to travel independently, taking part in shorter term, and more ad-hoc projects along the way (e.g. they had rough plans to look for opportunities to work or volunteer whilst moving from country to country). Some adhered to Ethical Gap Years\*’ advice regarding gap year structure (see section 4.2.2) in a more thorough way, and included a long-term project, as well as a significant period of independent travel before and/or after. The internal variation of the gap year practice is examined in more detail in Chapter 6, but the important point here is that the project stage in many cases

took place abroad and as such is considered here as a distinctive part of the broader “gap year travel” phenomenon.

**Table 2:** Student participants and their gap year plans. Fields shaded in blue show plans that were already booked at the time of last contact. Fields shaded in grey show participants who changed their mind and decided not to do a gap year.

No	Pseudonym	Type of gap year	Gap year plans	
			Project stage: activities and destinations	Travel stage: destinations considered
1	Lily (A2 student)	Full gap year or longer	<p>1) 10 week long volunteering for community projects in Nicaragua with ICS (partly funded).</p> <p>2) Community project in the UK upon return as part of the programme.</p> <p>3) Possibly also more ad-hoc volunteering during the travel stage.</p> <p>4) Organizing a local photo exhibition upon return.</p>	Various countries around South and Central America.
2	Amy (A2 student)	Full gap year	Volunteering to be organized spontaneously in an ad-hoc manner during the travel stage.	Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, India, Borneo, possibly also a quick trip to Morocco or Paris.
3	Jonathan (A2 student)	Full gap year	Christian youth discipleship gap year programme in Canada (Soul Edge).	Canada, America, Asia (including Thailand), Australia.
4	Lauren (A2 student)	Full gap year	Volunteering to be organized spontaneously in an ad-hoc manner during the travel stage.	Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, Thailand, India.
5	Mark (A2 student)	Initially planned to take a gap year, changed his mind	Charity work in Africa and/or Asia.	-

No	Pseudonym	Type of gap year	Gap year plans	
			Project stage: activities and destinations	Travel stage: destinations considered
6	Miriam (A2 student)	Mini-gap over summer. Full gap year as a back-up plan if not accepted to university	1) Unpaid summer placement at a car company in the US, restoring classic cars.  2) Taking part in a charity classic Mini tour of Italy.	-
7	Tara (A2 student)	Full gap year, preferably before, but possibly after university	Volunteering, but no specific plans yet. Considers going with a specialist gap year organization.	Around-the-world trip. No specific destinations, wants to go "somewhere far and exotic", possibly Australia and Africa.
8	Abbie (A2 student)	Did not plan to take a gap year	-	-
9	Jack (A2 student)	Did not plan to take a gap year	-	-
10	Susie (A2 student)	Full gap year, possibly longer	1) Volunteering throughout the travel period on eco-farms (WWOOF) in exchange for food and accommodation.  2) Paid work in Australia to save money for the university.	India, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and other Asian countries, Australia.
11	Sarah (A2 student)	Full gap year	1) Germany (learning German and "shadowing" a midwife, through family connections).  2) Africa (medicine related volunteering project, possibly with HIV and AIDS patients, applied for a partly funded project with ICS).	No definite plans yet, travel at either side of her volunteering in Africa.

No	Pseudonym	Type of gap year	Gap year plans	
			Project stage: activities and destinations	Travel stage: destinations considered
12	Ellie (A2 student)	Full gap year	Organizing gigs and touring around Cornwall in preparation for her degree in Music, earning money and learning to drive.	Spain, Serbia, Croatia, Thailand, Australia.
13	Charlotte (A2 student)	Full gap year	<p>1) Volunteering project in teaching/education in India, Nepal or Kenya, with an organization (applied for a partly funded project with ICS).</p> <p>2) Volunteering in a school in Nepal through College connections.</p> <p>3) Less structured volunteering organized in an ad-hoc manner during the travel stage.</p>	No specific plans, wants to go to Asia, considers the around-the-world flight to “get a taste of lots of different places”.
14	Thomas (AS student)	Full gap year or longer	<p>1) Possibly working in exchange for food and accommodation in Australia.</p> <p>2) Unspecified volunteering.</p>	US, Australia and India.
15	Charlie (AS student)	Full gap year, alternatively a year out between 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year of university	<p>1) Joining a storm chasing crew in the US to witness the tornado season.</p> <p>2) Doing volcanology in Hawaii.</p> <p>3) Volunteering with a news organization in the Middle East.</p> <p>4) Volunteering with aid groups around the Middle East.</p>	Travel across America after the projects. If American plans don't work out, just "go travelling" - around the Middle East or taking the Trans-Siberian railway.

No	Pseudonym	Type of gap year	Gap year plans	
			Project stage: activities and destinations	Travel stage: destinations considered
16	Lara (AS student)	Initially planned to take a gap year, changed her mind	1) Paid work in Australia.	India, Australia.
17	Georgia (AS student)	Full gap year	Elephant conservation project in Africa.	Africa, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines.
18	Chloe (AS student)	Undecided	1) Charity work in Tunisia (family connections). 2) Some paid work in Egypt (family connections).	-

Looking at Table 2, it is striking that only a few participants considered travel to short-haul destinations. In most cases this was in addition to a long-haul trip and linked to specific gap year projects, such as Ellie’s tour of Cornwall with her music gigs or Sarah’s plans to get some medical experience “shadowing” a midwife she knew in Germany. UK and Europe were rarely taken into consideration for the independent travel stage and never as sole destinations.

The overall picture was one in which there was a clear preference for visiting at least some long-haul destinations during a gap year, particularly during the independent travel stage. The remaining of this chapter examines meanings, norms and resources that were found to facilitate the popularity of long-haul destinations (often multiple) as the normal way of “doing a gap year”, both for gap year projects and the independent travel stage.

### 5.3 Meanings

An important aspect of the terrain for action faced by prospective gap year students were existing socially shared perceptions of itineraries appropriate for this type of journey. Many interviewed students reacted with surprise when asked whether they would consider visiting short-haul destinations in place of their faraway journey. This section explores the socially shared meanings (or “structures of signification”) found to be contributing to the perceptions of long-

haul destinations as gap year-appropriate. These included understandings of the conditions and consequences of destination choices, as well as predictions of interpretative conclusions that networked actors are likely to make as a response. As in the previous chapter, it is important to stress that these judgements did not always involve conscious deliberation and often had a taken-for-granted character (Stones, 2005). It was one of the challenges of the study to explore these understandings during interviews, even if they were not immediately expressed in a discursive manner. The following sections also draw on the results of content analysis of gap year materials that were found to promote identified understandings; participant observation at gap year events; as well as on interviews with relevant networked others, found to be influential in shaping young people's views of the appropriate ways of "doing a gap year".

In the following sections I examine the imagined geography of a gap year, i.e. the socially shared understandings of some destinations and mobility styles as more appropriate for gap years than others. Whilst there was not a single gap year itinerary that was followed uniformly by all, the analysis found that some destinations were normally excluded from considerations and decisions were made out of a finite number of geographical locations, almost exclusively long-haul. Moreover, travelling to several places was typically expected, rather than a return trip to one country. Students were aware of and often took for granted an existing "script for action" that outlined conventional destination and mobility choices for gap year travel. These socially shared meanings related first to the perceptions of gap years as an extraordinary journey requiring extraordinary locations (section 5.3.1); to the importance of high levels of mobility in the gap year context, a times negotiated against conflicting ideals of dwelling and spontaneity (section 5.3.2); to the dominant perspectives on development and conservation (section 5.3.3); and to the beliefs that some types of mobility are particularly suitable for personal transformation (section 5.3.4). The final section (5.3.5) explores how the understandings of gap year travel as sustainable and purposeful limit the possibilities for participants' reflexivity and critical distance and result in air travel being considered an acceptable "green sin" in this context.

Finally, it is important to emphasize once again that the social practice perspective is neither individualist, nor holist. Whilst some of the institutional arrangements or other resources that shape the gap year practice (examined in

section 5.5) cannot be easily changed by individual travellers, the meanings discussed below do not hold an absolute power over the practitioners, and it could be argued that agents can always “do otherwise” (Stones, 2005). However, their ability not to follow the accepted social conventions and interpretations is often limited by lack of adequate power, knowledge of alternatives and critical distance, and as such the prevailing perceptions can be seen as “irresistible social forces” (Stones, 2005).

As a concluding remark, once again it is crucial to keep in mind that the meanings are only one aspect of the gap year practice, and that only through a combination with norms and resources it can be reproduced over space and time by continuous performance of new cohorts of gap year students. As such, the findings presented below should be read alongside the resources (section 5.5) and norms (section 5.4) and always in relation to the cycles of structuration (Figure 2).

### 5.3.1 Extraordinary journey, extraordinary places

As discussed in the previous chapter, a gap year is widely considered to be an extraordinary journey, a rite of passage that facilitates transitions towards adulthood, higher education and employment. It is also believed to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gather invaluable experiences and memories, which according to Pine and Gilmore (2013) have replaced goods and services as the most valuable commodity in recent decades. Gap year students are in a unique moment in life that allows them to engage in long-term travel. They have the time, opportunities to save/fundraise money, are debt-free and not yet constrained by various obligations of the adult life; they also receive high levels of support from various actors and institutions that enable participation.

Further analysis revealed that such an extraordinary opportunity came with a set of widely shared understandings on how to make the most of it and ensure it is indeed a memorable experience worthy of its status as “the journey of a lifetime”. Whilst some travel practices are characterized by seeking familiar cultures, such as British tourists to Ireland in the mid-90s being motivated by the same spoken language and being able to drive on the same side of the road (Irish Marketing Surveys, 1995, as cited in Prentice & Andersen, 2000); and the phenomenon of return visits to the same destinations shows that tourists do not

necessarily always seek “the new” (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984); gap year travel was found to lie on the other end of the spectrum. The emphasis was on new and out of the ordinary experiences and these were typically to be achieved in two ways: by visiting places, which were as different as possible from everyday surroundings; and by clearly distinguishing gap year travel from other travel and tourism practices. These are discussed in turn in the following sub-sections.

### *5.3.1.1 Imaginations of difference*

It was found that those parts of the world that were thought to be the most different from the UK, particularly in cultural terms, were usually considered as the most appropriate for the gap year “journey of a lifetime”. Charlotte, for example, wanted to visit Asia and Africa on her gap year, and said that Europe and America “will definitely not be a priority”. When asked to provide reasons for prioritizing those particular parts of the world, she gave the following explanation:

“I think it is the difference. Because, obviously, Europe is different, well, any country is different to here, but it is similar sort of culture in many ways. So I think the complete difference would be more interesting, more sort of enlightening.”

A desire for cultural difference as a motivation to travel has previously been identified in tourism research (Larsen & Guiver, 2013). Interviewing gap year participants in South America, Simpson (2004a) also found that imaginations of difference were key to choosing those locations. However, as Larsen and Guiver (2013) found, tourists’ perceptions of difference do not always directly translate into overcoming physical difference. They argued that in light of the challenges associated with global climate change, tourists’ desire for cultural difference could potentially be met by visiting destinations closer to home. This study found, however, that in the gap year context, the perceived cultural difference had roots in romantic and simplistic neo-colonial perceptions of the Third World, where local populations are perceived in stereotypical ways as the homogenous “Other”, downplaying similarities and emphasizing differences to European culture (Said, 1978). Tourism literature, including gap year and youth travel, has long documented such prevailing perceptions in contemporary travellers’ experiences (Desforges, 1998; Favero, 2007; Lyons et al., 2011; Salazar, 2013; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2013). This study found that the perceptions of “otherness” and a

neocolonial gaze were a strong part of place imaginations for *prospective* gap year students, at the moment of recruitment, when destination decisions were being made, therefore facilitating demand for long-haul flying in this context. For Charlotte, Asia and Africa were “completely different” from European culture, and as such were more suitable for the extraordinary gap year journey. As Elsrud (2001) stated, “a person travelling from what is often described as the “Western World” to the tropics carries a mental luggage of grand narratives, which may seem quite objective and “real” to him or her, but are influenced by a number of historically, socially and culturally founded mythologies” (p. 600). It is argued here that some of those mythologies reinforce and strengthen the otherworldly, romantic appeal of Third World countries as suitable gap year destinations.

In particular, part of that mythology was the view that Third World countries are somehow more “authentic” than the West (and, as argued in the next section, the quest for authenticity is one of the key ways in which gap year travellers distance themselves from other tourists, as argued in the next section). Part of this authenticity lied in the perceived remoteness of those locations - the view that they somehow remain untouched by the globalized world, residing outside of its influences and are not yet “spoilt” by western civilization and the tourism industry. The following extract from my interview with Susie, where she explained why she always wanted to visit Asia, provides an illustrative example:

“Maybe because it’s not as touristy as quite a lot of places, it’s still quite untouched... many places are still quite untouched. It’s not like you’ll have to try really hard to avoid, like, tourist destinations.”

However, as Cohen (2003) argued, there are no “untouched” cultures left in the post-modern world, and therefore that quest for authenticity is a “futile enterprise” (p. 101). This does not stop tour companies using authenticity as a marketing device to appeal to backpackers who seek authentic experiences to distance themselves from mass tourism (Cohen, 2003). This study found that travel promotion materials distributed at gap year events were full of references to the “authentic”, “unspoilt” and “untouched” character of many Third World destinations. Local populations were often portrayed in simplistic, homogenous ways, as more warm, friendly, honest and authentic than people in the West, as in the following extract from STA Travel brochure:

“You’ll be surprised by how honest and heartfelt every single person you meet is during your stay in South Africa” (STA Travel, n.d.-a)

Mostafanezhad (2013) has previously found that volunteer tourists often aestheticize poverty and perceive those experiencing hardships as happy with their fate. Making do with few material goods and leading a simple life is often seen as more “authentic” than Western materialism. According to Mostafanezhad, this serves to depoliticize and dehistoricize global economic inequalities. Similar perceptions on poverty were found in some leaflets and brochures picked up at gap year events, which arguably served to promote particularly deprived areas in Third World countries as suitable gap year destinations. The following participant testimony from “Rubbish Dump Children’s Project” in Mexico found in the Outreach International (2012) brochure provides an example:

“It has opened my eyes to a way of life so different to our own, where families live beside rubbish dumps, earning their living by collecting bottles and other useful rubbish thrown out by tourists. And yet these families are amongst the happiest I have ever seen.”

The overall picture is therefore one in which the imaginations of Third World countries as completely different to the Western world, as more authentic, untouched and unspoilt, and the local populations as more authentic and happy, serve to strengthen their position among top gap year destinations, as the quest for extraordinary encounters and authenticity is one of the key characteristics of this type of travel. The need for more critical pedagogy in gap year experiences and volunteering programmes, suggested previously by Simpson (2004), is therefore important not only to promote a greater understanding of the structural causes of global inequalities and to facilitate critical, rather than descriptive, encounters with poverty. Exposing the “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973) of the Third World spaces as somehow detached from global capitalism, shedding light on the structural causes of inequalities and questioning the perceptions of the “happy poor” could form part of a broader strategy to direct

gap year travel practice into closer destinations, putting into question the very concept of “authenticity” and thus the necessity of long-haul travel.

Extraordinary cultural encounters were not limited to Third World spaces only. Some cult, romantic spaces and routes present in popular culture, such as the West Coast of America or the Trans-Siberian railway, were also portrayed as journeys out of the ordinary. However, these were much less common choices for participating students and much less visible in gap year promotion materials, which clearly prioritized Third World spaces as the places of extreme cultural difference and authenticity, full of extraordinary people.

The expected encounters with difference in the gap year context went beyond experiencing unique cultures. Discovering new landscapes, climate, wildlife and environments very different from those found in Europe was another way that marked the gap year experience as extraordinary. Many long-haul destinations both in the Third World and in developed countries exist in popular imagination as places of natural wonder, awe-inspiring landscapes and wildlife. From the Great Canyon, through the Amazon, Kilimanjaro, to the Great Coral Reef, natural wonders attract tourists and travellers seeking extraordinary experiences, gap year students among them. The natural environment and climate of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the US, heavily advertised in gap year promotion materials, can partially explain their popularity among top gap year choices (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015), despite being culturally relatively similar to the UK.

Whilst the link between cultural and physical distance is often complicated (for example America, despite being geographically distant, was not considered culturally different enough by some participants to be suitable for their gap year), the link between physical distance and environmental difference was in many cases more clear, as in this extract from the interview with Tara:

“I’d rather go somewhere far and exotic [than Europe]. Because, it’s different. I mean, like, France and England have roughly the same climate. Different language, there’s different things, but I mean - the further you go away, the more different life is.”

Whilst a desired blend of cultural and environmental difference varied between individual students, for Tara it was clear that she needed to travel far to

experience the level of difference she was after. In her case, achieving cultural difference was not sufficient and the change of climate was equally important, and for that Tara had to go “somewhere far and exotic”.

The remote, forgotten, unique, undiscovered, beautiful, hidden, dangerous, exotic, jaw-dropping, sun-drenched and awe-inspiring – these are just some of the adjectives in which the natural environments of many popular long-haul gap year destinations were described in marketing materials by gap year organizations, and by gap year students themselves. Promotion materials often highlighted the exceptional and unique character of advertised environments, as in the following examples:

“The biodiversity found in Manu National Park exceeds that in any other place of Earth”. (Quest Overseas, n.d.)

“Catalina Island is a special hidden place within easy reach of Los Angeles. With beautiful ocean views and jaw dropping landscapes, this island is home to more than 60 plant and animal species found nowhere else in the world.” (STA Travel, n.d.-a p. 79)

Whilst several “remote, wild environments” appropriate for gap year projects could be found in shorter haul destinations, for example in Arctic Norway (British Exploring Society, n.d.), they were significantly outnumbered by faraway opportunities. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine in detail all the ways in which different natural environments around the world were portrayed and understood as particularly unique, exotic and exciting, but I will provide wildlife encounters as an illustrative example.

Flagship species, such as tigers, elephants or gorillas are often used in tourism industry to attract visitors (Walpole & Leader-Williams, 2002). Modern safaris have roots in colonial big game hunting, the written accounts of which inspired the popular imaginations of Africa (Lilieholm & Romney, 2000). The descriptions of close encounters with free-roaming wildlife found in marketing materials distributed at gap year events, sometimes resembled hunting diaries of the old colonialists, as this participant testimony from African Conservation Experience’s Tuli Conservation Project:

“A rumbling noise got closer and closer. Suddenly elephants emerged from the bush and crossed our path. Just a few at first, and then more and more. I inadvertently held my breath – a herd of 93 elephants migrated past us!... I felt such awe, my eyes welled up with tears. Nature is unbelievably fascinating!” (African Conservation Experience, n.d.)

One study revealed that a large proportion of species-specific conservation programmes focus on animals that were formerly game animals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – even though now cameras replaced rifles, such encounters have clear colonial roots (Lorimer, 2009). What is also interesting about the above description is that it is incredibly emotive, describing nature that can inspire awe to the point of tears. Curtin (2008) has previously found that encounters with wildlife can bring a sense of deep spiritual and psychological fulfillment. The testimonies and stories of such encounters found in gap year promotion materials fit perfectly with the perceptions of gap years as a life changing experience, full of authentic, embodied encounters that can bring moments of wonder and inspiration, and even spiritual transformation. Such understandings arguably fuel the popular imaginations of Africa and other wildlife-rich locations as suitable for extraordinary gap year journeys. The only European destination promoted in gap year materials as a home to one of the “flagship” species, was Romania, where volunteering with bears was available (Oyster Worldwide, n.d.-a). The majority of charismatic species were, however, found in faraway countries.

#### *5.3.1.2 Distance from other practices*

The analysis revealed that to make the gap year journey unique and extraordinary, it was not only necessary to achieve the highest possible difference from everyday surroundings, and engage in close, authentic encounters with natural wonders and “exotic” cultures, but also to make sure that gap years differed from other tourism and travel practices that one can engage in at other times of year and moments in life. This further explains the lack of European countries among top gap year choices, as studies suggest that travel to Europe has increasingly become a part of the everyday (Randles & Mander, 2009b). Indeed, some interviewees did not even think that visiting European countries counted as “travel”, as the following extract from my interview with Georgia illustrates. At the beginning of our interview she said that she really wanted to do

a gap year because she hadn't "really gone abroad much" except for her school trip to South Africa, which she cited as an inspiration for her gap year. Later on, I inquired further:

"Researcher: So you haven't really travelled much?"

Georgia: No.

Researcher: What about holidays, do you go on holidays with your family?

Georgia: Yeah, we've been to like, Cyprus, um, normal places, like France, Spain, Italy, but not really like past Europe."

Georgia referred to European countries as "normal places" and she did not immediately recognize visiting them as travel. It is not surprising, therefore, that she did not consider them to be appropriate for such a unique, out of the ordinary experience that a gap year is widely believed to be. Simpson (2004a) has previously found that gap year travellers in South America constructed their travel as an "anti-holiday" and claimed to have deliberately chosen those locations as different from their normal, holiday travel destinations. The ease and "normality" of European travel seems to make it an unappealing gap year destination. During our first interview, Lily talked about her desire to learn Spanish as one of the key motivations for wanting to travel around Central and South America. I inquired about the necessity of long-haul travel to achieve this particular goal:

"Researcher: Wouldn't you consider just going to Spain?"

Lily: Um... I have considered that, but I kind of... while I've got the opportunity to go really far away and Spain is... you can get really cheap flights to Spain and I could go for two weeks and... so I'd prefer [to go to South America] while I have the time to spend a long time away."

For Lily, Spain was a place that could be visited easily and relatively inexpensively anytime and as such was more appropriate for short term trips. Due to a special moment that a gap year occupies in a life-course, providing a unique opportunity to spend a long time travelling, destinations that could be easily reached at other moments in life were not usually taken into account.

However, not all faraway destinations were deemed equally appropriate for gap year travel. It was found that some geographical locations were particularly strongly associated with gap years, as *the* places to go. The following interview extracts provide illustrative examples:

“I think that kind of side of the globe is way more common for gap years. Than, say, like America. I don’t know, but I’d prefer to go that way. Go, like, east, instead of west. Because I see America as more like a kind of family holiday or something. Yeah. I don’t know why, I just do.” (Lauren, talking about Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and India)

“It’s just kind of the classic backpacker route.” (Amy, talking about her plans to visit Southeast Asia)

The implication here is that there are certain locations and parts of the world that are considered more common for gap years than others. As Amy stated, her Southeast Asian itinerary was a “classic backpacker route” and therefore a natural choice (here it is also evident that the concepts of backpacking and gap year are to an extent overlapping). Similarly, for Lauren, the “east” seemed more common for gap years than the “west”. Whilst the US and countries around South and Central America are among popular gap year choices, they were topped by Thailand and Australia or New Zealand in ABTA’s statistics (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015) at the time of the study, which confirms Lauren’s perceptions. Therefore, even though gap years are hardly routine, habitual or everyday practices, there exist commonly shared ideas about how to “do a gap year”, the conventional gap year geography and mobility styles – participants were aware of which places were expected and normal to visit in this context. Whilst Simpson’s (2004a) participants avoided destinations such as Thailand and Australia for being too “common”, my analysis revealed that at least some students may choose to follow the existing convention, and the “commonality” does not always serve as a deterrent. Therefore, the search for extraordinary experiences examined in the previous section should not be understood as a purely individualistic endeavor. Whilst some parts of the world were not taken into account as too “normal”, the same students were often happy to adhere to a “gap year convention”, following destinations established by previous cohorts of travellers.

What is also interesting about Lauren's statement, is the distinction she made between destinations which were in her mind appropriate for gap years and those normal for "family holidays". Some other destinations were found to be associated with different travel practices, although it was beyond the scope of this study to analyze those links in detail. For example, Magaluf and Ibiza existed in the imaginations of some students as party islands, as expressed by Tara in the following extract:

"I think I'd stay away from the general teenage nightclub destination. Stay away from, like, Ibiza, and places like that."

Here, Ibiza was referred to in a condescending manner as a "teenage nightclub destination" and as such Tara had no willingness to include it in her gap year itinerary. "Teenage" seemed to be a key word there, as elsewhere in the interview she expressed a desire to take part in famous beach parties in Thailand, popular among "gappers" and other backpackers. The implication here is that efforts to shift the gap year travel demand into closer destinations may also need to seek to disrupt any existing associations of those places with other travel practices, such as family holidays or teenage clubbing, which might deem them inappropriate to a gap year traveller.

It was found that new cohorts of practitioners were often trained in normal ways of "doing a gap year", including gap year mobility, by those who participated in the past. By choosing to participate in gap years, students often appropriated the practice together with conventional destinations. Social media were one of the ways in which ideas about appropriate destinations spread, as the following extract from my interview with Georgia suggests:

"Someone I used to go to school with, her sister is travelling now. And someone else I know, she's just finished her second year... And she'd gone to like, Thailand, and she's moving somewhere else now. And obviously putting up photos [on Facebook] of what they're doing, and it just looks amazing."

Older siblings with gap year experiences were also an important source of information on where to go. For Amy, her older brother was particularly influential. In the following extract, she described their conversation about Southeast Asia:

“He said that the people were amazing, they were really friendly, especially in Cambodia. Not so much in Vietnam apparently. He just said the food is brilliant, the scenery is beautiful, it’s just all... gorgeous. And he said I have to go there.”

Another way in which the new recruits learnt about gap year locations and activities were gap year talks organized at some schools and colleges. Elsewhere in the interview, Georgia recalled a gap year talk at her old school, where a former gap year taker gave a presentation about her experiences. Georgia cited this talk as of key importance for her choice of the Philippines as one of her desired destinations:

“She showed us pictures of her with the village and she was saying how she learnt about what they do in their culture, how they fish and things like that, because it was on a little seaside. I don’t know, I find things like that really interesting.”

I attended one of such talks organized in the College I collaborated with, where Rosie shared stories and photographs of her African gap year adventures with a group of students, who took notes and asked questions about the details of her experiences and destinations. It can be argued that such events also facilitate the reproduction of gap year mobility in its current, long-haul form.

The importance of the word-of-mouth was also recognized by David, a representative of one of the high street gap year and travel providers. He said that gap year students normally have quite a good idea of areas they want to visit by the time they come and talk to him in the shop:

“I personally think it’s a lot of word of mouth. I think they’ve spoken to lots of friends and family who have been and they know why they want to go there. Which is one reason why Thailand is popular and then just keeps becoming more popular. Some people would just say ‘oh, we want to go to Australia, we want to stop in Asia for so much time.’”

Together, this analysis suggests that destination choices are one of the ways in which gap year practice becomes separate and distinctive from other forms of tourism and travel, such as family holidays or teenage clubbing. Some parts of

the world and mobility styles are considered to be particularly appropriate for this type of travel. Through the stories of previous participants, gap year practice spreads not in separation from, but together with ideas regarding conventional destinations.

### 5.3.2 On the move

It was also found that the independent travel stage was characterized by a relatively high degree of mobility. Whilst the project stage was frequently more sedentary, with many students committing to spending a prolonged period of time in one location (although some opted for taking part in short term, more ad-hoc projects during their travels), the independent travel stage was normally understood as a tour, a movement, rather than a return trip to a specific destination. As discussed in literature review, gap year travel has historical links to hippie and drifter travel of the past, as well as to the modern backpacker, and backpacking literature points to the high degree of movement and changing geographical locations as one of its key characteristics (O'Regan, 2008). For example, a study of backpackers in Byron Bay, a popular Australian destination, revealed that their average length of stay was just 3,5 days, making them a highly transient group of travellers (Taylor, 1994, as cited in Firth and Hing, 1999).

In the gap year context, this ideal of movement can be realized by following the routes established by previous cohorts of hippie and backpacker travel, or other romantic or cult routes existing in the popular culture, for example wandering around Southeast Asia, coast-to-coast America, or taking the Trans-Siberian railway. An extreme modern take on backpackers' mobility are around-the-world tours, which allow visiting several destinations on different continents. Multi-stop tickets are now available at relatively low prices (as compared to individual trips), and they were popular among participating students. Such ambitious itineraries also fit perfectly with the ideal of a gap year as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and an extraordinary journey. What could be more different from your average family holiday than a trip around the world? STA advertised their around-the-world trips in the following way:

“So, go crazy, the world's your oyster (Shakespeare apparently, no really), you only live once (not you Buddhists), seize the day

etc. And get in touch soon, you've got an epic trip to plan." (STA Travel, n.d.-b p. 5)

The above extract describes the around-the-world trip as an "epic" journey and encourages prospective travellers to "go crazy" in their destination choices. Some of the available itineraries were indeed dazzling, such as the tour called "Mighty Mighty", which included the following stops: UK-Bangkok-Sydney-Auckland-Fiji-Los Angeles-overland to New York-UK (STA Travel, n.d.-b). "The world's your oyster" – and as such, the whole world becomes a product for tourism consumption. Several interviewed students indeed had plans on buying the around-the-world tickets. Charlotte wanted to "get a taste of different places", and similarly Thomas's desire was "getting a bit of everything". These plans fit both with the backpackers' ideal of a high degree of mobility and the gap year being widely considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, *the* moment in your life to do it all, which sometimes resulted in a desire to cram as many destinations into the itinerary as possible. These ideas were often passed on by previous cohorts of gap year students. Sarah recalled being inspired by an older sister of her close friend, which again highlights the importance of previous "gappers" in the process of learning about the practice:

"One of my closest friends, her sister took a gap year. She is four years older than us. So she would have been planning it – she was Year 13 - when I was at secondary school, maybe in Year 8 or 9. She started really planning it and she really went around the world and had flights from all different countries. So I think I can remember then thinking 'yeah, I'll do something like this'".

Here, we can see that "really going around the world" and having "flights from all different countries" can be something that new recruits learn from those who participated in the past. Although at the time of our interview Sarah did not yet make plans for the independent stage of her travel, it is possible that such stories could inform her choices regarding the number of destinations.

However, around-the-world journeys were found to clash with one of the other widely shared gap year ideals – being spontaneous and wandering around aimlessly, without a fixed itinerary. Many interviewed students narrated the importance of spontaneity, often saying that a gap year is not so much about

visiting the sites, but about the experience of the journey itself. “Wherever it takes me really” was an ideal way of travelling for Tara, and this sentiment was shared by many others. This was sometimes difficult to achieve when booking flights in advance, which was usually much cheaper than buying tickets on the spur of the moment. STA advised booking as soon as airlines release their cheapest seats, which is normally 11 months in advance (STA Travel, n.d.-b p. 26). Students sometimes found themselves at a loss in their planning stage, navigating the two conflicting ideals of high degrees of inter-continental movement (which requires a fairly fixed itinerary if travelling on a limited budget) and spontaneous wandering around. Deciding in advance on how many destinations to visit and how long to spend in each place, whether to book all tickets in advance, or leave some plans to spontaneity and risk paying more as a result, was not an easy task. Chapter 6 examines in more detail how these conflicting ideals were managed.

Moreover, the high levels of movement and the constant changing of geographical locations sometimes created tensions with another popular gap year and backpacking ideal – the quest for authenticity. The following extract from my interview with Susie provides an illustrative example of this sentiment:

"I really want to see, like, the proper heart of countries rather than fake image, really."

This authenticity could lie not only in visiting places that were considered to be more “authentic”, as examined in section 5.3.1.1, but also in achieving an in-depth experience, which necessitates dwelling in one place for longer periods of time, getting to know the locals and ideally being involved in some forms of paid or voluntary work, as previously highlighted in literature dedicated to backpacking and working holidays (Allon, 2004; Allon et al., 2008; Clarke, 2005). Navigating between a desire for an in-depth, authentic experience and a desire for a high degree of mobility sometimes produced tensions (Chapter 6 explores these issues in more depth).

The overall picture is therefore one in which the gap year ideal of high levels of mobility and visiting several geographical locations can in extreme cases lead to ambitious around-the-world itineraries and, thus, multiple long-haul flights. Gap year students, however, tended to simultaneously adhere to the ideals of authentic and spontaneous travel, which in some cases worked in the opposite

direction, encouraging slow, “aimless” wandering and prolonged periods of dwelling in one location.

### 5.3.3 Places in need

Volunteering is a very popular activity for the project stage of the gap year. It is one of the main ways in which a gap year can become “constructive” (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of why this is necessary); and it also fosters more intimate, and therefore more “authentic”, encounters with local communities and environments (and, as discussed in the previous sections, authenticity is one of the key widely shared gap year aspirations).

Ironically, it was often the same parts of the world, which were portrayed as more authentic because of their assumed distance from the globalized world, and where local populations were presented as happy despite their poverty, that were simultaneously perceived and portrayed as in the need of help. Such perceptions informed destination choices, with Third World countries in particular becoming a natural choice for volunteering programmes. A belief that direct, personal, “on-the-ground” involvement by gap year volunteers is the best way to address the complex needs of many disadvantaged communities, is a simplistic attitude to development promoted by the gap year industry, which was referred to by Simpson (2004a) as a “geography of need”. The following extract from STA brochure picked up at one of the events, advertising a 15 days volunteering project in Vietnam, provides an illustrative example:

“The orphanage is under-funded and therefore cannot afford carers, or English teachers to give lessons to children. This is your chance to be proactive and take initiative with lesson planning. You’ll be rewarded with heartfelt smiles and Vietnamese hospitality when offering children and the elderly the attention and care they deserve.” (STA Travel, n.d.)

This example shows that the problem of lack of resources to employ professional carers for the Vietnamese elderly and English teachers for the children, is portrayed as remedied by short-term gap year volunteers, trusted with professional tasks such as lesson planning. Apart from various forms of social work, some other community volunteering programmes in Third World countries included addressing environmental challenges that impacted local livelihoods, for

example building sand dams in Kenya to help alleviate water shortages caused by droughts (Quest Overseas, n.d.). Taking into account that many of those environmental challenges are caused by climate change, it is open to question whether volunteering (often short-term) performed by groups of gap year students is indeed the best way to address those issues, considering the huge amount of carbon emissions associated with arriving at some of the volunteering sites.

It was also found that the perceptions of Third World places as in need of volunteers' help were not only promoted by the gap year industry. Many students recalled that they "always wanted to make a difference", which suggests that these attitudes to development and conservation can take shape long before a gap year is even considered. Television and other media were found to be particularly influential in this process, as this extract from my interview with Mark suggests, where he explained why he thought of Africa or Asia as destinations for his charity-work gap year:

"I've seen... Of course there is a lot of charity appeals on television and everywhere. And I've sort of seen the conditions they're in. And I've sort of seen that we're in so much better place than they. And I sort of want to give them a bit of help and hope."

Overseas school trips that involved periods of volunteering also fostered the perceptions of some parts of the world as in particular need of volunteers' help, with several participants citing such experiences as inspirations for gap year volunteering. This further highlights the link between gap year practice and school trips, explored previously in Chapter 4, and suggests that the meanings and perceptions on destinations can spread from one travel practice to another. My interview with John, the Geography lecturer, served as a moment of reflection and re-evaluation of the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding "places in need". Here, he reflected on school trips to Morocco and Kenya organized by his department:

"There's a bigger question there. Because we think, and this is me contradicting myself in a sense, cause we think we've got to go abroad to discover community and things we've lost, but we can help build them here. There are so many projects in the UK

to work for the National Trust, voluntary work, working in disadvantaged communities... Because for me community is what it's all about, there's a global community if you like. We go and live in a Muslim village, we work with them, and get to know people, but why aren't we doing that in North Devon? Why do we have to do that in some remote place? Are they more deserving?"

This comment becomes particularly important when considered alongside Jones's (2004) gap year review, which suggested that the provision of UK volunteering is higher than current demand. It could be argued that school trips may be contributing to the widely shared perceptions of Third World communities as natural sites for volunteering engagement and the absence of the UK in those considerations. My interview with John served as a moment of reflection – he questioned the taken for granted assumptions of “places in need”. “Are they more deserving?” he asked, proceeding to list a number of local projects that could also benefit from students' engagement, but have so far escaped his attention as potential school trip sites. He also reflected on the possibilities of building closer community networks in Britain rather than re-discovering community spirit in distant parts of the world. This shows how the imaginations of the “geography of need” can inform not only gap years, but also other practices, with Third World countries seen as natural sites for youth volunteering whilst local disadvantaged communities and endangered environments could be left out from consideration. Taking into account, for example, the growing number of people in the UK relying on food banks (Jones, , 2016), it could be argued that the perceptions regarding the “geography of need” as limited to Third World countries should be re-assessed, not only in the gap year context, but also throughout the British education system, as it can be very influential in shaping students' perceptions and attitudes towards development.

Georgia is one example of a student whose gap year inspirations came directly from a school trip. She had an opportunity to visit a place dedicated to elephant conservation on a school trip to South Africa with her previous school. This emotive experience, of being able to “touch” the animals and learn about them, inspired her not only to seek elephant conservation opportunities for her gap year, thus necessitating travel to Africa, but also to change her choice of a university course from dentistry to geography. This example also shows that the

“geography of need” was not limited to helping disadvantaged communities in Third World countries. Distant, endangered environments (such as the Amazon rainforest, or the Great Coral Reef), or endangered species (pandas, orangutans, elephants to name a few) were also believed to await direct involvement and help from gap year conservation volunteers. These were found both in developing and developed countries. This 15 days conservation project in Australia and New Zealand by STA Travel provides an example:

“If you enjoy walking and hiking through National Parks or finding a hidden gem of a spot with secluded views, then this programme will be everything you expect and more. As a volunteer you’ll help remove harmful plants, focus on tree planting and plant release and participate in track maintenance. The work that you do is hugely important. Help protect Australia’s and New Zealand’s beautiful lands and travel in a meaningful way.” (STA Travel, n.d.- a p. 81)

Lorimer (2009) has identified the most popular conservation volunteering hotspots for UK volunteers (p. 356). It is striking that they are exclusively long-haul. Lorimer (2009) argued that the popularity of those destinations over others has historical and political roots, for example the majority of UK programmes operate in former British colonies (p. 357). Again, it could be questioned whether conservation volunteering (often short-term) is indeed the best way to address environmental problems, particularly taking into account huge carbon emissions associated with the journey that British volunteers need to undertake in order to access many of those endangered environments.

Another distinctive form of geography of need was promoted by many Christian gap year programmes, where various communities around the world were seen as in need of religious guidance and teaching. Such programmes were often linked to missionary work and also delivered other forms of help to local communities. Whilst Christian gap year programmes were not limited to Third World spaces only, and there was a significant amount of UK and other short-haul programmes (e.g. mentoring young prison leavers in Britain), the popular perception was that nobody in the world should be left “unreached”. “Let your faith fly” encouraged a leaflet by the Baptist Missionary Society (n.d.), which could

be folded along the dotted lines to form a paper plane. Locations for missions “to reach those living on the margins” included Brazil, India, Italy, Lebanon, Nepal, Peru, Thailand and Uganda.

Similarly, Youth With A Mission (YWAM), which operates in 149 nations, stated that their projects were inspired by their founder’s dream of “waves” of young people “going to every continent and sharing the good news about Jesus” (Youth With A Mission, n.d.-a). Whilst not limited to reaching those living in distant locations, the leaflet again narrated the idea of reaching everyone in the world:

“We might be reaching a traditional ‘unreached people group’ in the depths of the Amazonian jungle or the furthers, driest regions of the Sahara Desert... but we might also be reaching out to snowboarders in Norway, surfers in New Zealand or Newquay, hikers in Nepal, or down-and-outs in Newcastle.” (Youth With A Mission, n.d.-a)

Together, this analysis suggests that existing understandings of places in need foster specific approaches to development, conservation and Christian missions, where groups of shorter or longer-term gap year volunteers are perceived as appropriate actors to engage in that type of work. Such perceptions often foster long-haul travel, fueled by socially shared imaginations related to “places in need” – i.e. the communities, environments and species in a particular need of aid and volunteering work.

#### 5.3.4 Transformative places

As established in the previous chapter, a gap year is widely believed to be a journey of self-discovery, a rite of passage, when young people venture out to find themselves and become adults. The analysis revealed that some parts of the world were commonly thought to be particularly well-suited for this purpose.

In particular, witnessing hardships and poverty in Third World countries, often through engagement in volunteering work, was believed to facilitate personal transformation by providing “humbling”, life-changing experiences:

“Wide-open blue skies, smiling faces, vast and spectacular scenery – Africa boasts it all. Hunker down in the forests of Uganda or soak up the watery world of the Seychelles. And

remember, it's not always about grandeur and powerful encounters. For more humbling scenarios, mingle with the Maasai people or volunteer with orphans to see a lasting impact – on both your life and theirs.” (STA Travel, n.d.)

One aspect of this expected transformation was becoming more appreciative of the privileges that “gappers” enjoy at home, in the UK. Katherine, one of the lecturers, described it in the following way:

“I do believe gap years are really good for students... If you have this wonderful life you also assume that other people in the world have the same privileges as you do... I don't want people to see the horrible side of life, but I do want them to see that life is very hard for some people. And most people, when they do a gap year, they choose to go somewhere that is very different. And, you know, that's one comment they make, that 'I'm really, really grateful for what I've got' when they come back.”

Arguably, the expectations of such personal transformation facilitate the perceptions of places that are, as Katherine said, “very different”, and where poverty and hardships can be witnessed, as appropriate gap year destinations. Simpson (2004a) argued, however, that adopting such a “lotto logic” (p. 216) to poverty encounters, where one ends up feeling lucky for being born in wealthier and more privileged parts of the world, obstructs the more critical understandings of global inequalities and possibilities for creating a socially just world. Moreover, from the sustainability point of view, such understandings serve to further strengthen the perception of distant Third World spaces as appropriate gap year destinations, as hardships were mainly associated with distant and different cultures in Third World spaces:

“I've learnt about how people live on the other side of the world from completely different cultures. It's made me more appreciative of everything and has completely changed my life.”  
(Paige Caldaralo, Borneo) (Raleigh International, n.d.)

Moreover, it can be argued that it is rather ironic that on the one hand disadvantaged communities in Third World countries are portrayed as more authentic and a simple way of life is glorified as happier than western materialism,

whilst simultaneously students are expected to feel privileged and grateful for not having to go through those hardships.

The expected personal transformation was also often linked to overcoming obstacles and challenges caused by encounters with unfamiliar cultures and customs. Charlotte, for example, recalled a story of her friend's experiences of reporting a bike theft to the police in Thailand, who did not believe him and accused him of lying. She considered such experiences, however challenging and scary, to be a part of the gap year experience, which help build desirable personal qualities, such as confidence:

“It must have been so scary at the time because he was on his own. And they just kept shouting ‘fraud!’ at him. ‘I’m just trying to report that...’ (laughter). So there’s always that. But I think even that is an experience, isn’t it? It gives you more confidence.”

The above quote shows how being placed in a foreign culture, with foreign customs, and handling unexpected and scary situations on your own is considered to be a part of the gap year experience, one that would toughen you up and make you more confident, thus facilitating transitions to adulthood. In order to achieve that, encountering unfamiliar locations and customs is necessary, which again explains why the UK and Europe may not be desirable destinations to fulfill these goals. These findings are thus in line with Ansell's (2008) study of risk-taking in the gap year context, which, as she argued, was one of the elements that young people are encouraged to draw on in identity construction. It was found that places which have the allure of risk and danger were more likely to become gap year destinations.

It was not only challenging cultural encounters, but also rough or harsh environments that were believed to toughen people up, building qualities such as strength, resilience and confidence:

“A tough physical and mental challenge, venturers trek across some of Sabah's most rugged terrain. You'll learn to survive in one of the harshest environments on earth – the jungle.” (Raleigh International, n.d.-a)

“Doing challenging work in such a harsh yet beautiful environment has made me a much stronger person; I feel I can now achieve anything.’ (Poppy Bluman, Costa Rica & Nicaragua)” (Raleigh International, n.d.-a)

Such understandings further promote long-haul flying, as access to challenging, extreme environments often depends on air travel. Soul Edge, an adventure based Christian gap year programme that Jonathan signed up for, promised prospective participants to push them to the edge “both mentally, physically and spiritually” (Soul Edge, n.d.), and their website highlighted the key role that Canadian environment played in this process:

“From trekking in the Rocky Mountains to snowboarding, we believe that for many young men and women this is a great way to be challenged and changed. Leadership qualities are nurtured in harsh and challenging environments such as there throughout the course. The pinnacle of the adventures for many is Snow camping in -20C; the stuff of legends! In 2013 we are also offering an extended debrief Canoe adventure in the Canadian wilderness! Add this to Ice climbing and all our other trips, and you have one outstanding year ‘in the gap!’” (Soul Edge, 2013)

Finally, some parts of the world were found to exist in popular imaginations as particularly well suited for a journey of self-discovery in spiritual terms. For example, the Gap Force brochure advertised their tailor made projects around Southeast Asia as places where you can “gain inner peace”:

“Buddhism: Come and live with the monks. Learn about this ancient religion, help them with their almsgiving, gain inner peace.” (Gap Force, n.d.-b)

As discussed in the previous section (5.3.3) close encounters with free-roaming wildlife are also sometimes presented as providing almost spiritual moments of awe and inspiration, thus facilitating travel to places where such encounters are possible.

The overall picture is therefore one in which some parts of the world are thought to be particularly well suited for personal transformation and transitions

to adulthood that gap year is believed to facilitate. Some of the ways in which such transformations are to occur include: coping with unfamiliar customs and cultures; overcoming physical challenges associated with harsh environments; humbling encounters with extreme poverty; as well as visiting locations that are believed to have a particularly rich spiritual culture. Taking into account the relatively mild climate of most European destinations, the familiarity and increasing “normality” of European countries, as well as prevailing romantic and neocolonial perceptions of many Third World spaces – it can be argued that currently the quest for personal transformation reinforces the necessity of long-haul travel in this context. One way to encourage the perception of Europe as an appropriate space for a “rite of passage” could be appealing to its rich cultural heritage and ability to provide traditional, classical education (which links to European Grand Tours), as in the following quote from one of the brochures:

“Travelling through Europe and absorbing the masterpieces of European culture is an important rite of passage. Equally, understanding art is a mark of a cultivated mind.” (Art History Abroad, n.d.-a)

Such understandings, however, were exceptions from the vast amount of gap year materials encouraging encounters with distant, different and exotic cultures and environments as a transformative experience.

#### 5.3.5 Gap year ethics and air travel

Some of the ethical issues related to gap year travel were present in the mainstream channels of information available to the interviewed students. In particular, various organizations, mainly non-profits, warned against “phony” volunteering and advised prospective “gappers” on how to ensure that the projects they participate in are indeed worthwhile and purposeful. Ian, a representative of Ethical Gap Years\*, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting ethical and constructive gap years in schools and colleges, explained the criteria they used to choose which organizations to recommend:

“Our criteria for supporting an organization which is offering volunteering opportunities, the first one is that it is a genuine educational experience for the participants. The second one is that it has genuine development benefits for the communities

where they are working, and that means that almost certainly the organization has worked in that community and built up a programme with local people where it's beneficial on both sides."

However, the impact of carbon footprint related to air travel was absent from mainstream discourses related to gap year ethics. For example, "The ethical volunteering guide" brochure distributed at one of the gap year events advised prospective volunteers on how to ensure their organization makes a positive contribution to local communities, and whilst it also recommended checking whether it "has proper eco and ethical policies", it did not provide much detail regarding what such eco policies should involve, and did not include any reference to the issues of transport and air travel (Simpson, n.d.). In another example, Real Gap Experience (2014), one of the UK gap year travel companies, dedicated a section of their website to "Responsible Travel", but this did not include any information about flying-related emissions, instead focusing on the positive impact of conservation projects:

"Our conservation projects make a positive contribution to the preservation of natural and human heritage, biodiversity and wilderness across the globe."

Indeed many gap year programmes, particularly those involving conservation volunteering, were often referred to as "sustainable" and having a positive impact on the environment in the promotion materials, as in this leaflet by The Leap:

"Why a winner? Travel, work, contribute... All projects are sustainable and beneficial to the communities and environments you'll be working with." (The Leap, n.d.)

The Leap's website even made a direct reference to climate change challenges, suggesting that participating in conservation programmes is a great way of "doing your bit" to help address these issues (The Leap, 2014). The positive impact of conservation programmes was also sometimes reinforced by authority figures, as this quote from a popular TV presenter found in a Gap Force brochure illustrates:

"Conservation and looking after our planet we live on is of paramount importance and I would recommend any young person thinking of undertaking such a project, to GO for it! Ben

Fogle, TV presenter. Filmed his Extreme Dreams series on two of our locations.” (Gap Force, n.d.-a)

“Gapforce mission is to care for our planet... We ensure your impact will be nothing but positive.” (Gap Force, n.d.-b)

Such narratives arguably complicate the understandings of the environmental impact of flying in the gap year context. Whilst on the one hand young people might be encouraged to avoid flying for environmental reasons, at the same time conservation volunteering in long-haul destinations is promoted as sustainable, and helping to alleviate the effects of global climate change. It can be argued that such perceptions limit the possibility of agents for developing a critical distance, which according to Stones (2005) is one of the necessary factors enabling participants to act against the established conventions.

Nonetheless, some of the ethical considerations currently promoted in the gap year context were found to (inadvertently) encourage more sustainable forms of travel. For example, ensuring that volunteering is worthwhile may include longer stays in one destination, which was recommended to students by Ian from Ethical Gap Years\*:

“Particularly - and I’m always stressing this - the project part of your gap year, don’t regard it as a quick fix – ‘I’m going to do a couple of weeks at an orphanage, teach them a few words of English, sing songs with them, move out for the next group of volunteers to do their week in the orphanage.’ That’s not doing anybody any good. In fact, it would be doing positive harm to those kids. They want something more permanent in the way of relationships than people just floating through, coming in the door and then the next lot come in. So I try and persuade them to think in terms of a working project for a minimum of at least two to three months, and even more.”

However, as this extract suggests, these considerations were linked to the project stage only. Whilst ensuring that volunteering is genuine might require longer stays in one location, the independent travel stage may still include a high level of mobility. That was the case with Charlotte, who wanted to spend several months on a dedicated volunteering project to ensure she made a genuine

difference, but then planned to engage in high levels of mobility, possibly purchasing the around-the-world multi stop pass, to “get a taste of lots of different places”.

The analysis revealed that some of the ethical considerations impacted on students’ gap year choices. In particular, the perceptions on travel ethics of some of the authority figures were found to be influential. Charlotte learnt from her lecturer that not all volunteering programmes are beneficial for local communities. She said that he offered her assistance in organizing a project in Nepal through the College’s charity work there “in a way that it would really help people”. In another example, Susie learnt about carbon offsetting from Katherine, her tutor and Environmental Studies lecturer, which resulted in her planning to offset her gap year travel emissions (she was the only participant that took environmental impact of flying into account in travel planning; see Chapter 6 on how other students managed their environmental concerns).

These examples suggest that dispositions of relevant networked others are influential in shaping the understandings of travel ethics in the gap year context. The agent’s context analysis involved therefore elements of conduct analysis of networked others – in particular how their beliefs, perceptions and general dispositions regarding travel and gap year ethics influenced the kind of advice and support offered to students, which were part of the overall terrain for action for prospective “gappers”. This conduct analysis revealed a complex hierarchy of ethical concerns, with carbon emissions from long-haul flying occupying a lower position in this hierarchy than many other ethical considerations. In particular, the positive impact of volunteers on local environments and communities, as well as the positive influence of travel experiences on “gappers” themselves, were normally given priority in the assessment of ethics. Ian from Ethical Gap Years\*, for example, reflected on those issues in the following way:

“I wouldn’t want to discourage anybody from doing a gap year because of the environmental damage. There are much, much bigger environmental impacts than young people travelling – industrialization in China and things like that... We are very conscious of the environmental cost of some gap year

opportunities, particularly the travelling ones, but we hope that also a lot of the projects are working in the opposite direction and are involved in conservation work and conservation awareness and so on.”

This extract shows that the positive contribution of conservation volunteering can in some cases be used to justify long-haul flying, “balancing out” the carbon footprint resulting from such travel. For others, environmental concerns were simply of secondary importance to other ethical considerations. David, for example, a representative of one of the Christian gap year organizations, believed that the positive impact of short-term gap year missions on both “gappers” and local communities alike, outweighed the environmental costs associated with flying. He explained his view in detail in an e-mail, which he agreed to be used for the purpose of this analysis:

“In the end environmental concerns are secondary to humans, after all it doesn’t matter what the environment is like if there are no humans to be affected by it (who is concerned about the environment on Mars? No one because no humans live there. We are concerned about the Arctic even if few people live there because it has serious consequences for the rest of the planet). If you are going to evaluate the environmental impact of short term missions you also need to bear in mind the great positive value they have on the lives of those who take part in them and the lives of those to whom they go.”

Moreover, some networked actors believed that participating in gap year programmes fostered development of a global community, promoting understanding, tolerance and a sense of belonging – these were seen to help bring about a better, more peaceful world. For example, Raleigh International charity, whose programmes are popular among gap year students, described their vision in the following way:

“Our vision is of a world where young people feel a sense of belonging to a global community. A community working together to strengthen and improve the world around them.”

Several actors interviewed in this study were passionate about developing such global community, and expressed the view that the expected benefits were of greater importance than environmental concerns related to air travel. The following extracts from my interviews with John and Katherine, College lecturers, provide illustrative examples:

“I know long distance travel: ooh – carbon dioxide, ooh – that sort of thing. But for the sake of humanity, the fact that you meet a Muslim and you begin to think: I lived in a Muslim village for a while, I’ve got friends who are Muslim and they’re not terrorists, so it’s breaking all that down.” (John)

“I wouldn’t want to go backwards, I wouldn’t want to not have the opportunity to travel and I would want my students... because I still do greatly believe that a lot of prejudice in the world is caused by people not knowing what another country is like and making assumptions by having a holiday there. So only seeing one part of it. Whereas when you travel, you’re not on holiday, you see people, you talk to people, you have experiences.” (Katherine)

Katherine, being an Environmental Studies lecturer, was very aware of the environmental impact of air travel and said that she always advised her students to offset their carbon footprint. However, she did not consider constraining the freedom to travel as a desirable solution, as she strongly believed in the value of travel and its ability to fight prejudice and intolerance.

Overall, the above analysis shows complex and often conflicting ways in which ethical issues are negotiated in the gap year context. Greenhouse gas emissions resulting from air travel were absent from mainstream sources of information regarding gap year ethics, distributed to students at gap year events, communicated directly by others and promoted on gap year websites – ethical considerations were normally focused on the impact on local environments, communities and “gappers” themselves. The impact of air travel, if considered, was just one of the many ethical considerations that formed the context for action, and it was normally not prioritized by students (see Chapter 6) and relevant networked others. Developing a global community, tackling intolerance and prejudice, addressing the needs of disadvantaged populations and endangered

environments, missionary engagement or expected benefits for “gappers” themselves were some of the ethical concerns found to take priority among influential agents. Such perceptions explain the current lack of efforts to encourage a shift towards more sustainable forms of transport and towards shorter-haul destinations in the gap year context. Flying was widely perceived as an acceptable “green sin”, with carbon offsetting being the most radical solution to address the problem of emissions communicated to students in this study. The perception of many conservation programmes as sustainable, meaningful and ethical, arguably obstructs the potential for critical distance – one of the necessary conditions for voluntary behaviour change.

Whilst it was not the purpose of this research to assess the actual contribution that gap year travel and projects make on environments, communities, and “gappers” themselves, it is important to note that many commentators call for caution when assessing the impact of such programmes. It has been questioned, for example, whether gap years can indeed develop a sense of “global citizenship”, as it was found that they sometimes serve to reproduce, rather than challenge, the stereotypical, neo-colonial perceptions of the Third World (Lyons et al., 2011; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2013). Similarly, conservation volunteering programmes do not always bring desirable outcomes (Igoe & Brockington, 2007), and their effectiveness is further constrained by their tendency to focus on a limited number of “charismatic” species and limited geographical locations (predominantly long-haul), which is due to historical, political and cultural reasons (Lorimer, 2009). Without wishing to dismiss the positive impact that many of the gap year projects may have on local communities and environments, as well as on gap year students themselves, this thesis highlights the need for further caution when assessing the outcomes and ethics of such programmes. In particular, attention should be paid to the largely neglected aspect of these projects - namely, that participation often necessitates long-haul air travel. Taking into account that some of the popular gap year destinations and communities are among those most vulnerable to the effects of global climate change, it is open to question whether a “hands-on” involvement by transient groups of gap year volunteers is indeed the best way to address challenges related to conservation and development. The current absence of

such considerations in the mainstream sources of information on gap year ethics further limits the possibility for a voluntary shift towards slow gap year travel.

## **5.4 Norms**

In this section I examine the norms, or *structures of legitimation*, which serve to reproduce long-haul mobility as the appropriate way of “doing a gap year”. Structures of signification are the normative beliefs of how networked agents are likely to behave in response to agent’s choices (Stones, 2005). In other words, practitioners assess the existing norms and the likelihood of sanctions or rewards. These are always negotiated against individual normative dispositions and beliefs, hierarchies of concerns and other practices in which agents are involved, so similarly to meanings, they do not hold an absolute power over participating individuals. As Stones (2005) argued, however, the power to act otherwise is often limited by a desire to realize the core commitments of the practice.

Chapter 4 explored the main normative beliefs held in the gap year context. Further analysis revealed that some of these norms facilitated visiting distant destinations. If students were to receive the expected social “rewards” and avoid “sanctions”, long-haul air travel was sometimes unavoidable. What follows is an examination of norms that shape the current long-haul character of the gap year practice and that, next to the meanings and resources, form part of the “terrain of action” for prospective practitioners.

### 5.4.1 Long-haul education and work experience

The previous chapter examined widely shared understandings of a gap year as a constructive stage in young people’s lives: it argued that post-school gap years are more than just a break from studying and a leisure pursuit, but have become an additional stage of education and career. Travel and taking part in various gap year projects (volunteering, paid work, learning a language or a skill) were considered to improve students’ university prospects and make a valuable addition to their CVs, as such experiences were thought to be impressive to future employers and admissions tutors. Gap years were also believed to enhance students’ educational performance and the university experience as a whole, by complementing textbook knowledge with first-hand experiences of the phenomena of interest, and by helping to develop various personal qualities, such

as maturity, confidence and independence, which were widely thought to be beneficial for the learning process and for coping with independent university life.

Further analysis revealed that achieving these benefits in many cases necessitated travel to long-haul destinations, therefore constraining the power of individuals to make alternative choices (if they wanted to receive the expected “rewards” for participation). For example, developing many personal qualities were linked to visiting distant parts of the world (see section 5.3.4 for more discussion). As suggested in the previous chapter, such qualities were portrayed as important for coping with university life and workload. Moreover, the need to target gap years towards specific careers and interests meant that those with interests in distant species, objects, places, phenomena or cultures had to engage in long-haul travel to gain experience in their fields. As such, Charlie’s travel to the US could be seen as, in a way, unavoidable. He had an interest in what he called “extreme geography”, particularly tornadoes and volcanoes, and he planned to pursue those interests at the university. He believed that experiencing those phenomena first-hand would improve his university performance, as he would be able to write about the things he personally experienced. The expectation of such benefits meant that Charlie had to travel to areas where he could witness tornadoes and active volcanoes:

“What’s a better experience than to actually see it happening? I mean, hopefully, I was looking at places with active volcanoes, like Hawaii, and go, do a bit of volcanology.”

Interestingly, the belief that direct experiences are superior to other forms of learning could also be found in the area of environment, sustainability and conservation. Georgia wanted to study geography and possibly work in the field of conservation in the future. Scuba diving in the Great Coral Reef was one of the activities she considered for her travels:

“That really interests me, why is it getting ruined, why can’t we conserve it, and things like that. I won’t necessary do conservation but if I go out there and just have a look and see what’s actually happening, that sort of interests me.”

Similarly, Lily wanted to travel to Cuba to learn about sustainable agriculture, despite her awareness of the negative impact of flying on climate change that she expressed elsewhere in the interview:

“Also I want to go to Cuba, so Latin America as well [as South America]. Because I'm interested in, like, food. And their whole, like, sustainable way of growing food, because they had that oil crisis, didn't they. And also the effects of the hurricane on their sustainability as well. So perhaps carry out a bit of research while I'm there.”

The implication here is that experiential education in many cases requires access to distant locations. Whilst it is possible that in some cases educational interests may have served simply to justify long-haul gap year travel in order to present it as “constructive”, nonetheless the socially shared belief in the value of experiential learning provides legitimacy to such travel choices. Experiential education is a long established approach in the field of education, where engaging in and reflecting on physical experiences serve to complement traditional learning methods (Dewey, 1938; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981). However, as Simpson (2004a) argued, gap year projects do not necessarily include all the necessary elements of experiential education, often lacking the key stages of “educational processing, facilitation and reflection” (p. 150), instead promoting the idea that experiences speak for themselves. This can lead to developing a rather superficial and descriptive understanding of visited places and cultures (Simpson, 2004a). From the sustainability perspective, the implication of such simplistic approach to experiential education is that a direct experience is often unreflexively portrayed and perceived as always superior to other forms of learning, which in many cases necessitates travel to long-haul destinations in order to access places, phenomena and objects of interest. Those who have access to such experiences can claim to have gained knowledge superior to textbook knowledge of their peers and gain advantage in the university and job markets, regardless of the actual depth and quality of the acquired knowledge.

A second family of normative beliefs related to the role of gap years in gaining practical work experience, thus improving university and employment prospects. The analysis revealed that the availability of some types of work

experience was at times higher in various long-haul destinations than in the UK. Kyle, a representative of one of the gap year organizations offering medicine-oriented volunteering, whom I met at one of the gap year events, explained that medical projects were not as easily available in the UK as in their partner hospitals in Mexico or India:

“Some universities look for experience. And this is something hospitals in the UK wouldn’t let you do here because of the Health & Safety regulations... They [partner hospitals overseas] wouldn’t of course allow students to carry out open-heart surgeries, but here our students wouldn’t even be allowed in hospitals because of the Health & Safety measures”. (Field diary notes)

Whilst it was beyond the scope of this study to verify this claim, Simpson (2004a) has previously suggested that Third World countries have become places for students to “experiment” at being adult experts, accessing professions not available to them in the UK due to lack of skills and experience. According to Simpson (2004a), this has become a major selling point for many gap year providers, and has roots in colonialism, where the colonized world served as a space where behavioural norms and “home” identities could be experimented with and changed.

Many of the gap year promotion materials analyzed in this study emphasized that anyone can take part and enthusiasm was often the only necessary “qualification” for the job. For example, 2-12 week volunteering projects in an orphanage in Cape Town (STA Travel, n.d.-b) were advertised in the following way:

“No experience necessary, just a lot of love and maybe some captivating storytelling skills. Volunteering in under-resourced communities, you’ll assist teachers with the love and care of newborns to 7 year olds, many of whom have been abandoned, lost their families or are awaiting adoption. Live in a shared volunteer house, exploring the flip side of this beautiful country at weekends.”

Putting aside moral considerations related to local populations being subject to such experimentation, the important implication is that accessing some types of professional work experience could be easier in Third World countries, as unskilled and inexperienced young people were unlikely to be given the same responsibilities in the UK. This arguably contributes to facilitating long-haul mobility in the gap year context.

This study revealed, however, that spaces for experimentation were not limited to Third World countries only, with the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand also providing opportunities to volunteer (see also section 5.3.3), although these were mainly in the fields of environment, conservation and sports. These countries were also popular destinations for paid work opportunities, due to the availability of working holiday visas (see section 5.5.3 for more discussion). As Allon (2004) suggested, working holidays also fit with the “authenticity” quest of backpackers (see section 5.3.1) as they allow spending a long time in one country, engaging with a local community, and thus enable backpackers to distance themselves from ordinary tourists.

Whilst paid work was also available in the UK, overseas experiences were often presented as particularly impressive to prospective employers, adding an “international sparkle”:

“Not only does finding yourself a job and travelling to Australia show you have independence, confidence and initiative, it will also add a bit of international sparkle to your CV – making you stand out from the crowd” (Bunac, 2012 p. 9)

“Make your CV stand out in the UK with references from your Canadian employers. With only 5000 visas available to Brits each year, you will join the select few that can say they have lived and worked in Canada, which will be a great talking point in your next interview!” (Bunac, 2012 p. 7)

The above examples suggest that by working overseas, young people are better able to stand out from the crowd and gain advantage in the recruitment processes. Such experiences are also a “great talking point” at interviews – presumably more interesting than a local or European work experience. Through such experiences they will be able to demonstrate a set of personal qualities that

are often assumed to be required to organize this type of work experience – independence, confidence and initiative. Such narratives have significant implications for climate change mitigation. If work experience gained in distant parts of the world continues being favoured over local experiences in recruitment processes, then long-haul air travel is likely to be further normalized as an accepted and approved stage in young people’s transitions to adulthood and employment.

#### 5.4.2 Gap year community – meeting spots

Chapter 4 explored how young people are encouraged to build their social capital by developing friendships with fellow travellers and volunteers from various countries. Further analysis revealed that access to the community of gap year travellers required visiting traditional gap year destinations and moving around the established routes, thus further facilitating the reproduction of conventional gap year destinations.

Binder (2004) has previously observed that backpackers tend to establish an (imagined) community by positioning themselves as distinct from the local “Other” as well as from non-travellers at home. Similarly, Cohen (2003) argued that contemporary backpackers combine what he called “inward” and “outward” orientation – i.e. not only looking for faraway locations and encounters with the locals, but also seeking company of their own kind. Travel to long-haul locations can be therefore as much about encountering the “Other” as meeting those who are the same. The analysis revealed that the imaginations of a friendly travel community and camaraderie expressed by prospective “gappers” contributed to the popularity of some gap year destinations:

“We’d probably join with some groups.... Cause, there are quite a few people who go to, like, Australia and New Zealand, they’re quite common places to go on your gap year. So I’m sure we’ll find lots of people out there. Who, um, are also on a gap year.”  
(Lauren)

"Everyone says you will meet so many people there... Apparently you keep running into the same people because it's people travelling at the same time as you and they are doing the same places." (Susie)

In some cases, these perceptions were shared with the new recruits directly by previous cohorts of gap year students:

“I think we have to meet people. Cause if we go along the sort of generic backpacker route, we’re bound to meet people who are going the same places as us. Because my brother did quite a lot. And yeah. Got to know people”. (Amy)

The implication here is that the establishment of some routes and places as traditional gap year destinations is likely to reinforce their popularity. A voluntary shift to shorter haul, less popular destinations, is therefore unlikely in this context, if one is to encounter those who are the same (i.e. other “gappers”) and thus develop social capital by joining the “travel community” and establishing lifelong friendships with travellers from different parts of the world.

## **5.5 Resources**

The final element of external structures identified in this research were resources, or *structures of domination*, that facilitated long-haul mobility in the gap year context. Structures of domination are power relations in the form of control over economic/material resources and control over people. The analysis revealed that various infrastructures, institutional arrangements, sources of information and other resources over which individual students had no control, resulted in long-haul destination choices being easier or more convenient to make, thus constraining students’ power to visit places closer to the UK. These resources form part of the terrain for action faced by prospective “gappers” and constitute what Stones (2005) called “independent causal influences” – those parts of external structures that are completely autonomous from individual agents they affect.

What follows is an examination of resources available to students at the moment of recruitment to the gap year practice. As with norms and meanings, individual knowledge of and competence in drawing on those resources differs between practitioners, depending on their habitus and previously acquired skills – these issues are outlined in Chapter 6.

### 5.5.1 Gap year information

As discussed in Chapter 4, there is now a breadth of information available to prospective gap year students. They can learn about available gap year

opportunities at gap year fairs; careers events; parents' evenings; through talks given at schools, colleges and travel agencies; UCAS conventions; and other events, less directly linked to progression or travel, such as a Christian youth festival or a skiing and snowboarding show, cited by one of the participants. The Internet was also a popular source of information and so were informal channels, such as the word-of-mouth.

Further analysis revealed that gap year-related talks and events tended to focus on projects and travel in long-haul destinations - there were significantly less UK and European opportunities being showcased. 100 individual brochures and leaflets were collected at various events and venues (any duplicates were excluded from the analysis), 92 of which advertised gap year opportunities and 8 were dedicated to funding, safety and other gap year information. 78 brochures and leaflets included references to more-or-less specific destinations<sup>7</sup>. The vast majority of those materials were either solely (47%) or predominantly (31%) focused on projects in long-haul destinations<sup>8</sup>. By contrast, only 13% of brochures/leaflets were solely, and a further 4% predominantly, centered on UK or other short-haul destinations.

As Jones's (2004) review revealed, UK volunteering opportunities are frequently provided by very small organizations, which may be offering a small number of placements (less than 10) on an ad-hoc and irregular basis, not necessarily annually (pp. 75-76). This could be one of the reasons why they did not advertise their opportunities on the same scale at gap year events as commercial and non-profit organizations providing overseas volunteering programmes. Jones (2004) concluded that whilst the level of UK volunteering provision is difficult to quantify "there are likely to be a larger number of potential placements available than are currently taken up for gap year participants" (p. 78). Similarly, Jones's (2004) review found it difficult to assess the number of UK work placements taken up by gap year students, as they were mainly available through informal channels and had to be organized independently. The informal character of those programmes could be one of the reasons why UK work placements, with a few exceptions (mainly by large, dedicated schemes, such as

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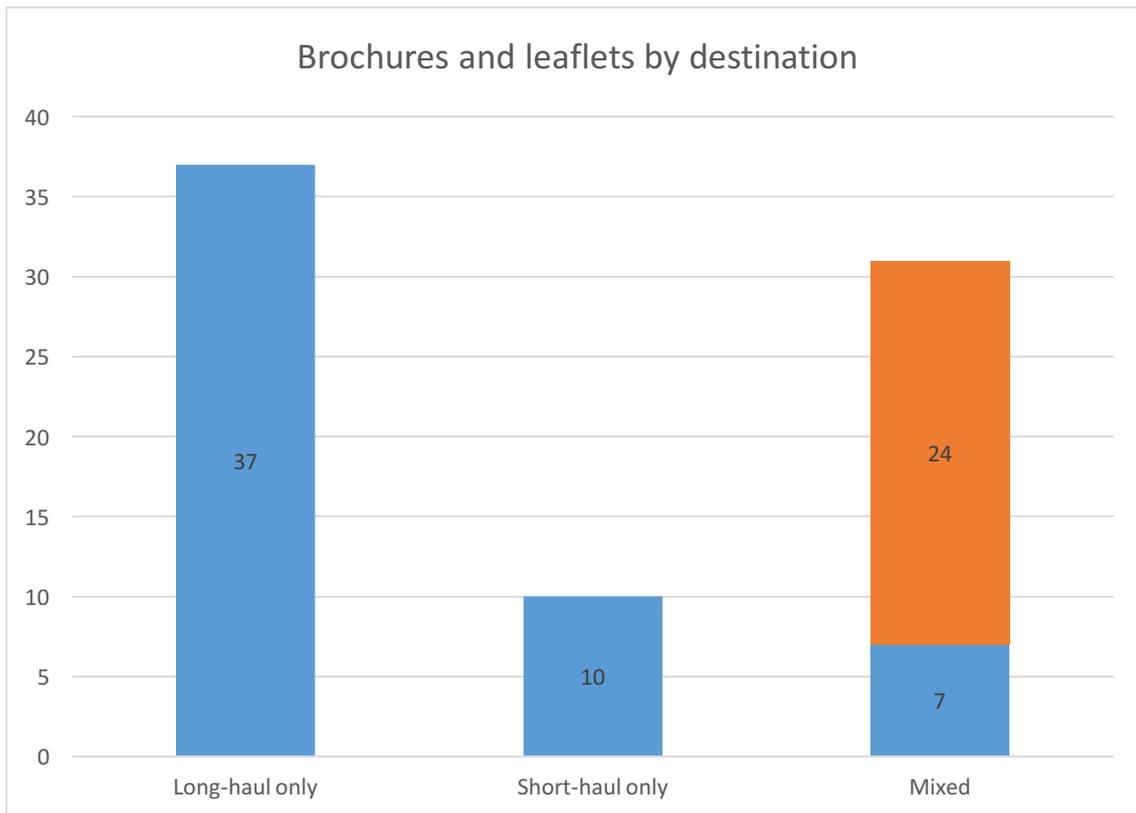
<sup>7</sup> Materials with only vague descriptions of destinations, such as „overseas“, „world wide“, „around the world“ or „abroad“ were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>8</sup> „Long-haul“ relates to all non-European destinations.

The Year in Industry), were largely absent at mainstream gap year events and talks. The events were dominated by organizations offering work placements, assistance with visa applications and help with job searches in destinations such as Australia, New Zealand, US and Canada.

Projects in European and other shorter haul countries featured more frequently than those in the UK, but less so than faraway locations. In particular, Western Europe was popular for language and art courses. A small number of projects was also available in Romania or Moldova, which were portrayed as spaces of difference in similar ways to many long-haul destinations (see section 5.3.1.1) with unique opportunities available, such as volunteering with Romanian bears (Oyster Worldwide, n.d.-a). Some of the closer natural environments were deemed appropriate for specific gap year projects, e.g. the Alps for skiing gap years (Gap Force, n.d.-a), or Arctic Norway for expeditions (British Exploring Society, n.d.). A small number of volunteering opportunities were also available in other European countries, for example volunteering with autistic children in Germany (Camphill Movement, n.d.).

Such opportunities were, however, outnumbered by long-haul projects. Only 10 brochures and leaflets focused exclusively on short-haul destinations. Where both closer and faraway opportunities were available, long-haul locations were normally given more print-space and visibility and/or provided a greater number of projects (see Figure 4). A lower visibility and choice of short-haul projects arguably limited the knowledge of alternatives and strengthened the perceptions that the long-haul is *the* destination for gap year projects, thus constraining the power of individual students to act against the established long-haul convention.



**Figure 4:** Brochures and leaflets by destination. Field shaded in orange shows materials with mixed destinations (i.e. both long-haul and short-haul), where long-haul opportunities dominated.

The project stage, however, was only one part of the overall gap year practice – it was usually either incorporated in or followed/preceded by a period of independent travel (see section 5.2). As examined in section 5.5.2, the location of the project may determine where the independent travel will take place, so the two stages can be more-or-less interrelated. Some brochures and leaflets, including those focused mainly on advertising projects, provided also travel information. Tips were offered on the cost and booking of long-haul flights (e.g. Projects Abroad, n.d.-a), including around-the-world trips (STA Travel, n.d.-c). Many of the promotion materials provided information on destinations, including places to visit and things to do; when to book flights; tips regarding vaccinations for long-haul travel etc. Unsurprisingly, considering that the majority of projects were based in long-haul destinations, travel information was also mainly focused on faraway journeys. There was no similar advice available for slower gap year mobility – for example possible itineraries or budgeting for an inter-railing European gap year, information on booking trains or short-haul flights, or ideas for using alternative transport modes, such as cycling or travelling in a camper van around Europe. Visiting shorter-haul destinations or travel overland is likely

to require a different set of skills and knowledge, including when and how to organize and book trains or other forms of transport; how to plan the itinerary; where to stay; which places to visit. Ethical Gap Years\* was the only organization that mentioned inter-railing as a potential gap year activity – it was, however, referred to as a “holiday” to take during the summer prior to a gap year placement overseas, which was to be followed by further travel (Ethical Gap Years\*, n.d.-a). Moreover, the brief leaflet did not include any specific details on how to go about planning such a trip.

Even if students did not participate in advertised projects and did not book travel packages through mainstream providers, they could use them as a source of information, as was the case with Lily, who used STA’s leaflets and resources, including, as she said, information “on the places”, to plan her own gap year. Travel and project companies with successful marketing strategies were therefore able to shape students’ imaginations related to appropriate ways of “doing a gap year”, as well as help them develop skills and knowledge necessary to embark on such travel. The first encounters mattered – Lara, for example, said that she wanted to make an appointment with STA Travel, as they were the first organization she came across (they were the only company showcasing their opportunities at a UCAS convention she attended). She was only going to consider other options after that initial meeting. Whilst Lara decided not to take a gap year in the end, it can be argued that such first encounters may be very influential in shaping the perceptions on how to do a gap year, including destination choices.

Colleges and schools were sometimes spaces where prospective “gappers” first learnt about available opportunities. Gap year fairs and careers events (which included gap year information) were organized in various educational establishments. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, lecturers and other staff members in the College invited representatives of various organizations to College events, varying from parents’ evenings, dedicated gap year talks, or the College fresher’s fair. For a large part, this was linked to their belief in the value of gap years and concern to provide their students with information that they were not always able to provide themselves, as Elisabeth, a lead tutor for one of the faculties, explained:

“I don’t think that tutors necessarily are overly well-equipped with what opportunities are out there. And that’s why we like to invite people in who actually have done it, and do it, and advertise these things themselves.”

“In the same way as we are obliged to send students progression information about how to start applying for university, so I see it along those lines, it's just doing a service if you like. Without wishing to promote certain organizations over others. But, you know, naturally some come to your attention and others don't.”

Organizations more proactive with their marketing, including sending promotion materials directly to schools and colleges and getting in touch with the teachers, are thus able to grab attention of staff at schools and colleges and, as a result, students. Some of the organizations that gave talks at the College and at schools previously attended by student participants were charities or non-profits, some commercial companies, but all focused solely or predominantly on long-haul projects – none of the students reported participating in a gap year talk that was dedicated to short-haul destinations. Sarah, for example, was inspired to volunteer in an HIV and AIDS programme in Africa by a charity that came into College to advertise their opportunities:

“I applied through the charity Agape... Because they came into college a few months ago. It was a really good talk and it was really exciting, it really made me want to do it... They’ve got an HIV and AIDS programme that you work on.”

Several students reported using the Internet as a source of information and some gap year and independent travel websites they cited promoted long-haul countries as most desirable destinations (Real Gap Experience, 2013; Travel Independent, 2014). Some other sites portrayed long-haul travel as a conventional gap year component in less direct ways. For example, The Royal Geographical Society with IBG (2015) included 77 profiles of ex and prospective recipients of their gap year scholarship on their website: only 2 of the gap year itineraries presented did not involve flying to long-haul destinations.

Overall, whilst the small-scale nature of this study does not allow for broad generalizations, this analysis suggests that the current landscape of gap year

information may limit the knowledge of alternative ways of “doing a gap year”. Gap year events and talks analyzed in this study were dominated by long-haul travel and/or projects in distant locations, and so were gap year promotion materials and some of the websites used by the students. These resources not only shape the perceptions of the right ways of “doing a gap year”, but help develop skills and knowledge specific to long-haul travel (e.g. by providing information on how to search for and book long-haul or multi-stop flights, when to get jobs etc.). Planning a slower, overland gap year is likely to require a different set of skills and knowledge, but these were not widely available in the formal information channels identified in this study.

#### 5.5.2 Project locations and other restrictions

Taking part in structured placements and projects limited students’ ability to choose alternative destinations, particularly for those students whose main motivation was taking part in the project (see Chapter 6 for a discussion on different approaches towards travel and project stages). Some projects were clearly linked to their destinations, for example The Great Coral Reef conservation or volunteering with elephants could only take place in a limited number of places. Moreover, when the project stage took form of a separate placement (rather than ad-hoc projects undertaken along the way), its location normally served as a starting point for the independent travel stage. In this way, projects that students took part in were able to determine the geographical location for further travels. For example, Jonathan wanted to travel around Canada and USA after the end of his placement in Canada, and only then, depending on the budget, extend his journey to Australia and Asia.

In other cases, some restrictions associated with bursaries, scholarships and travel and project packages determined the locations and influenced mobility decisions. For example, Lily told me that she could choose between Nicaragua, Tanzania and India as potential destinations for her volunteering project with ICS – she chose Nicaragua. She was not allowed to stay on at the end of the programme and was forced to travel back to the UK and then travel back out again to commence her independent travel stage:

“What I would have done is I hoped to have gone to Nicaragua with them and then maybe stayed on, but you are not allowed to,

you have to come back. Which is well annoying. But it's okay, it's how it is.”

The around-the-world packages sometimes enforced an itinerary, which resulted in more travel than desired. In the following extract, Lily recalled the experiences of her friends who went on a gap year in the previous year:

“They said that they really didn't like L.A., but they only went there just because their flight went there. I don't think they would have decided to go because they wanted to go, because they wanted to go to the place; they just went there because that was part of the world trip. And they didn't like it and they had to stay there for two weeks.”

The implication here is that students' ability to choose alternative destinations and/or limit the number of flights can be constrained by project locations, restrictions associated with funded programmes and multi-stop travel packages, which can in some cases enforce more travel than would otherwise be desired.

### 5.5.3 Cost and “ease” of travel

As gap year students often had a limited budget to spend and planned on travelling for extended periods of time, many European countries were inaccessible for financial reasons, as the cost of living, accommodation, transport etc. is usually much higher than in many Third World countries. When asked whether she would consider Europe as her gap year destination, Amy responded in the following way:

“I have considered it, but it sounds very expensive. I'd love to do it, but I don't have the money at the moment, that's the main issue. Maybe just a quick trip to Morocco, or something, that would be great. Or maybe Paris, or somewhere. But I couldn't do it for months, I don't have the money.”

Whilst later on Amy admitted that she would not limit her travels to Europe even if it was not more expensive than Southeast Asia, but would “split it into two” and visit both, it can be argued that limited budgets further restrict the possibility of students choosing European countries instead of long-haul journeys.

David, a representative of Youth Travel\*, described the considerations that students normally take into account when discussing their plans with him:

“Researcher: So what are the main things that students look for when they come here, what’s their main concern, or does it vary?”

David: Price. Normally. They want the cheapest price possible. For the longest amount of time really. Which is why Southeast Asia plays a big part, Australia is quite expensive. So people who might try and go there for a long period of time, we would tell them ‘you know, costs of living – very high. So, realistically, if you want to go to Australia for six months or a year, you have to work, to make it possible. Whereas Southeast Asia, you can go to Southeast Asia for six months and it won’t cost that much.’ But apart from that, yeah, I mean, I think adventure. People want to go and have an adventure. I think that’s why Southeast Asia is a really good place as well.”

The perception of Southeast Asia as a really cheap place to travel for long periods of time, combined with its imaginations as a very different, adventurous location, was also shared by many students. This partly explains why places such as Thailand and Vietnam are among the top gap year destinations (ABTA, 2013, 2014, 2015).

Whilst, as David explained, Australia might be more expensive to travel, it was possible to make it affordable by getting a job. The easy availability of working holiday visas in Australia and New Zealand made them attractive gap year destinations, and materials distributed at gap year events informed prospective “gappers” of available opportunities:

“As a UK citizen, you can stay in New Zealand for up to 23 months, working for as long as 12 months in total. You can be flexible and have several jobs with different employers, or work 12 months in one position. You can also do a course of study for up to three months within your year.” (NZ Department of Labour, n.d.)

Assistance was available through many organizations in getting working visas, searching for jobs, finding accommodation, and other necessary arrangements, not only in New Zealand and Australia, but also the US and Canada. Whilst risk taking and facing challenges were found to be part of the appeal (see section 5.3.4), further analysis suggested that ease of access and convenience also mattered. Beyond the easy availability of working visas, Australia was also, according to David, easy to travel, particularly in terms of the lack of language barrier. By contrast, getting a Chinese visa was “a bit of a nightmare”, as David explained, which in his view put people off this location.

Students considered their available budgets not only in assessing the cost of travel within their chosen countries, but also the cost of flights. In some cases, desirable locations were too expensive to reach, as in this extract from my interview with Lily:

“I’m so surprised at the flights to go from Cuba to Jamaica. Between them, it’s like, \$400 each way. It’s quite expensive for how short the flight is. Because I was thinking I could go to Jamaica as well, because I have some friends that have a house there, they are Jamaican. But I don’t know what I am going to do, I’m not sure.”

The cost of flights did not necessarily reflect the distance travelled. David explained the current popularity of Thailand as partly caused by the availability of flight deals to Bangkok:

"David: Bangkok is one of the cheapest places to stop.

Researcher: Cheaper in terms of spending there? Food, accommodation?

David: Both. And in terms of flights as well. Because Bangkok is a really big airport. You get quite a lot of deals going through as well.”

According to David, not many airlines went to Central and South America, which kept the prices quite high, whereas “lots of airlines” went to Australia, and the competition for customers made it cheaper, even though it was further. Thus, the

broader trends in tourism and transport industries shaped the context for action for prospective gappers.

Finally, the around-the-world flight deals were an attractive possibility, as they were considered a “good deal”:

“It’s really cheap for the amount of places you can go to, and you can literally travel all over the world. Usually it includes LA or New York and then you stop off in Europe and then you come home. Lisa, one of the girls I might be going with, suggested doing it. You get to go to more places.” (Lily)

Whilst Lily herself was reluctant to book the around-the-world flight, as she saw visiting too many places as an obstacle to achieving a desired depth of the experience (see also section 5.3.2 and Chapter 6 for more discussion), arguably such attractive deals foster high levels of gap year mobility. Compared to the cost of individual flights, around-the-world deals were relatively cheap, starting from just under £800 (STA Travel, n.d.-b).

## **5.6 Conclusions**

The preceding sections described meanings, norms and resources that were found to shape gap year mobility patterns, thus complementing findings outlined in the previous chapter. First of all, the analysis revealed the existence of a “social script” regarding conventional forms of gap year mobility that was internalized by students and communicated to them through different channels at the moment of recruitment. In particular, the novel contribution of this thesis lies in examining different forms of mobility taking place in the gap year context, rather than being limited to a particular project or endeavor, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, tends to be the case in empirical accounts of gap years. A typical gap year was found to involve a “project stage” and the “independent travel stage”, both of which may require some form of mobility. It was found that long-haul locations, often multiple, were seen as particularly suitable for both stages of travel, although shorter-haul destinations were sometimes included as an additional stop in the itinerary, mostly linked to specific projects. Thus, the findings confirm and extend those by Snee (2014), who found that even though people presented individualized accounts of their gap years, the discourses and narratives they displayed were largely consistent with one another, rather than individualistic, critical or reflexive.

This research contributes to the understandings of such “script” for action in the gap year context, by highlighting the previously under-researched conventions regarding gap year mobility, and exploring how they spread to new cohorts of participants at the moment of recruitment. The socially shared understandings underlying gap year mobility conventions can be grouped in four broad themes. First of all, as discussed in the previous chapter, gap years were found to be widely perceived as an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel, due to the special position they occupy in the life course, allowing for generating funds for, and engaging in, long periods of travel. As such, there was a widespread perception that gap years should involve travel to extraordinary locations, ones that are as different as possible from both everyday surroundings and more common travel practices, such as family holidays. This suggests that the narratives of “anti-holiday” identified previously by Simpson (2004a) develop prior to gap year participation, and are adopted by new cohorts of participants as they learn about gap years from various sources, such as older siblings, dedicated gap year events or social media. Long-haul destinations, and Third World countries in particular, were seen as particularly appropriate, due to their exotic appeal, popular romantic depictions of their cultures and natural environments, and the fact that they are not typical family holiday destinations. Moreover, the analysis revealed that “the east”, including Southeast Asia and Australia, exists in popular imaginations as a conventional location for gap year travel, and some young people were found to follow this convention largely unreflexively. The independent travel stage undertaken during gap years had many commonalities with backpacking, and was typically expected to involve a degree of more-or-less spontaneous wandering around, rather than being a return trip to one country, which is in line with findings from backpacking literature (O’Regan, 2008). In extreme cases, this led to ambitious itineraries, and even the so-called “around-the-world” trips, which involved several destinations on different continents. Another important aspect of the landscape of gap year meanings were the perceptions of Third World communities and distant environments as in particular need of volunteer engagement, as well as the belief that encounters with cultural difference and challenging environments can be life changing, bring about a desired personal transformation and build character. As such, the long-haul gap year mobility is an invaluable element of transitions to adulthood, which are one

of the expected benefits of taking a gap year, as discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, it was also found that the perceptions of gap year volunteering as ethical and sustainable, with a positive impact on local communities and environments, may limit the potential for critical distance of the participants and other network agents. The analysis revealed complex and often conflicting ways in which important agents, including teachers and representatives of gap year organizations, negotiated ethical issues in the gap year context. Greenhouse gas emissions were found to be largely absent from their considerations or placed lower in the hierarchy of concerns than the perceived positive outcomes for students and visited places/communities alike.

These meanings were accompanied by normative expectations that visiting some places will bring tangible results, recognizable and rewarded by others. The study found that the expected rewards associated with engagement in periods of experiential learning necessitated long-haul flying to access distant phenomena and places of interest. Moreover, the ability to gain experience in professional positions promoted travel to Third World countries, where such opportunities were available even for unskilled and inexperienced students, which supports Simpson's (2004a) findings. Paid work experiences in the US, Australia, Canada or New Zealand were portrayed as particularly impressive to prospective employers, which promoted choosing those locations over UK opportunities. This is in line with Heath's (2007) suggestion that overseas experiences are particularly valued and occupy a higher position in the gap year hierarchy than those available in the UK. Moreover, visiting long-haul destinations considered difficult or challenging for various reasons was believed to facilitate the development of personal skills valued in university and job markets. Finally, accessing the community of backpackers and developing social capital through making friendships around the world, relied on visiting gap year hot spots and following traditional routes.

The resources, or *structures of domination*, over which individual students had no control, were found to further influence the terrain for action faced by prospective "gappers". The main channels of gap year information were dominated by projects and travel in distant locations, thus limiting the knowledge of alternatives and possibilities for developing slow travel skills and competence. Students' power was sometimes further constrained by structured programmes,

bursaries, scholarships and travel packages that predetermined geographical locations. Finally, structural issues related to the cost of travel in various countries, the ease/difficulty in acquiring visas (including working visas) and the flight prices were also important elements of the context.

Together, these three parts of the external structures: meanings, norms, and resources, form the terrain for destination and mobility choices in the gap year context. It was found that the current configuration of these elements tends to foster air travel to long-haul destinations (often multiple). As such, this chapter built on and expanded findings outlined in Chapter 4. In particular, adopting a social practice perspective, and temporarily “bracketing out” active agency, allowed for highlighting the highly social nature of destination decisions and the relative stability of mobility patterns. Once again, this chapter should be read in relation to the cycles of structuration presented in Figure 2, and in conjunction with other findings, as each aspect of structuration presents only a shard of the overall picture (Stones, 2005). Methodological bracketing allowed for suspending agent’s reflexivity and opportunities for choice available within the contours of the practice, but these need to be kept in mind to avoid overly deterministic accounts of mobility choices. At the same time, whilst some inner variation and scope for choice undoubtedly exists (and is examined in Chapter 6), this chapter argued that it may be difficult for young people to make choices against the established convention – both in very real terms, as other opportunities might not be as easily available; and in terms of resisting the established conventions, which not only requires critical distance and knowledge of alternatives, but may also jeopardize receiving the full benefits of the gap year. Taking that into account, it can be argued that voluntary behaviour change in this context is likely to be limited and that attempts to encourage a shift towards slow gap year travel would need to consider the complexities of the gap year practice outlined in this chapter. The next chapter moves on to the analysis of gap year mobility-as-performance, employing “agent’s conduct analysis” to explore the role of active agency and instances of critical reflection to the structural constraints described in Chapters 4 and 5.

## **Chapter 6: Agency and choice in gap year mobility**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter is dedicated to addressing the third objective of this thesis: to examine the role of agency and its limits, particularly in relation to the issues of mobility choices and access to participation. As such, the focus is substantially different from the two preceding chapters, moving on from “practice-as-entity”, to examining how students’ individual dispositions, broader life projects, principles for action, transposable skills, resources and discursive orientations, including environmental concerns, are managed in the gap year context and how they affect their performance.

This inquiry stems from two important insights from the social practice theory. The first one is the understanding that individuals are not mere carriers of social practices and that performances of gap years vary, as “people manage everyday life as a puzzle of many considerations emerging from practices and projects and influenced by their accumulated experiences and dispositions” (Ropke, 2009 p. 2493). Various life projects, general frames of meanings, transposable beliefs and concerns of participating students were found to impact on their gap year plans, leading to different itineraries and activities, and to more-or-less sustainable choices. These general-dispositional frames (*habitus*) do not imply voluntarism, as they are a consequence of participation in past and present practices. Secondly, social practice theory appreciates that “not every human being is capable of undertaking every possible practice, nor are practices uniformly distributed” (Shove et al., 2012 p. 65). It was found that gap year opportunities were not equally available to all interviewees. Access to and individual performances of the gap year practice were affected by students’ resources, skills and competence, which in turn depended on the kinds of families they were born to; the communities and networks they belonged to; and also on the types of practices they participated in in the past. As Shove and colleagues (2012) argued, it is crucial to show how issues of access and changing commitments over individuals’ lifetimes combine to define the trajectories of practice, as this impacts on future patterns of participation and survival of social practices.

This chapter, therefore, moves away from describing gap year practice “as entity” towards practice “as performance” (Spurling et al., 2013), and outlines the results of agent’s conduct analysis. For this purpose, this time the context of action is “bracketed”, and whilst the analysis on its own may this time appear overly individualistic, when read alongside other chapters it complements the understanding of the gap year practice as not static, but dynamic, and allows for accounting for the “duality of structure” as intended by Giddens. In other words, this chapter examines how “the conjuncturally-specific internal structures relevant to the context of immediate action forge a reconciliation of sorts with the active agency and the general-dispositional frame of meaning of the agent” (Stones, 2005 p. 122). As Stones (2005) argued, it is a process of “negotiation and reconciliation” that can in some cases “lead to an attenuation of the agent’s general-dispositional frame” (p. 122) – for example, to the value-action gap. Therefore, this chapter explores how students’ hierarchies of concerns, general dispositions, desires, beliefs, transposable skills and resources affect individual performances of the gap year practice, as they are negotiated and reconciled with the “conjuncturally-specific internal structures” (i.e. with students’ knowledge and awareness of gap year meanings, norms and resources discussed in the previous two chapters, which can also vary between students, as they may have a different level of understanding of, access to, and critical distance towards those external structures). This negotiation and ordering of concerns does not necessarily imply rational deliberations: this process can be more-or-less pre-reflexive and taken for granted (Stones, 2005 p. 102-103).

As such, this analysis accounts to some extent for the inner variation of the gap year practice and differences between individual student itineraries, as well as shedding light on limits to participation and possible future trajectories of the practice-as-entity. Whilst it is not the purpose of this chapter to examine each of the individual student performances in-depth, three broad aspects of habitus and active agency are established, which were found to have consequences for gap year mobility and thus are relevant to the sustainability angle of this thesis. Section 1 explores the issues of access to participation, outlining how students mobilize their habitus, in particular their relevant skills, competence and other individual resources, in order to participate in a gap year. Issues of access are of relevance for making predictions about the future of gap year practice-as-entity

and its potential for survival through ongoing recruitment of new participants. This section concludes that whilst those from wealthy backgrounds have an easier access to gap year participation, there is also evidence that some students may reflexively draw on skills and competence accumulated through other experiences to embark on gap year travel despite financial barriers. Implications for the future trajectory of the gap year practice are discussed. Section 2 then examines the impact of habitus/ transposable dispositions on gap year mobility choices. It was found that depending on participants' past travel experiences, skills and general dispositions, including broader life projects and goals, they were to an extent able to exercise choice in relation to gap year mobility, with consequences for carbon emissions. And finally, Section 3 explores a specific aspect of habitus, namely students' environmental concerns and their impact (or lack thereof) on gap year decisions. In particular, any tensions between transposable environmental values and students' understanding of the specific context of action (i.e. of the external structures outlined in the previous two chapters) are examined. Thus, the concept of habitus is mobilized in this chapter to move the attention from practice-as-entity to how practitioners themselves engage with the structural context of action, in line with the acknowledgement that performances of social practices are never identical, and that people are able to "adapt, improvise and experiment" (Warde, 2005 p. 140). Therefore, this chapter examines the extent to which students are able to exercise choice based on their preferences, skills, values, resources and dispositions, and through such choices potentially over time mould and reshape the gap year practice-as-entity itself. This analysis has implications for sustainability strategies, as most effective solutions might vary for different groups of students and different versions of the gap year practice. Moreover, the issues of access are relevant when assessing the possible directions in which the practice-as-entity might develop in the future, particularly the potential for further "mainstreaming" of such experiences.

## **6.2 Habitus and issues of access – who goes on gap years?**

### **6.2.1 Financial resources**

Previous research found that whilst gap year takers come from a variety of backgrounds, they are more likely to be white or native English speakers; attend independent schools and "high status" universities; and come from families with a higher socio-economic status (Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Some argue that going

on a gap year allows middle-class students to confirm their class advantage and gain privilege in the job and university markets (e.g. Heath, 2007; Bagnoli, 2009).

The analysis of interviews with prospective “gappers” revealed that those from wealthier backgrounds indeed had an easier access to gap year participation. Whilst the majority worked or planned to work in order to save money for their gap years, many also received support from their families, either in the form of direct financial contribution, inheritance money or loans from parents. Amy, for example, a former private school student, received money from her grandparents and felt confident that her parents would also contribute towards it, as they did for her older brother (who, according to Amy, ended up spending an astonishing amount of around £13,000 on his gap year). In another example, Jonathan was going to pay the fees for his Christian discipleship gap year course with inheritance from his grandfather, so that he could use his own savings from work as spending money. Going on a gap year was therefore arguably more difficult for those who could not rely on such financial support from their families – in particular, some of the more expensive projects and travel were likely to remain out of their reach.

For several participants, financial constraints constituted a powerful barrier to participation and resulted in decisions not to go on a gap year. Abbie, for example, said that she really wanted to take a gap year, but realized that it was going to cost “so much” to go to university that “adding a whole year’s worth of holiday bills on top of that” was simply not a viable option:

“I know that going on a gap year, it’s just going to be that I’m going to spend all of the money that I need to save up to pay for uni... Because it’s going to be so expensive for me to go to uni.”

Abbie had to cover most of her living expenses whilst at university herself, as her parents offered to pay only for the first year of her student accommodation. She had already started saving money towards university expenses at the time of our interview through a part-time job in a bakery. It is therefore understandable that even though Abbie managed to accumulate some savings, she could not freely spend them on a gap year. Jack, who was also planning to go straight to the university, believed that similar considerations were true for many of his peers:

“I know at the start of college a lot of people were...they assumed they would do the whole gap year thing. But then, as time goes on, less and less people are doing it... People weigh up whether it's really what they want... I guess it's also to do with the fact that the price of uni, as that goes on, they get more and more information about what we've got to do for it. And I guess that deters them. They can't really afford both things.”

Financial constraints were also among the reasons why Mark and Lara changed their minds during the course of the study period and decided not to take a gap year, as they realized how expensive it was going to be. They both explained that if they wanted to go on a gap year, they would need to spend most of the year working and saving up, and could only afford travel for a short period of time. They both decided it was not worth it and changed their plans to go straight to the university instead.

The overall implication is that financial constraints can be a powerful barrier to participation and that going on a gap year is likely to be easier for students from relatively well-off families. In particular, those who have to accumulate savings for their university may be less able to participate. This to an extent limits the potential for further mainstreaming of the long-haul gap year practice. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, there is now a number of bursaries and scholarships available for those who would not otherwise be able to participate. Other ways of gathering funds widely recommended to students included fundraising and working part-time during the school year and full-time during the gap year – although as the interview with Abbie suggested, some might not be able to spend their savings freely. It was also possible to plan a gap year independently, which tended to be cheaper than taking part in an organized project. However, making the most of the funded or more affordable opportunities required a level of organizational and travel skills, confidence and/or social capital, i.e. in Stones's (2005) terms transposable dispositions (*habitus*) resulting from participation in past practices. These are discussed in the following sections. The analysis revealed that these characteristics were not equally distributed among the students, which further limits the population out of which potential gap year takers can be recruited.

### 6.2.2 Organizational skills

Organizational skills and the ability to plan ahead were found to be useful when planning a more affordable gap year. Lily, for example, was a very empowered and confident student, competent in researching and looking into available gap year opportunities. As a result, she was able to fund her gap year without relying on financial contribution from her family. She planned to achieve this through a mixture of own savings (at the time of our interviews she already had two part-time jobs, in a restaurant and in a shop), fundraising and through a gap year scholarship. Lily spent a considerable amount of time researching funding opportunities, took initiative to apply for three separate scholarships, attended interviews and carefully considered her options. She was not successful with her first funding application, but was not disheartened and kept on looking. She then decided to reject a bursary she was granted by another organization, as it required a substantial contribution on her behalf. In the end, she was accepted to participate in a 10 week volunteering project in Nicaragua with ICS, which covered most of her expenses – Lily only had to fundraise £1,500, which was calculated according to her household income. In her own words, finding this opportunity took “hours of Internet searching”, which requires a level of skill and competence. She was also able to organize her independent travel stage on her own. Instead of purchasing one of the available package programmes, which she considered “so expensive”, she planned to organize it individually in a more affordable way. She found websites which offered free volunteering opportunities by putting volunteers directly in contact with the locals and where food and accommodation were provided in exchange for work. Overall, Lily’s personal determination and organizational skills (part of her habitus) made it possible for her to acquire the necessary funds herself and plan her independent travels in an affordable way.

Similarly, Charlie was very proactive in his planning, even though he was still in his first year of college at the time of our interview. He had thoroughly researched the possibilities of organizing his gap year, looked into organized programmes and considered setting up an independent project by contacting professional organizations in his fields of interest. Whilst he did not come from a wealthy family and did not have a lot of previous travel experience (he said that his family could not afford to go on holidays abroad or send him on a school trip

to Morocco), he believed that his personal skills would allow him to successfully plan his gap year. “I’ve always been very fore planning” he said, and believed this set him apart from his less organized peers:

“Most of my friends aren’t that fore thinking. They just cope with what happens in the present instead of thinking in the future.”

This transposable ability to plan ahead meant that Charlie was already thinking of budgeting and saving for a gap year and was in the process of applying for jobs, which arguably made his participation more likely:

“I do want to put some savings towards it, even as early as this is. I do want a bit of preparation for it, like, financially, so I’m not someone who will suddenly be going, say, like a month before I want to go on a gap year ‘oh no, I haven’t got any money’.”

Whilst it was not possible to establish whether Charlie managed to achieve his gap year goals, it can be argued that those with high levels of organizational skills may be more likely to succeed in acquiring necessary funds and planning an independent gap year. Fundraising was another way in which gap years could become more affordable. Georgia, for example, planned to cover part of her expenses in this manner: she considered doing a sponsored run to gather additional funds. Whilst arguably those from wealthy backgrounds may have better opportunities of gathering funds in this way (as “sponsors” of runs and other activities are likely to include parents and other relatives), fundraising can also involve packing bags in a supermarket, car washes or other ways of collecting money from the general public.

The above analysis suggests that whilst it might be possible to organize a gap year without financial contribution from the family, it is likely to take a considerable amount of planning and organizational skills. Not all had the same ability to plan ahead and the same awareness of funding and fundraising opportunities and competence to find and organize affordable alternatives to structured projects. Mark, for example, changed his mind during the course of the study and decided not to take a gap year partly because he felt that he was not able to successfully organize charity work in Africa independently of professional organizations. This realization came after going on a school trip to Morocco which made him realize “how much planning was required”:

“It’s sort of given me more questions than it answered. So it sort of made me think, well, do I want to do this on my own, how much would it cost, where would I stay, how much work would I do, would I be accepted into the community, or would they accept me, and all this... That, sort of, was the beginning of the end.”

After realizing that organizing his gap year independently was beyond his abilities, Mark looked into structured projects, but reached the following conclusion: “It was like £3,000/£4,000. I wouldn’t have been able to save that much up”. Similarly, whilst Jack had initially thought of doing a gap year, he explained that he did not know how to make it happen and was not sure how to organize it:

“Jack: I like the idea of travelling. I wanted to travel across America but I just didn’t really see the likelihood of it actually... or how it would happen, if that makes sense?”

Researcher: How do you mean?

Jack: The logistics of it. I didn’t really... I don’t know. It just didn’t seem too plausible. I don’t really know what I want. So I wouldn’t have organized it properly and stuff.”

Whilst it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the origins of students’ organizational skills, the analysis suggested that other projects and practices could contribute to their development. Lily’s competence in researching opportunities, putting together applications and attending interviews was not limited to her gap year only – she was also proactive in other areas of life, for example participating in local volunteering and having two part-time jobs. In another example, Georgia’s knowledge of fundraising and her idea to do a run to cover part of her gap year expenses were inspired by her previous experience of fundraising for her school trip to South Africa, for which she also had to do a sponsored run. Charlie’s knowledge of various opportunities was partly informed by his self-proclaimed high levels of “media awareness” and watching Discovery Channel and Natgeo on TV.

This analysis suggests, therefore, that organizational skills facilitate participation in gap years, particularly when accessing limited, funded

opportunities that may be less visible and require more effort than widely advertised commercial gap year programmes; when using more creative ways of gathering funds; or when planning a gap year independently, which is normally cheaper than an organized project. Whilst there is now a number of resources available to prospective gap year takers (as examined in Chapter 4), individual awareness and organizational skills influence the extent to which students are able to make the most of those opportunities and constitute limits to gap year participation.

### 6.2.3 Travel confidence and skills

Apart from the ability to plan ahead and find affordable opportunities, confidence and travel skills were important when planning independent travel, as opposed to taking part in package programmes (which tended to be more expensive). Lily's confidence partly stemmed from her belief in her organizational skills examined in the previous section – she believed she could plan it in a way that would allow her to avoid risk. She contrasted her approach with that of some of her friends:

“One of my friends is doing an organized trip and she's going to Tanzania and doing three weeks there, volunteering and stuff, but that's like £3,000 to do that, and that's not even including flights... but some people would obviously do that.... One of my friends, a couple of years ago, tried to get sponsorship and she, like, raised lots of money to go away to South Africa and do some voluntary work with a company. So I think some people are really worried about the safety of it. Which, like, I am aware of it and stuff, I just have to be really organized to go away. To make sure I'm really organized.”

Charlie also felt confident to organize his gap year independently if it proved cheaper than a structured programme, as he was very aware of his limited budget:

“If the organization is cheap enough then I'd happily will [go with it] .... If it's cheaper to go alone, I will. I mean, I'd hitchhike across America if that's what it takes.”

Those who did not have the same level of confidence and were more worried about safety issues, were more likely to aspire to travel with an organization, as the following extract from my interview with Georgia illustrates:

"I would worry about transferring from the planes to where you've got to go. Because with a lot of the companies, they, like, meet you, if that makes sense? They would meet you and then take you wherever you have to go. I wouldn't do, like, hiking, or anything like that, I couldn't deal with that."

Students' travel confidence was sometimes derived from their past practices. For Jonathan, it was his previous travel experiences that made him confident to travel independently on his gap year:

"I've always been quite confident with travelling. Out of my brothers I was always the most confident to go up to... if we were in another country, to go up somewhere and ask for something or go up and buy something, or get information from them. But I have always been the one that's wanted to go out and do things. Whereas everyone is a bit like, 'oh yeah, I'm not so sure', I've been the one pushing it. So I feel the gap year is perfect for me because there's nothing that worries me. I have travelled abroad by myself before... I flew to Barcelona to meet my cousins. I went with my cousins. We stayed in a villa. There was a bit of travelling in between meeting them, on my own. It wasn't too bad. I didn't think anything of it, really; it was fine."

Jonathan's confidence to travel independently can be contrasted with Georgia's worries about finding her way around visited countries. Those with lower level of confidence could participate in organized programmes, although this was likely to be more difficult, as they tended to be more expensive. Lily was also quite an experienced traveller, having visited Morocco a few times, as well as many European countries (including a camping trip to Spain "on her own", i.e. just with friends, without adult supervision). She also went on a school trip to Spain which allowed her to be "really immersed in the language" and contributed to her confidence of travelling to Spanish-speaking countries on her gap year:

“So it was a confidence boost to know that I could go to another country and get by.”

The implication here is that experiences of international travel in other contexts (such as short trips with friends, family travel or school trips) can foster development of travel confidence and skills necessary to participate in independent long-haul gap year travel. Lack of such experiences and confidence could constrain students' ability to participate and prompt them to opt for more expensive package programmes. For Ellie, who did not have a lot of travel experience, it was travelling “faraway” that she most worried about:

“If I was travelling faraway I'd be going with an organization because I'd feel a lot safer if I went with an organization that specializes and knows what problems are out there... I'd love to go with people who know what they're doing, essentially. You'd feel a lot safer. I think you'd see a lot more of the country than you would if you did it yourself as well. Like, you'd have to know a lot about the country before you went there.”

However, she felt confident to travel independently around Europe, which she considered more familiar and as such a good starting point for travelling on her own:

“I suppose I'd probably start off by travelling somewhere close, like in the European Union, like Spain or Croatia, or Serbia, just so I'd know that... I know what it's like, I know that I'll make friends, I know that it won't be, you know, I won't be convicted of drug-smuggling – hopefully not.”

These findings are in line with previous research that revealed that as travel experience increases, backpackers are likely to visit more exotic and distant places (Richards & Wilson, 2004). For Ellie, visiting Thailand, which was one of her desired destinations, would only be possible with a professional organization. The overall implication here is that independent travel, which tended to be more affordable than package programmes, required a level of travel skills, confidence and competence that was not equally distributed among students. However, taking into account concerted efforts by some networks agents to develop travel skills and empower students to travel, for example through school trips (see

Chapter 4), and some evidence presented in this section which suggests that school trips can indeed contribute to the development of travel skills (although as Mark's example shows, this is not always the case), it is likely that over time more students may develop the necessary confidence to embark on long-haul gap year travel. Moreover, the popularity of low-cost carriers and increasing normalization of short trips abroad (Randles & Mander, 2009b) is likely to have a similar effect, as previous travel experiences were found to help develop these qualities. It is therefore possible that participation in long-haul gap year travels may increase over time, thus further increasing its impact on the environment.

#### 6.2.4 Social capital

The analysis also revealed that students were able to complement their organizational and travel skills (or mitigate against lack thereof) by receiving support from their social networks. Some networked others were able to provide assistance, share their own travel knowledge and skills and boost students' confidence. For example, Lily's stepdad, who had spent 5 years travelling around the world when he was younger, was able to assist her when booking visas and making plans. Lily also e-mailed her friend's dad, who was a travel guidebook writer with work experience in Central America and Ecuador, to ask for advice about visiting this part of the world. Many other students had access to similar support and learnt about the best ways to plan a budget trip from friends, parents, older siblings and other relatives and networked others, including peers who were also in the process of planning their gap years. Charlotte, for example, learnt about ICS scholarships from one of her friends, and consulted another one, who just came back from her gap year, regarding practical planning tips:

“I have spoken to her quite a lot about how she organized it. And flights and stuff, she went through STA Travel, which is quite a common one, I think...because, you think, like, you are just going to do these things, but actually how are you going to do it? So it's quite useful to talk to people that have done it, to know which companies to go to, where to go for flights, and things like that.”

Stories and experiences of other travellers also served to build confidence, as was the case with Lily:

“Lily: I’ve also, like, met people who have done what I wanted to do as well, and they were fine. So, like, I hope I don’t sound ignorant by thinking ‘oh no, I’ll be safe, I’ll be fine’, but, like, a lot of people have done that.

Researcher: Are those people your friends?

Lily: Well, sort of like, family friends or my parents’ friends”.

The analysis revealed that not everyone had access to the same levels of support. Mark, for example, felt largely left to himself in his planning, which contributed to him not taking a gap year: “I wouldn’t necessarily know who to get to help me.” Similarly, whilst some of Sarah’s and Lily’s closest friends were also planning a gap year, Abbie knew only one person who was going - and he was just someone from College, rather than a close friend. This could have contributed to her inability to find ways to finance her gap year, for example through a scholarship.

Moreover, personal networks were important in more direct ways – having relatives or friends abroad to stay with or rely on during the travels arguably made independent travel on a budget easier and more accessible. Lauren, for example, could rely on such networks:

"One of my friend's uncles or something, lives in Vietnam, so like, that's always somewhere we could go. And then some relation to my mum or something, lives in Australia I think. So we've always got, like, contacts, that you can, kind of talk to, which is quite good."

Several other students had access to such networks abroad. For example, Thomas’s uncle worked in Australia, so he considered visiting him there.

Independent travel was also more accessible for those who had someone to accompany them, which depended on the kinds of friendship circles they belonged to. Travelling on your own arguably requires higher levels of confidence than travelling with someone or with a group of people. Thomas was travelling with his girlfriend and several other students with their friends. Lily had a close friend to travel with and, in addition, four other people she knew were going on a gap year to South America at the same time as them, so they were planning to

meet up in various countries. Whilst some students, such as Charlie, felt confident to travel on their own, lack of company was one of the reasons that in the end deterred Mark from going on a gap year:

“None of my friends were really interested in doing it... So, ideally, I wouldn't have wanted to go on my own, so I actually had someone to talk to throughout it, so it wasn't just me and a bunch of people who speak fractured English.”

Altogether, this analysis suggests that gap year participation might be easier for those students, who have well-travelled friends/relatives; access to support networks abroad; and who belong to friendship circles where taking a gap year is a popular choice. These issues are likely to put middle-class students at an advantage, although other sources of information and support available in the gap year context (see Chapters 4 and 5) were in some cases sufficient. Tara, for example, whilst she did not come from a wealthy background and did not know anyone who did a gap year or anyone who was planning to go, was nonetheless able to access online information and received advice from teachers and gap year company representatives.

### **6.3 Habitus and gap year mobility choices**

Further analysis revealed that transposable skills and general dispositions affected the kinds of gap years that individual students aspired to. Whilst social meanings, norms and resources described in the previous two chapters provided the terrain for action, they also gave scope for some inner variation between gap year performances – “[c]hoice is possible, even mandatory, because more than one course of action has systemic legitimacy” (Whittington, 1997/1992 p. 378, as cited in Stones, 2005 p. 105). The previous section already hinted at one of the differences in gap year aspirations – the preference for either an organized or independent gap year resulting from different levels of confidence and skill. Whilst it is not the purpose of this section to examine all the differences between individual gap year performances, the variations which affected the sustainability of gap year decisions, particularly in terms of the overall distance travelled and/or modes of transport, are outlined. In making their gap year choices, agents were able to draw on their general dispositions, principles, skills and orientations drawn from other sources – their past experiences and other areas of life, which over

time become part of habitus. Gap year practice-as-entity is therefore open to renegotiation over time as cohorts of students change. Skills, aspirations, life projects brought over from other areas of life can affect the trajectory of the practice.

### 6.3.1 Authenticity of experience and the number of destinations

As examined in the previous chapter, gap year travel is often framed in opposition to mass tourism practices. Whilst many interviewed students aspired to the ideal of a “traveller”, as opposed to a “tourist”, the specific understandings of what it meant differed somewhat between participants, which in some cases had an impact on mobility choices. For some, seeing the “heart of the countries”, as Susie put it, required spending a significant amount of time in the local areas, getting to know the people, rather than passing through quickly on a busy itinerary, ticking-off destinations. In Lily’s case, the desire for an in-depth experience resulted in her conscious willingness to limit the amount of locations that she wanted to visit:

“Personally, I wouldn’t want to go to lots of different countries. For me, it would be more important to understand that place, meet local people in more detail, get to know how they survive. I think it depends what you want to get out of it.”

For Lily, having an in-depth, authentic experience meant not only getting involved in volunteering, but also limiting the number of destinations she aspired to visit. She wanted to fully immerse herself in a culture, rather than “just going to the main places” and believed that with the around-the-world trip “you don’t get as an enriched journey”. Lily’s understandings were informed to an extent by her well-travelled stepdad with whom she discussed her gap year plans extensively and who recommended longer stays, as well as by experiences of her friends and family members who took the around-the-world trip. Many times during our two interviews she emphasized that hopping from one country to another and having the around-the-world trip was not her type of gap year, it was “a different way of doing things”. This suggests that within the widely shared perceptions of gap years as more authentic experiences than holidays, there was scope for choice and interpretation. Indeed not everyone seemed to share Lily’s view that a high degree of mobility would have a negative impact on the depth of travel

experiences. For example, whilst Thomas also drew a distinction between gap years and holidays (emphasizing that they were “not really the same thing”) and he wanted to work during his travel to get a deeper experience of visited places, he did not think of limiting the number of places he wanted to visit. “I think of getting something of every continent” he said, deciding in the end on India, US and Australia, after discussing his plans with representatives of STA Travel. Therefore, the specific understandings of how to achieve a desired authenticity of experience differed somewhat between individuals, and some of these understandings could lead to less travel in favour of longer stays. Even Lily, though, struggled to reconcile her conflicting desires for the authentic experience on the one hand, and for making the most of her gap year opportunity by visiting at least several places, on the other (which as discussed in Chapter 5 is one of the conventional mobility choices in this context):

“I’m still finding it hard deciding on what country and how I’ll travel. Because I’d really love to travel in Cuba. My stepdad said you should just go to Cuba for four months and just really travel around there. But I don’t know. I kind of want to take the opportunity to go to other places as well.”

This shows that rather than simply reproducing external structures, students can engage in reflexive considerations, particularly when different aspects of external structures are in some ways contradictory. This analysis revealed that achieving authenticity of experience was sometimes perceived to be at odds with visiting numerous destinations; that different students had different understandings of the two meanings; and adopted different strategies to combine them in their performance of the practice.

From the preceding analysis, the following points can be noted. First, that students can reflexively negotiate between multiple, and in some cases conflicting, social meanings that co-exist within the gap year travel landscape, as Lily’s desire to conform to the gap year ideal of high levels of mobility on the one hand, and achieving an in-depth experience on the other. Promoting slow gap year travel might therefore need to involve not only establishing new social meanings, but working to disrupt existing ones, which may work in the opposite direction. Secondly, individual understandings of the meanings can vary, as Lily

and Thomas had slightly different perceptions on what achieving an authentic experience meant. Authority figures, such as Lily's stepdad, could play an important role in shaping these perceptions.

### 6.3.2 Spontaneity and modes of transport

As discussed in the previous chapter, spontaneity was another one of the widely held gap year travel ideals, but further analysis found that individual students had different expectations regarding the desired degree of spontaneity. At one extreme, Susie opted for slower transport modes whenever possible, to avoid the fixed itinerary associated with booking long-haul flights:

"I want to do as much travelling as I can over foot. And I guess I'm not going to know when I want my flight, I don't want to have a time limit on how long I can stay in the country because I've got to get somewhere in time for a flight."

Others were happy to limit their spontaneity to the periods in between their flights, such as Thomas, who wanted to wander aimlessly "from flight to flight" on his multi-stop journey. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the gap year ideal as a spontaneous, free travel, has the potential of limiting the amount of flights booked and opting for overland travel whenever possible, as was the case with Susie. Making the journey itself a part of the travel experience and using slower transport modes has been suggested as tourism's adaptation strategy to climate change (Dickinson et al., 2010). This study suggests that there is scope for strengthening these ideals in the gap year travel context, whilst also taking into account any meanings that might be at the same time working in the opposite direction – i.e. those fostering high levels of movement and inter-continental mobility. However, it needs to be taken into account that Susie was an exceptional participant, characterized by a high degree of travel experience, including long-haul travel, and coming from an extremely well-travelled family. She was very confident about her ability to organize her travels in a spontaneous way, willing to hitchhike in order to get to desired locations, and was able to reflexively mobilize those skills to design a slower alternative to popular multi-flight gap year experiences. Rather than simply reproducing existing meanings, it was a process of reconciliation of her own values, dispositions, expectations and skills with the structural context at hand. As Eric Cohen (2003) observed, even seemingly spontaneous drifting and

travelling without a purpose requires “competence, resourcefulness, endurance and fortitude, as well as an ability to plan one’s moves, even if they are subject to alteration” (p. 97). Efforts to promote overland and/or short-haul travel in the gap year context and making the journey itself part of the experience might need to appreciate differences in participants’ habitus, i.e. that such travel may require a different set of travel skills and competence.

### 6.3.3 Negotiating projects and travel

The previous chapters established the systemic links of gap years to larger life projects, particularly education and careers. Access to specific educational activities was found to impact on gap year destinations – for example Charlie’s choice of the US was partly motivated by his desire to witness geographical phenomena, such as tornadoes and active volcanoes. Therefore, whilst his choice lied within the social understanding of gap years as another stage of education, the specific performance depended on his individual interests. This shows that participants’ knowledge of the context of action combines with their habitus to produce action, which results in variations in the performance of the gap year practice and may potentially lead to changes in gap year-as-entity over time. Further analysis revealed that whilst the understandings of gap year travel as a constructive stage in young people’s lives means that gap years now typically involve a stage of being involved in a project of some sort, individual students attached different levels of importance to their travel and project stages.

Some students were mainly motivated by taking part in the gap year project, and sometimes the travel component was considered less significant. Ellie, for example, clearly prioritized her music tours around Cornwall in her gap year planning:

“My main whim is going to be, right, music. If I’m doing really, really well with my music and I get more gigs up country, I’ll say to myself “I need a car to do this, I really do need a car”. So I’ll save up for a car. And then if I do get more and more gigs, and I do have time to work more, I will definitely go travelling. It just depends on my monetary status, how long, how far that will be.”

It is therefore clear that for Ellie the travel part was less important in her hierarchy of priorities. Even though she wanted to engage in travel, she felt that buying a

car to play gigs in other areas of the country might be a better use for her limited financial resources. The travel stage was to take place only after she accomplished her other goals. It can be argued that Ellie is reflexively using the framework of the gap year-as-entity, i.e. the existing normative expectation that a gap year should be a productive stage of one's career, to accomplish her individual life goals and projects. Adopting strong structuration allows for unravelling how practices and practitioners are intimately related and co-constitutive of one another, thus keeping the duality of structure at the heart of the analysis. By embarking on her gap year, Ellie is simultaneously affected by external structures, as well as reproducing and potentially challenging them – her choice of Cornwall for her music tour may contribute to the shifting perceptions of conventional gap year geography over time. Ellie believed that these experiences would help her with her university course in commercial music – she was advised during her interview for the course that experiences in promoting and booking gigs would be beneficial. It could therefore be suggested that the “professionalization” of gap years (Simpson, 2005) and the emphasis on gathering pre-university experience discussed in the previous chapters, may lead some students to prioritize projects over travel, particularly when managing limited financial resources. Whilst many of the projects currently take place in distant parts of the world (as discussed in the previous chapter), it is possible that some of those experiences could be directed to shorter-haul destinations without affecting project outcomes. For example, Jonathan's key motivation was his desire to take part in the Christian discipleship gap year course, and he said that for him “it didn't really matter too much” where it took place. In his own words, “it was a bonus that it was in Canada”, and whilst he expressed regret that the project was no longer divided into two stages (as it previously took place partly in Canada, and partly in Kenya), it did not change his willingness to take part. Similarly, for Miriam, the main motivation for her mini-gap was to engage in her passion for classic Minis. Travel was only necessary as it allowed her to achieve these goals - she got a work placement for a well-known car company in the US and planned to take part in a classic Mini tour in Italy. Therefore, it could be argued that improving the provision and marketing of short-haul gap year courses, work experience placements and other opportunities for a variety of students' interests, could help shift the gap year practice towards its more

sustainable form, at least for those whose main motivation is taking part in projects.

The majority of the students, however, considered both aspects of the gap year as equally important, or even gave the travel stage a clear priority. For Susie, WWOOFing (volunteering on organic farms in exchange for food and accommodation) was just a way of making her travels possible:

“I knew I wanted a year out and I wanted to go travelling, but I didn’t know how actually I was going to do it. So I was looking at those different websites, and all conservation things and volunteering, but they’re all... you have to pay for them, and, like, a lot of money... And then I had a one to one with my tutor, and she showed me WWOOFing... it’s just so perfect. Not having to pay for accommodation and food... and you can do it literally anywhere.”

For Susie, therefore, participating in WWOOFing was not an end in itself, but a means for travelling around freely and in an affordable way. Her desire to travel came before the project, which simply made her travels possible.

For Lauren, travel was also the main incentive to take a gap year. Volunteering projects, which she planned to organize in an ad-hoc manner whilst travelling around Asia, Australia and New Zealand, were seen simply as another attraction, a way to avoid boredom on a long trip:

“Because obviously we've got quite a lot of time when we're out there. And we want to do, like, travelling, and obviously, like, sitting on the beach (laughter). But I also think we would get a bit bored of that if we did it all the time. So we would probably try and find some, like, volunteering work we can do.”

This example supports observations from the international volunteer tourism literature, which suggest that participants can be motivated by either self-interest (“vacation-minded” participants) or altruism (“volunteering-minded” participants), sometimes possessing multiple motivations simultaneously (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Overall, this analysis suggests that whilst both travel and projects are widely promoted activities in the gap year context (as discussed in the previous chapters), gap year practice allows a degree of choice with regards to how much emphasis is given to each of the stages. Individual students were found to give different levels of priority to each, depending on their broader life projects, dispositions, aspirations and available resources. Therefore, when travel takes place in the gap year context, it can result as much from a desire to travel and visiting specific destinations/parts of the world, as from the willingness to participate in a particular project. It could be argued that a shift towards shorter-haul destinations may be easier for those gap year takers whose main motivation is taking part in the project, and where the long-haul location is not crucial for achieving project outcomes (for example some religious, media or language courses). However, for those mainly or equally motivated by participating in long-haul travel, or where destinations are of key relevance for the projects, such solutions are unlikely to be sufficient.

#### **6.4 Habitus, environmental values and a hierarchy of concerns**

As discussed in the previous chapter, some aspects of travel ethics were part of the overall landscape of gap year norms and meanings that students faced when making gap year decisions and were promoted by various networked actors. However, these ethical considerations did not include the impact of air travel on climate change and tended to focus on the influence of gap year takers on local communities and environments, and on benefits for students themselves. The previous chapter explored also how relevant others justified travel emissions as being of lesser importance than expected gap year benefits. By contrast, this section moves to examine participants' transposable perspectives on travel emissions and climate change and how they managed any conflicts arising between their gap year travel aspirations and environmental values.

None of the students brought up the topic of air travel emissions during interviews, even if prompted with an indirect question regarding possible negative impacts of gap year travel. Direct inquiries were intentionally postponed to ascertain the level of concern that students gave to the issue of flying. Whilst some interviewees voluntarily expressed ethical considerations related to making sure that they make a positive contribution to the places they visit (for example Lily wanted to avoid travelling with a commercial organization partly because she

wanted to ensure that all the money she spent benefited local communities), flying emissions were never mentioned. When asked directly, the responses varied, and whilst most expressed some level of awareness or concern for the environmental impact of air travel, only one student had planned to take action by offsetting her emissions. None, however, expressed a willingness to change their destination choices for environmental reasons.

At one extreme, students expressed low levels of concern and a low willingness to take action. Chloe, for example, said that she was “not particularly” concerned with the impact of air travel on global warming, providing the following explanation:

“Because I’ve flown so much before, it feels normal to me. I don’t worry about that sort of stuff when I’m travelling.”

This extract suggests that the “normality” of flying in other areas of life (Chloe flew quite frequently with her family) could be contributing to the absence of such concerns in the gap year context. Therefore, whilst the gap year practice itself might be a once-in-a-lifetime event, principles for action and general orientations towards air travel can be an element of the habitus developed through past practices. For Chloe, flying was a “normal” element of her life and as such it was not a topic she gave much thought to. Cairns and Newson (2006) previously warned against the development of air travel culture similar to “car culture”, where flying becomes an increasingly normal and expected element of life, resulting in a socio-cultural “lock-in” of this technology. Arguably, the normalization of flying in other areas of life limits the possibility for “critical distance” in the gap year context, which is one of the necessary conditions identified by Stones (2005) for agents to act against the established conventions.

Jonathan also recalled his previous travel practices in his answer, which further supports the view that principles for action in relation to travel emissions can be developed long before a gap year is considered:

“I like recycling and that sort of stuff. If my family throw away a can I’ll make them pick it up and put it in the recycling bin or something like that. But the idea of airplanes and things, I think you can’t really get around that. So I’m not too concerned about that, sort of, carbon emissions and travelling. But obviously if we

can save a journey by sharing cars, then I'll try and suggest that we do it, but I won't say we should do one, sort of... if we went on holiday, I wouldn't say we should do one form of transport because it will do less carbon emissions, or anything like that.

Researcher: Okay, so that wouldn't be a part of your considerations when you book your gap year flights?

Jonathan: No, not really."

In this extract, Jonathan explained how he normally goes about mitigating his environmental impact in different contexts, including family travel practices, which further confirms that general principles for action, a part of habitus or "general-dispositions" in Stones's (2005) terms, can be translated from one practice to another. As a rule, he did not consider changing a transport mode for environmental reasons and he was not going to make an exception for his gap year travel. Therefore, other youth travel practices, such as school trips or family travel, may be crucial for developing strategies and principles for action with regards to travel emissions. What is also interesting about that extract is that Jonathan chose to discuss his family's recycling practices, which had nothing to do with the question about flying. This seems to support findings from previous research that people can use other, often random, environmentally-friendly behaviours as a compensation and justification for air travel emissions (Randles & Mander, 2009a). His answer also shows a sense of powerlessness in relation to flying – as he said "you can't really get around that". Relatively easy fixes available to him in other contexts (recycling, car sharing) were not available in relation to flying. This sense of powerlessness was contributing towards his lack of concern – Jonathan explained that he was not "too concerned" about this issue as there was nothing he could do about it. Therefore, this analysis supports previous research, which criticized the concept of uniform sustainable lifestyles and suggested that environmental behaviours vary across different areas of life (Barr et al., 2010). It is also in line with Stones's (2005) observation that agents' perceived capability and power to act is crucial if they are to create realistic alternatives to external structures, whilst at the same time meeting their various needs (p. 114).

For Thomas, the sense of powerlessness was linked to the low belief in the efficacy of his hypothetical behaviour change. Whilst he believed air travel emissions to be “an issue”, he thought that his own behaviour would not make a difference without everyone taking action:

“I don’t think anything can change without everyone doing something. No, yeah, I think it’s an issue, but. I’d like to say that it would make me think about how I would travel, but I don’t think it would (laughter).”

This quote confirms previous research which suggested that the issues of “locus of control” can be relevant for participating in pro-environmental behaviours – those with an external locus of control might be less likely to act, as they tend to believe that their actions are insignificant and will not bring about change (Hines, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1987).

The sense of powerlessness was widespread among participating students and a sense of inevitability of air travel was common even amongst those who expressed interest in broader issues of sustainability, environment or conservation and had high levels of concern for climate change:

“Georgia: You can’t really get anywhere without being on the plane, can you? It’s just annoying how much impact we actually have. We don’t think about it, like when you go travelling ‘oh yeah, I’m all for the environment’, but then to get there you have to affect the environment, you can’t do anything about it. That’s the annoying thing obviously (laughter).

Researcher: So you wouldn’t give up on your travelling plans because of that?

Georgia: I don’t think you really can. Cause, you can’t really get a boat there, it’s not easy, if that makes sense.”

This extract suggests that gap year takers may be aware of the contradiction between travelling for environmental reasons (such as Georgia being “all for the environment”, wanting to take part in a conservation project) and the fact that arriving at their gap year destinations by plane may be contributing to climate change. This supports Stones’s (2005) observation that habitus consists of a

plurality of discourses, principles and orientations that can at times be conflicting and result in tensions. In this case, reconciliation of those tensions was not possible, as long-haul flying gives limited alternatives in terms of a modal shift - for Georgia, flying was necessary to get to her desired locations, and getting there by boat was not “easy”. Similarly, Ellie thought that alternatives to flying were not viable:

“You do think about that but... I don’t really know what to say to that, because there’s no other way of travelling other than by plane or walking it or swimming it, or going in your own little yacht. If I could buy a yacht and tour around the world on my yacht, I would. But it would be a lot cheaper to do it by plane.”

Lack of viable, easy and affordable alternatives to air travel meant that students could not reconcile their gap year plans with their environmental concerns and were forced to sacrifice one or the other. The analysis found that willingness to participate in various gap year activities was prioritized over environmental values. For example, Miriam claimed to think about her environmental impact and broader issues of climate change:

“I do try to think about those sorts of things, rather than just jump on the plane and who cares about the environment (laughter). I'm studying the Amazon at the moment, in World Development and Geography, and the effects on that, and what happens if deforestation continues and everything like that. So I do find that, stuff like that, very interesting and how we affect our planet. That at the end of the day, if we don't change, then down the line we're not going to have much left.”

However, at the same time Miriam claimed that her passion for classic Minis was more important and she was not willing to sacrifice her gap year plans, even though she was aware of the environmental impact of flying and also realized her hobby was not particularly “green”. Similarly, for Charlotte, expected personal gains from her gap year were more important than air travel emissions:

“Obviously that is an issue, but it is something that I would say the positives override it, maybe.... That’s why I personally would get more out of it than I would see the negatives, I think.”

This analysis is in line with Stone's (2005) observation that "agents compromise their ideal set of wants, desires and principles in order to be realistic; they sacrifice some things in order to safeguard others" (p. 112). Prospective gap year takers in this study sacrificed their environmental concerns in order to safeguard gap year participation. Thus, the existence of habitus/ individual dispositions does not imply that agents are free to "practice" their values in all contexts. As Stone's (2005) argued, given the agents' desire to realize the core commitments of the practice and their relative lack of power over established social norms, they may have to act "according to pragmatic schemas that embody pragmatic norms rather than normative ideals that will, thus, remain hidden from view" (p. 92). Such perception of norms sheds a new light on the value-action gap and why the declared environmental norms often remain "hidden from view" in the leisure and travel context, including gap years.

Susie was the only student who took action to mitigate against environmental impact of her gap year flights. She planned to offset carbon emissions resulting from air travel and to limit the number of flights as much as possible:

"It is so bad to fly. I want to try and do the carbon offsetting thing where obviously you pay and then they plant trees for offsetting your amount of carbon dioxide that is produced from the plane. So I'll do that. And then I just want to spend as little time flying as I can and spend most of the time using other forms of transport".

Whilst Susie's desire to use other forms of transport was also motivated by her preference for a more spontaneous journey and avoiding a fixed itinerary (see the previous section), carbon offsetting was motivated solely by her environmental concerns. Susie learnt about carbon offsetting from her environmental studies teacher and introduced it to her family – they had offset emissions from their last trip to Spain. This shows that authority figures can be important agents in developing principles and strategies for action, which can be enacted in various travel contexts.

At the same time, however, Susie was not willing to consider changing her gap year destinations for environmental reasons, even though she felt that she "should" do it. Carbon offsetting, whilst not an ideal solution, could therefore be

seen as a compromise to reconcile her two conflicting desires – to engage in long-haul gap year travel and to avoid carbon emissions:

“Researchers: But you wouldn’t give up flying for environmental reasons?”

Susie: I feel like I should, but... I don’t know. I think there’s certain places where I just have to take flights. From going here to India, I do, kind of, need to. But around India, I guess as long as I can, like, not fly, then I will.

Researcher: Okay. But not going to India, just keeping it more local, isn’t something you would consider?

Susie: I don’t think so.”

Overall, this analysis suggests that the potential for voluntary behaviour change towards shorter-haul and overland travel in the gap year context is limited. The analysis revealed that those concerned with flying emissions felt largely powerless to act. Modal shift was considered not viable for faraway journeys, whilst changing destinations to short-haul was not taken into account, as gap year aspirations were prioritized over environmental concerns.

## **6.5 Conclusions**

From the preceding analysis, several points can be noted. By paying attention to the interplay between the external structures (outlined in chapters 4 and 5) and practitioners’ agency, this chapter unraveled constraints and opportunities for choice in making gap year mobility decisions, providing explanations for the internal variations of the practice as well as looking into the future at its potential trajectory. First of all, it has been shown that access to long-haul gap year opportunities is not equal for all. Those who received financial support from their families had a clear advantage, whilst affordable gap year opportunities were more easily available to those with high levels of organizational skills, confidence, travel skills and relevant social capital derived from practitioners’ past experiences, i.e. habitus/general dispositions in Stones’s (2005) terms. These factors may limit to an extent the size of the population out of which gap year practitioners are recruited, as several students were found unable to fulfill their gap year aspirations. However, taking into account concerted efforts by various

actors to empower young people from less privileged backgrounds to participate in gap years (as outlined in Chapter 4), and the multitude of sources where necessary skills and competence were found to be drawn from (including peer groups, school trips, family travel, other practices, Internet and other media, teachers and gap year representatives), it is possible that gap year participation will only increase over time. This possibility needs to be taken into account when designing strategies to mitigate against aviation emissions, particularly considering evidence from other research, which suggests that gap year travel may lead to return trips to visited destinations (O'Shea, 2011).

Moreover, the analysis revealed that gap year aspirations varied to an extent between individual students, resulting in different itineraries. Whilst, as discussed in the previous two chapters, gap year takers are faced with the terrain for action which pre-exists their participation, this terrain for action allows also for a degree of choice and active, reflexive use of practitioners' knowledgeability and skill. Whilst the analysis did not examine all such differences, it focused on issues relevant to gap year mobility and transport patterns. Students' general dispositions, understandings, transposable skills and competence resulted in different performances of the gap year practice, including differences between the numbers of destinations visited, the amount of time spent in each place, transport mode choices and different levels of priority given to the project and travel stages respectively. These insights are relevant for strategies aimed at promoting slower ways of "doing a gap year", as different solutions might need to be developed for different groups of students, depending on their aspirations, skills and other characteristics.

Finally, students' enduring environmental concerns related to air-travel were found to be placed relatively low in the hierarchy of concerns in the gap year context. Interviewees lacked the critical distance and/or the power to act, as there were no easily available alternatives to long-haul flying. Therefore, this study suggests that voluntary behaviour change in this context is unlikely and further highlights flaws of the "deficit" model of the public – most interviewees' were aware of the negative impact of air travel on climate change, but were unable to reconcile their gap year aspirations with environmental values. Consequently, strategies to promote more sustainable forms of gap year travel practice will need to address the social organization that supports its long-haul character, rather

than trying to convince individual students to change their behaviour for environmental reasons.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion**

### **7.1 Summary and discussion of main findings**

This research intended to provide an in-depth and socially situated understanding of long-haul flying within the specific context of gap year travel and, by doing so, advance strategies towards reducing aviation emissions to mitigate climate change. As such, it aimed to respond to recent calls for redirecting research and policy attention towards the inherently social nature of tourism practices underlying air travel, particularly in light of identified limitations of dominant psychological understandings of behaviour (Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008; S.A. Cohen et al, 2013; Young et al, 2014).

This section is dedicated to summarizing the main findings and discussing them in relation to the existing body of literature, highlighting the unique contributions of this thesis. The results are discussed in three sub-sections, corresponding to each of the specific research objectives. First, gap years are described as a form of social practice, providing the broad context within which gap year mobility is situated. Drawing on the concepts derived from the theory of structuration, and agent's context analysis in particular, meanings, norms and resources influencing the continued performance of gap years are outlined. Second, those aspects of the gap year practice that were found to foster long-haul mobility, often to several destinations, are examined. And third, findings from agent's conduct analysis, which considered the role of agency in gap year participation and mobility choices, are outlined. Finally, theoretical contributions are discussed. Section 7.2 then goes on to summarize and flesh out the key contributions of this thesis, whilst section 7.3 considers how presented findings could be employed to inform policies directed at managing aviation demand. Finally, limitations of this research and recommendations for further study are discussed in section 7.4.

#### 7.1.1 Gap year as a social practice

The analysis suggested that gap years can be successfully conceptualized as a social practice – a collective phenomenon, rather than an individual undertaking driven solely by individual aspirations and motivations. The study revealed a variety of socially shared meanings, norms and resources that students drew upon when becoming gap year takers. As such, it is argued that whilst young

people may have a degree of choice in what they do, they are also guided by collective rules of conduct, conventions and normative expectations, and their decisions are constrained/enabled by existing infrastructures, institutional arrangements and other resources. Thus, this study built on and substantially expanded previous “socially-oriented” accounts of the gap year phenomenon (e.g. Simpson, 2004a; Snee, 2014). By contrast to other studies, the novel contribution of this thesis lies in examining the “terrain for action” faced by prospective gap year takers as they planned and navigated between available opportunities, and by paying close attention not only to socially shared understandings and imaginations, but also normative expectations and resources, including infrastructure and institutional arrangements. Moreover, adopting strong structuration as a theoretical framework allowed for positioning this “terrain for action” as dynamically shaped by numerous networked others, such as commercial and non-commercial gap year organizations, members of staff at schools and colleges, university admissions officers and parents. This part of analysis, concerned with “practice-as-entity” (Spurling et al 2013), purposefully “bracketed out” agency and reflexivity. Specific insights are summarized below.

It was found that the widely shared gap year convention was that of a “constructive break”, which is broadly consistent with previous gap year research (e.g. Cremin, 2007; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2005). It was discovered that reconciling the seemingly contradictory ideals of leisure and career advancement was normally achieved by planning to combine several undertakings within the year out. An “ideal gap year” was both constructive (this was accomplished through participating in various projects, such as volunteering or work experience), and leisurely (projects were typically followed or preceded by periods of freer, independent travel). The two stages were not always clearly demarcated and at times blended with one another, but most participants in this study designed their gap years roughly along these lines, thus following the established convention. There was a widespread concern to make the gap year appear constructive, for example through aligning it to a desired career, and not coming across as a “layabout” to university admissions’ tutors. These concerns reflected advice often communicated to students by relevant others, such as tutors and progression officers, providers of structured programmes and university recruiters.

Moreover, the study revealed that international travel was a widely expected element of a well-spent gap year, both for leisure purposes and to participate in overseas projects or work experience, to an extent that taking a gap year was sometimes almost synonymous with engaging in travel. This thesis suggested that such high value of travel experiences in this context is partly linked to the broader role of corporeal travel and experiencing places, people and events directly, which, according to Urry (2002), is essential for people to be full and active members of society. Pine and Gilmore (2013) suggested that currently in Western societies consumers prefer to collect memorable experiences over spending their money on goods and services, marking a shift towards “experience economy”. As such, gap years can be seen as an opportunity to gather socially valued memories and experiences, thus reflecting broader societal trends. Indeed, many students said that they always wanted to travel, and gap year simply provided a unique opportunity to do so; as one of the participants explained: “it’s become a thing that that’s the time to do it”. However, in the context of pre-university gap years, travel also plays a very specific and unique role as a “rite of passage”, facilitating personal transformation and transitions to adulthood, which has also been documented by previous research (e.g. Ansell, 2008; Bagnoli, 2009; King, 2011). The expectations that gap years will help develop various life skills, an adult identity (characterized by maturity and independence), as well as assist in figuring out future career paths were widely shared by prospective “gappers” interviewed in this thesis, as well as other important actors, and were one of the key aspects of gap year marketing.

Additionally, this research identified normative expectations of tangible social rewards, which were believed to result from participation in gap year activities. These included CV enhancement and better prospects of securing a university place and future employment, as the dominant perception was that such experiences are able to impress and attract interest of admissions and recruitment officers. Another common belief was that gap year experiences are likely to lead to improved academic performance, particularly if they are aligned to the chosen course, as they can be an inspiration for academic writing. This echoes Snee’s (2014) findings that there is a shared narrative of gaining useful skills for education and employment, which, as she found, gap year takers tended to reproduce. This research contributed to these understandings, by identifying

similar narratives among *prospective* “gappers”, which shows that rules of the practice might be internalized prior to participation. It was also found that those who took a gap year were widely believed to be better adjusted to university life and independent living away from home. Some participants felt they needed to achieve a certain level of maturity, independence and skills in order to cope with university life (for example through being able to manage their own finance, bills and house chores). Thus, rather than developing those skills at university, young people expect to arrive “prepared”. Those benefits were also widely promoted in gap year materials, which is broadly in line with previous findings, for example by Heath (2007). Moreover, commencing the new stage of education refreshed, inspired, and invigorated was also perceived to be beneficial, rather than being tired from recent exam taking and burnt out. As such, gap years can be seen as a buffering period between the two formal stages of British education. Other expected advantages of going on a gap year included access to the valued social and cultural capital, through establishing networks abroad, as well as an improved status at home, for example being more “cultured” or able to relate to peers who had gone through similar experiences. As such this thesis confirms and extends those accounts of gap years that frame it as a socially valued and rewarded practice that is able to improve one’s prospects and social standing (e.g. Bagnoli, 2009; Heath, 2007; Simpson 2004a).

Gap year taking was also found to be facilitated by institutional arrangements, particularly through “deferred entry” being now built into the university application process in a transparent way, which allowed for worry-free travel after securing a place on a chosen course. Many universities provide advice on their websites and clarify the recruitment process for those who wish to defer entry to take a gap year. Students do not have to be concerned about travelling back for an interview during their gap years, going through the hassle of acquiring references from former teachers after finishing college, or worry about how their application would be viewed by admissions’ officers at the university, which according to one of the College lecturers used to be a real problem in the past, when applying for deferred entry was a bit of a gamble. This arguably contributes to pre-university gap years being such a popular activity in Britain, by contrast to, for example, China, where lack of institutional support results in postponing gap year taking until later years in life, as suggested by a

recent study (Wu et al., 2015). Jones (2004) has previously provided a comprehensive review of gap year provision in the UK, identifying various available programmes and schemes tailored at this group. This thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of gap year resources, by examining which opportunities, and in what ways, formed part of the terrain for action for prospective “gappers”. It was found that not only students had access to a dazzling variety of structured programmes tailored to almost all interests and career pathways, but also they at times were able to create their own, independent projects, through utilizing the Internet and other media to find out about relevant companies and to establish contacts. Travel packages were also available, as well as a number of resources for independent travellers, enabling them to travel in safe, fun and affordable ways, e.g. through volunteering programmes that offered food and accommodation in return for work; flexible, short-term volunteering projects for those who travel without a fixed plan and want to avoid prolonged commitments; travel insurance and emergency facilities; social events and social networking sites for gap year travellers; and many others. As such, gap year opportunities are available for people with different levels of skills and travel competence, and with various aspirations and interests. Moreover, this thesis provides a novel, in-depth glimpse into various channels of gap year information that were available and utilized by prospective “gappers”. These included talks and gap year fairs organized at schools; gap year providers’ materials; information at UCAS conventions and government websites; through communities of interest; careers services; members of school and college staff; as well as more informal channels and the word-of-mouth. Finally, this research identified a number of funded opportunities, such as full and partial scholarships for those who could not afford to participate otherwise, as well as organizations providing assistance in budgeting and fundraising, which opens gap year participation to some of those from less affluent backgrounds. Whilst access to gap year experiences is not equal to all, it is now easier than ever for many young people to embark on long periods of international travel, either through joining a structured trip or project (often, but not necessarily, more expensive), or through utilizing some of the numerous sources of advice and information to plan the travel and/or projects independently, which can be more affordable. Thus, it is likely that gap years may over time become more mainstream.

Thus, this thesis shows that gap years can be successfully conceptualized as a social practice, rather than simply an individual “choice”, as they are characterized by collectively shared ideas of what it means to do a gap year and which activities are particularly desirable in this context; and they are enabled/constrained by available resources and institutional arrangements. Together, this assembly of meanings, norms, and resources facilitates the continuous recruitment of new cohorts of gap year takers. This “terrain for action” was found to be dynamic: a number of actors were involved in the (re)production of meanings and norms and providing resources. They included commercial and non-commercial organizations; schools and colleges, and individual members of staff; university admissions officers and graduate employers; and parents. Thus, gap years are situated in the midst of position-practices of various networked others, which adopt different positions towards it, depending on their professional and other social roles. This is of relevance for policy makers interested in managing gap year mobility: strategies may involve addressing a variety of interlinked agents and practices, as there is no one set of actors that has full control over the shape of gap years.

Most importantly, the perceptions of gap year taking identified among various agents were predominantly (although not solely) positive. The study found a number of actors actively involved in widening participation in such experiences, particularly to those from less wealthy families, through providing resources, including funding; facilitating the development of travel skills, confidence and competence; and communicating the value of such projects to parents, debunking negative gap year perceptions and myths; and promoting more constructive and/or ethical (and thus more socially acceptable) forms of gap year. Thus, whilst previous accounts of gap years highlighted inequalities in access to gap year experiences, which were predominantly undertaken by the wealthy middle-class students (Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2004a; Bagnoli, 2009), there was evidence to suggest that this trend might be changing. Concerted efforts were observed among numerous networked agents in the College and beyond to bridge the gap of privilege and encourage, or even fund, participation for those from poorer backgrounds. This was by contrast to previous observations made by Heath (2007), who suggested that students from the state sector are given less institutional encouragement to pursue a gap year.

This is also crucial for sustainability strategies, as if the gap year becomes even more mainstream over time and is further consolidated as an acceptable rite of passage, whilst continuing on its long-haul trajectory (see the next section), it will result in even greater greenhouse gas emissions. This is particularly important in light of anecdotal evidence that young people may attempt to “keep their gap year alive” upon return, which can take form of return trips to visited destinations (O'Shea, 2011), and evidence from broader fields of tourism and youth travel, which suggests that episodic travel experiences can lead to an extended travel career (Richards and Wilson, 2003) and even a long term lifestyle (Cohen, 2011).

### 7.1.2 Long-haul mobility in the gap year context

Further “agent’s context analysis” revealed that social meanings, norms and resources that formed the “terrain for action” for prospective gap year takers, promoted long-haul mobility (and often multiple flights) as a normal way of “doing a gap year”. Long-haul destinations were the most popular among participants in this study, which was in line with ABTA’s (2013, 2014, 2015) statistics. Moreover, most students planned to visit several destinations on their gap year, often on different continents. Destination choices did not take place in a vacuum, but were an integral part of the gap year practice and some geographical spaces were constructed as the most appropriate or more convenient than others for this type of travel. Thus, this thesis contributes to the growing body of research exploring the collective nature of air travel (Hopkins et al., 2015; Randles & Mander, 2009b), and provides further evidence to suggest that travel decisions are not simply a matter of individual “choice”, by linking them to a specific social practice.

The preference for long-haul destinations was partly related to the understandings of a gap year as an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime journey, which led to the search for geographical spaces characterized by the highest possible difference from the mundane and the everyday. It was predominantly long-haul countries that had the desired romantic, otherworldly and exotic appeal, as they exist in popular imaginations as places of cultural and environmental wonders, and are thus considered suitable for a journey of a lifetime. Only a small number of European destinations were portrayed in a similar way, and these included places characterized by extreme landscapes and weather conditions,

such as the Arctic Norway, or some places located in the former Soviet bloc, which may have the desired “exotic” appeal to the British traveller, such as the Trans-Siberian railway. Making the journey extraordinary was also achieved by distancing it from other, more prosaic, travel practices, including family holidays and various short trips that are now part of the everyday. In their choices, some students avoided what they believed to be “family holiday destinations” or “teenage party islands”, normally located in Europe. These findings are consistent with previous research that found students expressing discourses of anti-tourism and anti-holiday in gap year narratives (Snee, 2014, Simpson 2004a), and contributes to these understandings by highlighting that such sentiments develop prior to the gap year experience. It can be argued that the increasing normalization of international travel in other contexts, including trends towards frequent flying (Randles & Mander, 2009b), results in the search for ever more distant and different gap year destinations. One of the participants did not even seem to consider visits to European countries to count as proper travel. Moreover, it needs to be stressed that the search for distance and difference was not undertaken individually - some places existed in the popular discourse as *the* places to go on a gap year, with Australia and Southeast Asia considered to be particularly appropriate. Some students were found to follow that convention largely unreflexively, explaining that this is simply where you go on a gap year. Travelling along conventional routes also facilitated meetings with other “gappers”, which is thought to be an integral part of the gap year experience – students narrated expectations of encountering a friendly travel community, sharing tips and stories, and making new friends. Arguably, this limits the potential for choosing alternative destinations in this context and going against the established convention. Moreover, gap years were mostly understood to include a degree of moving around, rather than being a return trip to one destination, and this high degree of mobility often took form of ambitious around-the-world itineraries. Around-the-world tickets are now available at relatively low prices, and evidence suggested that such deals may sometimes entice students to include destinations in their itinerary that they would not otherwise consider.

Furthermore, visiting locations considered to be particularly challenging or awe-inspiring in terms of culture or environmental and weather conditions was believed to promote personal transformation and facilitate transitions to

adulthood, which, as discussed earlier, were part of the widely shared gap year expectations. Travel to Third World destinations was presented as particularly suitable for this purpose, where humbling, authentic and life-changing encounters were believed to take place, fueled by simplistic imaginations of “otherness” and poverty. Coping with cultural difference was also part of the experience, particularly overcoming challenges and discomfort. Rough environments had similar character-building qualities in popular perceptions, whilst some distant cultures and wondrous encounters with wildlife and nature were presented as bringing about an almost spiritual transformation. Thus, geographies of difference were an important aspect of the widely shared hopes that a gap year will prove to be a life-changing experience and assist in “finding yourself” and developing a new, adult identity. These findings are broadly in harmony with Ansell’s (2008) research, who explored that risk taking is an important aspect of transitions to adulthood undertaken during gap year. This thesis contributes to these understandings by highlighting the geographical dimension of this risk taking – it was found that long-haul travel was widely portrayed as necessary to access places perceived as dangerous, with only a few exceptions. Europe was generally seen as too similar to the UK, both in terms of culture and climate, and it did not lend itself to become a natural location for the rite of passage, where radical personal transformation was expected to take place.

Project destinations were characterized by their own rules and conventions, which can be divided into three themes: perceived need, experiential education and standing out from the crowd. First of all, this thesis confirms Simpson’s (2004a) findings, as Third World countries were largely understood as natural spaces for volunteering work and presented as in need of gap year takers’ engagement in gap year promotion materials. Such understandings were also found to be present outside of the immediate gap year context, promoted by media representations and reinforced by school trips to Third World locations. School trips often inspired students, provided destination and volunteering ideas, helped build necessary skills and confidence, and at times served a more practical role, by connecting prospective gap year takers with specific places and organizations in the Third World that schools had previously engaged in. This suggests a link between gap years and other practices, which means that attempts to direct gap years into a more sustainable

trajectory may also need to address the place of long-haul travel in the British education more broadly. One of the College lecturers questioned these taken for granted assumptions during our interview and wondered why they do not consider UK volunteering and community engagement for their school trips, challenging the common perception that Third World places are in greater need of such engagement. This research also revealed that the “geography of need” was not limited to Third World communities only, and extended to distant endangered species and environments, which could be found in the developed world as well, with conservation opportunities available in the national parks of the US, Australia and New Zealand, for example volunteering with koalas or the Great Coral Reef. UK and European volunteering projects were largely absent in mainstream sources of gap year information and in students’ imaginations, again with some incidental exceptions, such as volunteering programmes with bears in Romania.<sup>9</sup> Other “needs” to be met by gap year travellers included reaching distant communities with Christian teachings, as part of Christian gap year missions and projects (although UK and European programmes were also available, albeit again on a smaller scale). Volunteering and other forms of engagement in long-haul destinations in the gap year context, therefore, can be seen as stemming from two interrelated understandings: first, that distant communities and environments are in particular need of this kind of engagement; and, second, that those various needs can be effectively met by transient groups of gap year volunteers. Without wishing to undermine any positive work undertaken by “gappers”, this thesis argues that the environmental cost of reaching distant locations, particularly for short term projects, should also be taken into account when assessing their overall impact. Perhaps, in light of the climate change challenges, a shift towards a more widespread engagement of gap year volunteers with UK and European communities and endangered environments could be encouraged.

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<sup>9</sup> However, as Crawford and Cribb’s (2012) study suggests, UK volunteering is also a popular gap year activity, undertaken by around 20% of gappers. This could mean that opportunities to undertake such projects may emerge during the year out (perhaps as an additional activity), rather than being planned in advance, as most prospective gap year takers in this study did not take UK volunteering into account (apart from Lily, whose structured project in Nicaragua involved also local engagement upon return). Therefore, whilst this thesis does not suggest that local projects do not take place in the gap year context at all, it was found that for prospective gap year takers, the imagined “geography of need” tended to include mainly long-haul destinations, distant cultures and endangered environments, for example “charismatic” species, and that such opportunities dominated promotional materials.

Secondly, the widespread belief in the value of experiential education meant that students were incited to witness their places and phenomena of interest first hand prior to commencing university, by engaging in research, volunteering or paid work in their field. Information provided by some universities, in gap year materials and other sources suggested that students will be rewarded for partaking in such experiences by having greater chances of getting accepted to their desired course and being able to perform better and contribute more. For some young people, such understandings necessitated long-haul travel, if their objects of interest were located in distant parts of the world – for example witnessing the tornado season in the US or sustainable agriculture in Cuba. Moreover, as Simpson (2004a) previously observed, many professional roles that cannot be easily accessed in the UK by inexperienced and unskilled students are available in Third World countries, where young people are allowed to “experiment” at being a teacher, working in construction or in care and medical professions. This thesis provides further evidence regarding such “geography of experimentation”: a representative of a gap year organization at one of the gap year events, explained how access to hospital volunteering is much more restricted in Britain, and thus Mexico and India became natural places for their medical projects. However, this study revealed that developed countries, including the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, also provided opportunities for experimentation in professional roles, although these were mainly linked to the fields such as environment, conservation, research and sports. The availability of various professional roles in distant parts of the world and the wide promotion and visibility of such projects at gap year-related events and in gap year promotion materials (the number and variety of UK and European opportunities was much more limited), arguably reinforces the perceptions of long-haul mobility as indispensable. To access spaces of experimentation, for example to get a desirable medical experience, long-haul flying may be simply necessary or appear as necessary. In face of climate change challenges and emissions associated with air travel, it can be questioned whether first hand experiences should always be favoured over other forms of learning, and whether periods of preparation for the university course, particularly through “experimentation” at professional roles available overseas, should be encouraged at all costs. Perhaps similar educational outcomes could be met

through projects at closer destinations. Such projects may already be available, but currently escape the attention of many young people. As Jones's (2004) review suggested, the provision of UK volunteering is likely to be higher than current demand – a greater promotion of such projects at gap year events and in other sources of gap year information could be encouraged.

Thirdly, experiences of paid work in Australia, Canada, US and New Zealand were portrayed in promotional materials as particularly impressive to admissions tutors and future employers, adding the CV an “international spark” and helping students stand out from the crowd of other applicants. The availability of working holiday visas in these countries made them natural spaces for extraordinary work experiences, standing higher in the hierarchy of gap year activities than working in Europe or the UK, as organizing such experiences was portrayed as associated with higher levels of dedication, independence and drive. Working abroad also fits with the quest for authenticity and getting to know the country not as a tourist, but through semi-residence and dwelling. Thus, Australia, Canada, US and New Zealand through their working visas allowed for experiencing both the desired difference by travelling long-haul and outside of typical holiday destinations, often to places of natural wonders, vast landscapes and exotic wildlife, as well as where encounters with unique, indigenous cultures were sometimes possible; achieving authenticity through being able to work and live in the country rather than having a superficial, tourist experience; and acquire unique work experiences to stand out in recruitment processes. This blend of understandings and resources explains the popularity of those countries for gap year choices.

Ethical considerations were found to enter the landscape of gap year meanings, with distinctions sometimes made between “good” and “bad” ways of “doing a gap year”. The former involved ensuring that gap year takers make a positive impact on visited communities and environments, and that young people themselves gain tangible educational benefits from the experience. This was broadly in line with previous accounts of gap years, for example that of Cremin (2007), who argued that the rules of conduct in the gap year context include being simultaneously enterprising and ethical. Various agents identified in this research dissuaded students from purely hedonistic travel, for example from gap year tourism that did not include “giving back” to local communities in any way, and

warned against “phony” volunteering programmes that do not respond to genuine needs, but are designed mainly to generate profit for commercial providers. However, transport and mobility issues, including the carbon impact of arriving at chosen destinations, were absent in those mainstream ethical considerations communicated to students. Frequent references to gap years as sustainable and environmentally friendly in promotion materials, particularly in relation to development and conservation projects, arguably limited the possibilities for critical distance in this context. Whilst many influential agents were aware of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from air transport, they tended to place them lower in their hierarchy of concerns and see them as balanced out by the perceived positive impacts of the gap year, such as building tolerance and broadening young people’s horizons, helping others and making a positive contribution to local environments.

The study also revealed that gap year materials available in the mainstream channels of information were dominated by projects and opportunities in long-haul destinations. Only a small number of more local options was widely marketed. Whilst not all students took part in structured projects, some individual travellers used the resources from professional organizations to plan their own gap years independently and were inspired by talks and vivid descriptions provided by representatives during talks they attended. As such, professional providers who specialize in long-haul destinations may be able to shape the “gap year geography” even for those who do not participate in their programmes. Lecturers and other members of College staff also sometimes fell back on using promotional materials from gap year organizations to advise their students, particularly if they lacked expertise and resources themselves. Representatives were invited to various events at schools and colleges to assist students and their parents in their choices. A greater incorporation of UK and European projects and opportunities at gap year events, in promotional materials and through schools and colleges could help stimulate demand and aid students in developing necessary travel skills and knowledge to undertake “slower” travel, for example by spreading information regarding international train travel. The location of the project was found to be crucial as it often served as a starting point for further journeys. Some programmes were associated with various restrictions, thus further limiting opportunities for choice. For example, some of the available

funding and scholarships predetermined project locations and some projects did not allow participants to stay on at the end of the experience and required them to fly back to the UK instead. As such, mobility was often restricted in very tangible ways.

Finally, the cost of travel played a crucial part for gap year takers, most of whom travelled on a limited budget. Europe was widely considered too expensive to travel, and part of the appeal of Southeast Asia was the ability to travel for prolonged periods of time in an affordable way. Airfare cost was also important, with popular destinations being cheap precisely because of their popularity – as one travel representative explained, when airlines compete among each other for popular routes, they tend to offer more deals. Some of the more obscure locations, even if desired by prospective gap year takers, were sometimes excluded from considerations due to the cost of travel. Efforts to direct gap years into a more sustainable route should take into account the affordability of alternative opportunities in light of the typically limited student budgets.

Overall, this thesis puts into question the extent to which young people are free to choose their destinations according to individual aspirations and desires, by highlighting the collective patterns of gap year participation, including tastes, understandings, fashions, norms and practical constraints. The terrain for action that prospective gap year takers face, includes also the geography of the gap year, making some destinations and styles of mobility appropriate and possible, whilst excluding others. It was revealed that the current assembly of meanings, norms and resources tends to promote long-haul mobility (often including several destinations on different continents) as a conventional way of “doing a gap year”. Attempts to shift the practice into a more sustainable trajectory need to take into account its current social organization and the role of various networked agents.

### 7.1.3 Agency, habitus and gap year travel

The norms, meanings and resources discussed earlier formed the “terrain for action” for prospective gap year takers, and profoundly constrained opportunities for choice. It needs to be stressed, though, that structuration theory also recognizes agents as skilled and knowledgeable, and not solely as “carriers” of established ways of doing things. However, as Stones (2005) observed, even when theoretically agents may have the power to “do otherwise”, real people

often feel that they are not free to act against established conventions. In order to resist the structural forces discussed earlier, prospective gap year takers would need to have not only the necessary power to do so (whilst still realizing the core commitments of the gap year practice); but also knowledge of alternatives and their consequences; and adequate critical distance (Stones, 2005 p. 115). The current assembly of norms, meanings and resources outlined in the previous section arguably restricts the possibilities for all three conditions being met. Even when choice is theoretically possible, it often jeopardizes some of the key benefits of the gap year – for example travelling outside the conventional routes might mean missing out on the social aspect of gap year travel, as “gappers” tend to meet in popular hotspots. However, a degree of choice and reflexivity was nonetheless possible, as often more than one course of action had systemic legitimacy – in those cases, active agency played an important role when navigating between different opportunities. Students were found to follow their individual interests to an extent when designing itineraries and picking projects, and their general dispositions, understandings, transposable skills and competence shaped by past practices resulted in differences between the numbers of destinations they visited, the amount of time they spent in each place and transport mode choices.

First of all, the study found that whilst many students narrated the perception of gap year travel as more authentic and extraordinary than mass tourism and “normal” holiday experiences, the exact understandings of what it meant in practice differed somewhat between participants, leading to different itineraries. For some, it seemed necessary to visit as many destinations as possible, to make the most of what was seen as an opportunity of a lifetime – this often resulted in the purchase of an around-the-world air travel pass. For others, the depth of experience mattered more, and there was some evidence to suggest a certain hierarchy or even snobbery regarding how various gap year experiences were perceived. For one student, the popular around-the-world trips appeared superficial and more akin to mass tourism: she saw hopping from one place to another as less valuable than travelling within the borders of one country for prolonged periods of time, getting to know the culture and locals in more-depth. Similarly, whilst many students wanted to wander around the world in a spontaneous way, for some it mattered more than to others, to an extent where

the desire of freedom of movement led to opting for overland travel and avoiding flights whenever possible. Those different gap year aspirations and forms of mobility resulted from students' habitus - their past travel experiences, their social and cultural capital, as well as travel competence and skills. Students who opted for slower, more spontaneous and in-depth ways of travelling tended to be the ones with substantial previous travel experience, confident in their ability to travel on their own, finding their way around the country, interacting with the locals and using overland transport modes. Important others, such as parents and guardians, were found influential in teaching those students this style of travelling, passing on their own expertise and travel tips. Therefore, whilst not all forms of gap years are equal in terms of the numbers of countries visited and the total number of flights, it is important to remember that overland and slower travel may require a different set of travel skills and knowledge, and a certain level of travel competence that not all young people share. Nonetheless, despite those differences, the "slow" gap year travellers still planned to engage in long-haul flying, even if they were at the same time dedicated to travelling overland whenever possible and spending longer periods of time at their destinations than their hyper-mobile counterparts on ambitious around-the-world trips booked through specialist providers.

Moreover, whilst most participants adhered to the widespread convention that a gap year should include both a "constructive" and leisurely stage, individual students attached different levels of importance to each. Students could pick and choose from available constructive and leisurely opportunities and the resulting plans and itineraries differed according to their individual aspirations and preferences. Some clearly prioritized the project stage and narrated that destinations and independent travel were of secondary importance. The majority, however, were either equally or even mainly motivated by participating in long-haul travel, and projects were sometimes just a means to an end (e.g. providing food and accommodation in exchange for work) or just another travel attraction (with volunteering portrayed as a "fun" activity and a way to avoid boredom and loneliness), as well as an obvious asset to the future CV. It can be argued that for those young people who prioritize projects, transitioning to shorter-haul gap year destinations could be relatively unproblematic, providing that similar opportunities in the UK or Europe were available. However, for those who were

equally or mainly motivated by participating in long-haul travel, such solutions are unlikely to be sufficient.

Generally speaking, whilst some aspects of travel ethics affected students' gap year plans (some were concerned with ensuring that their volunteering is genuine or that the money they spend benefits local communities rather than only gap year companies), aviation emissions were not normally included in students' ethical considerations. When questioned about those issues during interviews, many acknowledged conflict between their desire to care for the environment and their gap year aspirations. However, there was a widespread sense of powerlessness, as alternatives to flying were not possible for long-haul journeys. Some students were found to copy the "recipe" for action learnt from past travel experiences – as they took no action to mitigate against flying emissions in other travel contexts, they were applying the same rule in relation to their gap years. Only one participant planned to offset her carbon emissions, a solution she learnt from her lecturer, which she also introduced to her family. This suggests the importance of previous travel and relevant others in developing recipes for action in relation to flying emissions – there seems to be a widespread lack of an acceptable solution to be easily applied in this context. Voluntary shift to short-haul destinations was not normally considered, as gap year aspirations stood higher in the hierarchy of students' concerns, even if some expressed feelings of guilt regarding flying. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that environmental awareness and values have little impact on travel behaviour (Barr, Gilg, et al., 2011a, 2011b; Barr & Prillwitz, 2013; Barr et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2013; Hares et al., 2010). It also confirms sociological accounts of flying, which argue that people travel predominantly to participate in socially valued practices. Many of the participants in this study studied geography in the College and were aware of climate change challenges, some expressing a high level of concern over aviation emissions. A few even planned to pursue a conservation-related career, and one student was involved in climate change mitigation projects in her city. If a group of such highly aware and engaged young people were unwilling to give up on flying for environmental reasons, it is unlikely that social marketing campaigns directed at the general public would be effective.

Finally, there was an important issue of access – whilst gap year promotion materials often seem to suggest that anyone can do it, gap years are not an

egalitarian phenomenon, equally available to all. Previous research found that it is mainly those from affluent middle-class families that tend to participate (Crawford & Cribb, 2012). This research discovered that students from wealthier backgrounds had an easier access to some gap year experiences, having more financial capital to spend. However, some young people were able to plan their gap years with little or no financial contribution from their families, utilizing their organizational skills, confidence, travel skills and relevant social capital to create more affordable opportunities, sometimes in very creative ways. Participation in past travel practices and having access to social capital abroad and social circles of people who had done a gap year or travelled in the past, were found to influence students' confidence, knowledge and travel competence. As such, the growing normalization of travel in other contexts can have a snowball effect, with more people being able to undertake gap years by developing necessary skills and knowledge of funded and affordable opportunities, either through own travel or learning from others. Many actors were involved in widening participation, and some participants from less affluent backgrounds and with limited own travel experience were able to utilize information and available resources to plan their own gap year. Therefore, whilst not everyone had an equal access to gap year opportunities, there is now a multitude of sources where financial resources, skills, and competence can be drawn from and there are many agents actively involved in widening gap year participation. This is of relevance to sustainability strategies, as whilst important barriers to participation remain, it is likely that gap years may become more mainstream over time.

#### 7.1.4 Theoretical contributions

The increasing interest in social practice theory arose partly to counteract the dominant individualistic perspectives on energy consumption in various arenas of social life, wherein individuals are conceptualized as active decision-makers, driven by rational choice, information, values or attitudes (see for example Shove, 2010 for the criticism of such approach). The emphasis of practice theory on the shared and collective patterns of consumption and situating agency beyond individual consumers (for example Strengers, 2012) brings, however, the risk that individuals may at times be rendered overly passive and seen as merely carriers of social practices. It is important to remember that social practice perspectives were developed to avoid both structural determinism and overly individualistic

accounts of human action alike, to bridge the agency/structure divide in social sciences. This is not to say that, as Whitmarsh and colleagues (2011) suggest, individualist theories of behaviour should be combined in some way with practice theory. Rather, the role of agents and their reflexivity in the reproduction of social practices, which at least in theory are integral aspects of the social practice approach, need to be accounted for in a more systematic way. The popular “tip of the iceberg” model (Figure 1), which situates parts of the agency in shared meanings, materials and competences, can at times obscure the dynamic nature of practices and the reflexive character of agents. Whilst proponents of practice theory do acknowledge the place of practitioners in (re)producing and (re)shaping social practices (Shove et al., 2012; Ropke, 2009; Shove & Pantzar, 2007), and agents’ reflexivity is at times examined in empirical studies (e.g. Butler et al., 2014; Pantzar & Shove, 2010; Shove & Pantzar, 2007; Truninger, 2011), it is widely acknowledged that moving between practice-as-entity (which can tell us a lot about the relatively enduring and stable characteristics of practices) and practice-as-performance (which by accounting for agents’ reflexivity and performance can highlight the dynamics and shifting contours of the practice, identify links to other social practices and the impact on individual practitioners) is difficult to achieve. This thesis argues that strong structuration provides a particularly useful conceptual tool to move back and forth between practitioners and practices-as-entities, unravelling the intimate connections between them and accounting for the dynamics of practices. The conceptual model of cycles of structuration, developed by Stones (2005) based on Giddens’s writings and various criticisms of his work by those engaging with structuration theory at the empirical and theoretical levels, provides a systematic way of looking at the role of both agency and structure in the (re)production of social practices, such as gap years. Whilst this approach can be applied to examine various aspects of social practices, it is argued here that it is particularly useful to explore the moment when people adopt (or get recruited to) new practices, as accounting for the role of reflexivity and conscious deliberation is of paramount importance when normal, daily proceedings are disrupted, and new practices are taken on and incorporated into practitioners’ life projects. This thesis provided an example of the types of rich and in-depth findings that can be generated when working within this conceptual framework.

The model, however, is not without its flaws. Its complexity requires a certain level of reflexivity on behalf of the reader, in particular keeping in mind which type of methodological “bracketing” is being applied at any given time, and treating each part of analysis (“conduct analysis” and “context analysis”) as essentially incomplete without its counterpart. When read separately, context analysis may appear overly deterministic, whilst conduct analysis overly individualistic, and it is only through the combination of the two that Giddens’s “duality of structure” is fleshed out. Arguably, however, the advantage of this approach lies in its clear model that serves as a reference point in which to situate the findings.

## **7.2 Key contributions**

As highlighted in the previous section, this thesis makes a major contribution to academic literature in the several fields of knowledge. This section summarizes and fleshes out the key intellectual arguments and contributions, before moving on to discussing policy implications.

First of all, this thesis contributes to the field of tourism and leisure studies by examining the social dimension of unsustainable air travel, thus complementing work of researchers such as Randles and Mander (2009) and Hopkins et al. (2015). In particular, the novel contribution of this work lies in exploring the role of long-haul mobility in relation to the gap year phenomenon. It also extends existing accounts of the value-action gap observed in tourism research, whereby people are unwilling to change their travel behaviour for the sake of the environment, despite expressing concerns over climate change (e.g. Barr et al. 2011a, 2011b; S.A. Cohen et al., 2013; Hares et al. 2010). Such contradictions were also observed among participants in this research, but the value-action gap was redefined from the social practice perspective as a natural consequence of existing rules and resources associated with gap year taking. Through its emphasis on gap years, this thesis also advances previous understandings of unsustainable mobility by bringing in the lifecourse perspective, exploring the relationship between air travel and transitions to adulthood. Finally, it also extends existing accounts of gap year travel itself, by focusing on the previously largely under-researched stage of gap year planning

and decision-making, and by adopting a more comprehensive approach to gap years, exploring how various activities and mobilities combine to form the overall experience.

Secondly, this thesis supports and broadens existing accounts of youth transitions to adulthood, which increasingly point to the relevance of travel in this process, including gap years (Ansell, 2008; Bagnoli, 2009; Desforges, 1998; King, 2011; O'Reilly, 2006). In particular, the novel contribution of this work lies in examining how young people learn about gap year experiences; which actors are involved in teaching and supporting them; what kinds of opportunities and constraints they encounter; as well as the role of agency and reflexivity in making gap year choices. This research also identified both ongoing inequalities of access to gap year experiences, as well as evidence that students from state sector schools and less wealthy backgrounds are being increasingly encouraged to participate and receive various forms of support, including funding. Therefore, there is a possibility of a shift in the gap year practice away from the activity reserved predominantly for the wealthy middle-classes, towards a more mainstream stage in young people's lives. These findings can be interesting for researchers from the fields of education and youth studies.

Thirdly, this thesis contributes to the growing body of empirical research in the field of (un)sustainable consumption informed by social practice theories (e.g. Shove, 2003; Gram-Hanssen, 2010; Strengers, 2011; Halkier & Jansen, 2011; Evans, 2012). In particular, strong structuration was found to be a very useful tool for exploring the collective nature of non-routine forms of consumption, by accounting for the ways in which people pick up new practices and understanding both the constraints and opportunities for choice granted by the practice at the moment of recruitment. Methodological bracketing allowed for accounting for both the relatively enduring "external structures" as well as the dynamics, tensions, differences, and variations as the gap year practice was more-or-less reflexively enacted by individual practitioners. In particular, strong structuration can be applied to study more conspicuous and non-habitual forms of resource consumption than those that are traditionally the focus of practice studies, by paying attention to the interplay of agency and structure at the moment of adopting (or "getting recruited to") new practices. Arguably, other travel practices may also benefit from being explored from this perspective.

### **7.3 Policy impact**

Adopting a social practice theory to the study of air travel allowed for re-defining the problem of unsustainable flying from that of individual “choice” or decision, to that of collective practices. Gap year travel is an increasingly popular activity undertaken by British youth and, as demonstrated in this thesis, long-haul destinations are part of the established script for action. Opportunities for choice, whilst not completely absent, are limited and constrained by an assembly of meanings, norms and resources that promote long-haul mobility and often multiple flights as a particularly desirable, appropriate and convenient way of “doing a gap year”.

Without wishing to undermine any positive contributions that gap year takers may have on environments and communities they visit, work and volunteer in, and any valuable effects on the lives of “gappers” themselves, this thesis argues for incorporating flying emissions into the assessment of the overall impact of gap years. Perhaps, in light of climate change challenges, we should be more reflexive as a society about our “right” to travel and the role of long-haul mobility as a rite of passage and another stage of education for a growing number of young people (although still predominantly a privilege of those from more affluent backgrounds). This is particularly important in relation to youth travel, as young people are likely to learn and get accustomed to high levels of mobility through such experiences: return trips to gap year destinations have been documented by other research (O’Shea, 2011). Perhaps the civic education and an improved understanding of the world and global problems often promoted as one of the benefits of a well-spent gap year should also involve a critical reflection on the environmental cost of air travel. For example, following Simpson (2005), a greater reflexivity regarding the value of hands-on engagement to achieve “development” should be encouraged, particularly taking into account that many Third World communities are those most vulnerable to climate change challenges.

Conceptualizing air travel as an element of collective social practices has implications for policy makers and other stakeholders interested in facilitating a shift towards more sustainable travel. Following Spurling et al. (2013), three broad types of interventions in relation to gap year travel can be suggested based on the findings presented in this thesis.

First of all, gap year travel could be “re-crafted” (Spurling et al., 2013) to become more sustainable. This could include changing the character of the practice towards travelling shorter-haul destinations, whilst keeping the main aspects of the phenomenon intact. Such interventions may involve attempts to alter some of the external meanings, norms and resources to promote UK and Europe as appropriate and convenient gap year locations. For example, efforts could be made to change the societal imaginations of difference linked to long-haul destinations, as difference was believed crucial for the extraordinary character of gap years and for the radical personal transformation that was expected to take place during a year out. As Larsen and Guiver (2013) previously argued, achieving desired difference does not necessarily require overcoming physical distance. Marketing efforts could help promote some of the shorter-haul, “unknown” locations as gap year appropriate, perhaps even re-discovering Britain. Promoting a more critical perspective on global inequalities, previously suggested by Simpson (2004a), could expose the “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973) of distant tourist spaces and question their perceived untouched and unspoilt character, which could also help redefine gap year geography. Similarly, efforts could be made to further popularize overland travel and longer stays in destinations as enabling more authentic and spontaneous experiences, which are highly valued by gap year travellers. A few participants were already found trying to avoid flying and hopping from one destination to another for those reasons. Most importantly, this thesis shows that such marketing attempts are unlikely to be successful as standalone policies. For example, it needs to be acknowledged, that overland and spontaneous travel, and prolonged periods of dwelling in one place, may require different levels of skills, competence and knowledge, as well as availability of activities, projects and infrastructures to facilitate such stays. Young people will also need to have knowledge and competence in organizing such journeys, for example how and where to book trains or other forms of transport and how to do it in the most affordable way. Taking into account a high cost of travel in Europe, funding and scholarships could be directed to promote sustainable forms of travel, rather than towards carbon-intensive trips to long-haul destinations. Perhaps a higher availability and visibility of European work placements, or projects akin to

“Erasmus” directed specifically at gap year students could also help direct the practice into a shorter-haul route.

Secondly, policy interventions could “substitute” (Spurling et al, 2013) the gap year practice. In other words, is there any other practice or a set of practices that could fulfill gap year purposes? Indeed, interviews with some students suggested that at times a university “year abroad” built into the course served as a deterrent from gap year taking as it fulfilled a similar purpose as a “constructive break”, providing leisure, travel and educational experiences. For example, the main reason why Lara changed her mind about taking a gap year, was an opportunity to travel abroad on her university course. Some other students also recalled their friends or siblings not taking a gap year because it was already built into their university programmes. Efforts could be made to ensure that such opportunities abroad meet the conditions of sustainable travel and assist in developing slow travel skills, which could help divert young people from developing hyper-mobile lifestyles and long-term travel careers.

Finally, Spurling et al (2013) suggest that another way of intervening in practices is “changing how practices interlock”. This research identified a number of practices that are closely interlinked with gap year taking. Most importantly, they included university admissions and graduate recruitment practices. Perhaps the “centralization” of admissions processes already happening at some universities, as reported by one of the admissions managers, would over time decrease the perceived value of extraordinary gap year experiences as improving chances of being accepted. If recruitment is based solely on exam results and grades, the need to impress admissions’ officers in personal statements may decrease. The study also identified school trips as important for several students in providing inspiration about destinations and the kinds of activities to engage in, as well as ways to fundraise money, and at times providing even more practical benefits, such as direct links with charity organizations where they could set up their projects independently from professional gap year providers. Including ethical and sustainable travel into the curriculum of school trips, developing slow travel skills, for example by travelling by train, and making the journey a part of the experience, as well as encouraging reflexivity regarding aviation emissions, could help develop principles for action and travel competence that could affect gap year travel as well. This research found that teachers and College lecturers

were often influential figures in communicating travel ethics and teaching young people how to travel responsibly.

Crucially, by highlighting both the limiting/enabling character of the structural context of action and the role of active agency and reflexivity in (re)producing the gap year practice, this thesis suggests that interventions into practices may at times turn to individual practitioners as agents for change. The central tenets of the social practice theory, i.e. the de-centering of the individual and highlighting other sources of agency (derived from the structural terrain), do not mean that individual practitioners are reduced to mere “carriers” of social practices. Albeit agency might be limited, social practices can also at times enable choice. Whilst people may not have uniform “green” lifestyles or even consistent value systems, more-or-less sustainable forms of gap year practice were found to exist, and students were able to navigate between them according to their general dispositions. Therefore, education towards sustainable travel and promoting environmental values or slow travel as enabling more authentic experiences, may have a role to play, as long as they are not standalone policies and limits to choice are acknowledged.

#### **7.4 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

I should stress that this study has been primarily concerned with gap years that are planned in advance, which, according to Crawford and Cribb’s (2012) analysis, is the experience of the vast majority of “gappers” in England – they found that around three quarters had deliberately planned to take a gap year at least a year in advance. Planned gap years were also more likely to include travel, which was the main object of interest of this thesis. As such, exploring how gap year decisions arise before young people complete their secondary education and pass their A-level exams, was considered to be a good strategy to address the aim and objectives of this research. However, it needs to be acknowledged that some gap year takers “drift” into a gap year, without having planned it. They are more likely to stay on to retake exams or undertake paid employment and are less likely to travel than those whose gap year decisions were more deliberate (Crawford and Cribb, 2012), and consequently, were not the main object of interest here. Nonetheless, some of them do engage in travel or work and volunteering abroad (Crawford and Cribb, 2012). As such, one of the limitations of this research was not including the accounts of those young people into the

analysis, as participants were recruited out of a group of A-level students before they completed their education. It is likely that the “terrain for action” for those who drift into gap years may be somewhat different, particularly in terms of available resources: they may be less likely to receive institutional support from their former school or college; they may have less opportunities to attend gap year talks and fairs organized in educational establishments or at UCAS conventions; or to discuss their plans with tutors, progression specialists or gap year representatives invited to schools. They may also have less time to plan and raise funds to engage in long periods of travel, or find friends to travel with, and their motivations are also likely to be different. If they retake exams or need to attend university interviews, this will impose time constraints on any travel arrangements they wish to make. Future research could explore in more depth the kinds of activities undertaken by those who “drift” into gap years – perhaps different destination and mobility choices are made and it is possible that a different “script” or “recipe” for action exists in this context.

Moreover, my analysis focused on emerging gap year *plans* rather than actual gap year experiences. It is possible that plans considered by prospective gap year takers in this study changed during their year out, for example due to unforeseen circumstances or arising practical constraints. We cannot be certain to what extent they were able to realize their aspirations and whether additional activities and opportunities did not emerge after completing secondary education, for example as a result of some of the initial gap year undertakings. Interestingly, only one student considered participating in UK volunteering, as local engagement upon return was a requirement and part of her structured project in Nicaragua, for which she received funding. As Crawford and Cribb’s (2012) study suggested, however, a fairly large proportion of gap year takers (around 20%) participate in UK volunteering. It is possible that perhaps such plans emerge more often during a year out rather than being planned in advance. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore not only how gap year plans emerge during secondary education, but how they change and get altered during the gap year itself. New structural factors that remained hidden in this study could emerge out of such analysis, which could be of use to those interested in shifting gap years into a more sustainable trajectory.

I should also make clear that the findings presented in this thesis are based on a small-scale and in-depth research conducted in the South West of England and the majority of participants were students and members of staff of one of the state colleges in this region. Caution should be taken when attempting any wider generalizations regarding the overall UK gap year phenomenon. “Making the cut” was based on existing literature, unfolding insights on the ground, as well as practical considerations of access and resources, and the study had a largely exploratory character. More research is needed to develop a comprehensive account of UK gap year taking, for example including experiences of those from independent schools or other geographical regions.

Finally, whilst participants in this study showed a preference for long-haul destinations, which was broadly in line with statistical data (ABTA 2013, 2014, 2015), and whilst the majority of gap year advertising and information materials promoted faraway travel, this research also identified a number of UK and European opportunities. However, at least for students in this research, such programmes were not as popular as those in long-haul destinations, and if they were to take place, this was normally in addition to a long-haul journey. This is not to say that more sustainable forms of gap year travel do not exist: European and UK work placements, volunteering and language and training courses may well take up a proportion of gap year population and may not always be followed or preceded by long-haul travel. Perhaps there are some students who undertake all gap year activities locally or in short-haul destinations, and choose, for example, inter-railing, hitchhiking around Europe, cycling trips or camping for their independent travel. However, considering that such opportunities were much less visible and not taken into account by participants in this study, it is likely that they are currently a marginal, niche way of “doing a gap year”. Future research could explore such practices to help inform strategies to engender a widespread shift to more sustainable forms of gap year.

Last but not least, future research could explore other common travel practices from a social practice perspective, examining the collective nature of air travel to inform sustainable development strategies. Such research could stimulate further discussions regarding the role and place of long-haul travel in the age of climate change and about the responsibility of states, businesses, institutions and civil society actors to address aviation emissions.



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## RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: Young people's travel decisions

Researcher: Paulina Luzecka

### The project

My name is Paulina Luzecka and I am a PhD researcher in Geography at the University of Exeter. I am interested in young people's decisions regarding travelling (or "going on a gap year") after their A-level exams. In particular, I would like to find out which information sources they use to decide whether and where to travel – the important people, organisations, books, websites and events that guide their choices.

This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and supervised by Dr Stewart Barr (University of Exeter), Dr Ewan Woodley (University of Exeter) and Professor Alan Lewis (University of Bath).

### Your role

You are invited to participate in this study. Participation will involve approximately 3 interviews between now and July 2013 during which I will ask you questions related to gap years and travel more generally. You do NOT need to be planning to go on a gap year to take part.

All information collected, including everything you say, will be kept entirely **confidential** and **anonymous**. I will not discuss or share any information about you with anyone else. Pseudonyms will be used during writing up of the project and in any publications that may follow.

Interviews will be audio recorded and will last approximately 1 hour each – recordings will be used solely for transcription purposes and not shared with anyone else.

I understand that the last year of sixth form can be a busy period, but it is unlikely that you will find participation in this study very time-consuming. Meeting times and dates will be arranged according to your availability.

Nevertheless, should you decide to discontinue your participation, you will have the right to do so at any time without providing a reason.

### What's in it for you?

As a way to say “thank you” for your time and involvement in this project, there will be a prize draw in July 2013 and an opportunity to win a **£250 Amazon voucher**. There will be one voucher available to win among every 10 student participants, so you have a big chance to win!

Also, participating in this study will be a useful experience for anyone interested in social sciences and/or research as well as for those thinking about a University degree or considering a researcher's career. You will have a chance to witness the research process, take part in interviews and ask questions about university education.

### Questions?

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact me on the details provided below. I will be more than happy to answer any queries or concerns you might still have.

#### Contact details:

E-mail: pml202@exeter.ac.uk

Telephone: 07707639239

Postal Address: Paulina Luzecka

University of Exeter, Department of Geography

Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ



Department of Geography  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ

## RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: Young people's travel decisions

Researcher: Paulina Luzecka

### The project

My name is Paulina Luzecka and I am a PhD researcher in Geography at the University of Exeter. I am interested in young people's decisions regarding travelling (or "going on a gap year") after their A-level exams.

This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and supervised by Dr Stewart Barr (University of Exeter), Dr Ewan Woodley (University of Exeter) and Professor Alan Lewis (University of Bath).

### Your role

You are invited to participate in an interview, during which you will be asked questions related to gap year travels. I am interested in your personal views, experiences and opinions, therefore there are no right and wrong answers. Your contribution will be very much appreciated.

All information collected, including everything you say, will be kept entirely **confidential** and **anonymous**. I will not discuss or share any information about you with anyone else. Pseudonyms will be used during writing up of the project and in any publications that may follow.

The interview will be audio-taped with your consent. The recording will be transcribed and then destroyed. Please let me know if you prefer not to be recorded.

Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### Questions?

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact me on the details provided below. I will be more than happy to answer any queries or concerns you might still have.

#### Contact details:

E-mail: pml202@exeter.ac.uk

Telephone: 07707639239

Postal Address: Paulina Luzecka

University of Exeter, Department of Geography

Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ



Department of Geography  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ

**CONSENT FORM**  
**To be completed by the participant**

Title of Project: Young people's travel decisions

Researcher: Paulina Luzecka, PhD Researcher

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature



Department of Geography  
Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ

**CONSENT FORM**  
**To be completed by the parent/guardian**

Title of Project: Young people's travel decisions

Researcher: Paulina Luzecka, PhD Researcher

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without providing a reason.
3. I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_  
[enter child's name] to be included in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and relationship to child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature



## Young people’s travel decisions

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions by ticking the appropriate boxes:

1. Have you thought about what you want to do immediately after college (for example go straight to university; find a job; go on a gap year)?

Yes, I have a clear idea about my plans

Yes, I have a couple of ideas but still haven’t decided

Yes, but I really don’t know what I want to do

No, it’s too early to think about it

2. How likely is it that during the year following your A-level exams you will:

	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Possibly</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Very Likely</b>
Take a year out/ “gap year”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Go straight to university	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Try to enter paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please state): _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. If you are thinking of taking a year out, how likely is it that during that time you will:

Work in the UK or another European country	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteer in the UK or another European country	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Travel in the UK and/or Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Work outside Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix 5: Students questionnaire

	Unlikely	Possibly	Likely	Very Likely
Volunteer outside Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Travel outside Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. If you don't anticipate taking a full year out, would you consider going on a "mini-gap" over summer?

YES  NO

5. If your plans include travel, have you already made any travel arrangements?

YES  NO

If yes, please state what kind of arrangements you have made:

---

6. Having read and understood the participant information sheet, would you consider taking part in this study and get a chance to win a £250 Amazon voucher? Please note that by answering YES you do not commit to anything at this stage. You will be provided with more information and an opportunity to ask questions before you make your decision.

YES  NO

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!** If you answered YES to question 6, please provide your details below, so that I can contact you regarding your potential participation in the study. Your details will be kept in strictest confidence and will only be used by me for participant selection.

FIRST NAME:

---

SURNAME:

---

DATE OF BIRTH: DD/MM/YYYY

MALE  FEMALE

TELEPHONE NUMBER:

---

E-MAIL ADDRESS:

---

# Appendix 6

## Students interview themes

### First interviews:

**1. Current situation and post-school plans**

*e.g. Which subjects are you taking this year? What are your plans for the future, after you graduate from college? Do you consider taking a gap year? Why/why not?*

**2. Gap year plans**

*e.g. What do you plan to do on your gap year? Where? How long? When? Independently/with a specialist organization? How detailed/certain are those plans at the moment? How do you intend to fund your gap year? What arrangements have you made so far? What are your next steps in your planning process?*

**3. Origins of gap year plans**

*e.g. When did you first consider taking a gap year? How did you first learn about doing a gap year? What made you choose those specific activities?*

**4. Gap year mobility**

*e.g. What made you choose those specific destinations/ itinerary? Did you think of how you are going to get there?*

**5. Influential actors, events and resources in making post-school plans**

*e.g. Did you discuss your plans with anyone? Did you attend any gap year-related events? Do you use any websites/guidebooks/brochures/other sources of gap year information in your planning? Did anything else influence your plans? In what ways did those people/events/resources influence your plans?*

**6. Previous travel experiences**

*e.g. Have you engaged in travel prior to your gap year? Tell me about those experiences. Did you travel with your family/friends/schools/on your own? Which places have you visited so far? Did you enjoy it? What did you most enjoy?*

**7. Aviation emissions**

*e.g. Are you concerned with the environmental cost of flying? If so, does it influence your gap year plans in any way?*

### Second interviews:

**1. Progress and changes to gap year plans**

*e.g. Have your gap year plans changed/ developed in any way since we last spoke? In what ways? Why? Have you spoken to anyone/attended any gap year-related events/used new sources of information/other since we last met?*

# Appendix 7

## Networked others interview themes

1. **Position-practices**

*e.g. Can you tell me about your role as...? What does it involve?*

2. **Professional relationships with gap years**

*e.g. What is the relationship between your professional role and gap years? Do you interact with prospective gap year takers as part of your role? In what ways? Directly/indirectly?*

3. **Individual attitudes towards gap years**

*e.g. What is your personal opinion about gap years? Why did you decide to engage in... (if not part of your professional role)? What is your opinion regarding aviation emissions resulting from gap year travel (if relevant)?*

# Appendix 8

## List of interview participants

Group	No	Occupation and relevant roles	Pseudonym	Relevance/ details
<b>COLLEGE STUDENTS</b>	1	A2 student	Lily	Planned to take a full gap year or longer ( <i>2 interviews</i> )
	2	A2 student	Amy	Planned to take a full gap year ( <i>2 interviews</i> )
	3	A2 student	Jonathan	Planned to take a full gap year ( <i>2 interviews</i> )
	4	A2 student	Lauren	Planned to take a full gap year
	5	A2 student	Mark	Initially planned to take a gap year, changed his mind ( <i>2 interviews</i> )
	6	A2 student	Miriam	Planned to take a mini-gap over summer
	7	A2 student	Tara	Planned to take a full gap year before or after university
	8	A2 student	Abbie	Did not plan to take a gap year
	9	A2 student	Jack	Did not plan to take a gap year
	10	A2 student	Susie	Planned to take a full gap year or longer ( <i>2 interviews</i> )
	11	A2 student	Sarah	Planned to take a full gap year
	12	A2 student	Ellie	Planned to take a full gap year
	13	A2 student	Charlotte	Planned to take a full gap year
	14	AS student	Thomas	Planned to take a full gap year or longer
	15	AS student	Charlie	Planned to take a full gap year before or during university
	16	AS student	Lara	Initially planned to take a gap year, changed her mind
	17	AS student	Georgia	Planned to take a full gap year
	18	AS student	Chloe	Undecided

Appendix 8: List of interview participants

<b>Group</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Occupation and relevant roles</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Relevance/ details</b>
<b>COLLEGE STAFF</b> <b>(one of the South West state colleges)</b>	19	Progression Officer	Kath	Advised students on making transitions from college
	20	Head of Geography Department; Geography lecturer; tutor	John	Advised students on post-college choices, including gap years
	21	Environmental Studies lecturer; tutor	Katherine	Advised students on post-college choices, including gap years
	22	Lead tutor of the Humanities Faculty; Psychology lecturer; tutor	Elisabeth	Organized a gap year talk in the college, delivered by a former gap year taker
	23	Head of Advice and Recruitment	Susanne	Organized parents' evenings where gap year information was provided
	24	Health & Wellbeing Manager; Sport Science lecturer	Nigel	Organized a fresher's fair where gap year information was provided
<b>GAP YEAR REPRESENTATIVES</b>	25	Representative and founder of Ethical Gap Years* <sup>10</sup>	Ian	Engaged in various gap year information and promotion activities in the South West
	26	Representative of Youth Travel*	David	Interacted with prospective gap year takers in Youth Travel's* high street office
<b>UNIVERSITY STAFF</b> <b>(one of the South West universities)</b>	27	Head of Widening Participation and UK Student Recruitment	Emily	Interacted with prospective university students at various events
	28	Home/EU Admissions Manager	George	Lead the process of undergraduate admissions

<sup>10</sup> Organization names marked with "\*" are pseudonyms

# Appendix 9

## Participant observation sites

Event	Date	Location/ venue	Organizer	Details
<b>A gap year fair</b>	June 2013	One of the grammar schools in the South-West	Ethical Gap Years* <sup>11</sup>	An event open to members of the general public, where representatives of various organizations held stalls at which they showcased gap year opportunities, provided information, distributed leaflets and brochures, and answered visitors' questions.
<b>A gap year talk</b>	June 2013	The College	An initiative of Elisabeth, the lead tutor of the Humanities Faculty, with assistance of Ethical Gap Years*	A talk delivered to students in the College by a former gap year taker. An event open to college students. The talk was followed by questions from the audience, and opportunities to pick up leaflets and brochures of various organizations endorsed by Ethical Gap Years*.
<b>Information tent at a Christian youth festival</b>	August 2013	A large outdoor/indoor event venue in the South West	A Christian charity	A Christian youth festival, open to pass holders (paid entry), where one of the interviewed students first learnt about his gap year project. Festival included a large information tent with stalls where various organizations showcased their opportunities, including providers of Christian gap years.

<sup>11</sup> Organization names marked with “\*” are pseudonyms.

Appendix 9: Participant observation sites

Event	Date	Location/ venue	Organizer	Details
<b>A fresher's fair at the College</b>	September 2013	The College	The college; Health & Wellbeing manager	A fresher's fair at the College organized as part of the induction week for new students. It involved stalls showcasing College-based activities, local art, education and other institutions, and a number of commercial companies, including representatives of a gap year/travel organization.
<b>A career's event for Year 9 students</b>	October 2013	One of the universities in the South West	A partnership of schools in the region	Short workshops run by a wide range of employers to provide careers and progression information to Year 9 students. Included a stall by Ethical Gap Years* run by a representative and two former gap year takers, talking about gap year opportunities and distributing leaflets.
<b>A series of travel-related talks</b>	February 2015	A high street office of Youth Travel* in one of the cities in the South-West	Youth Travel*	A series of talks delivered to prospective travellers by representatives of Youth Travel* and partner organizations. Topics included, among others: available opportunities, travel safety, destinations and paid work in Australia and New Zealand.

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

<b>No</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type of material</b>
1	24-7 Prayer	n.d.	The Vision Course	n.p.	Leaflet
2	Accenture	2011	Be>you imagined. Horizons scheme.	n.p.	Brochure
3	Africa & Asia Venture	n.d.	Experience is everything	n.p.	Brochure
4	African Conservation Experience	n.d.	Make a difference as a conservation volunteer	n.p.	Leaflet
5	Agriventure	n.d.	The world at your feet	n.p.	Leaflet
6	Archeology Abroad	n.d.	Digging abroad in a gap year	n.p.	Leaflet
7	Art History Abroad	n.d.-a	A valuable course for all young men and women of ambition and culture	n.p.	Brochure
8	Art History Abroad	n.d.-b	Experience the masterpieces of Italy	n.p.	Leaflet
9	BMS World Mission	n.d.	Let your faith fly	n.p.	Leaflet
10	British Exploring Society	n.d.	no title	n.p.	Leaflet
11	British Standards Institution	n.d.	A parents' guide to adventurous activities abroad for young people	n.p.	Leaflet
12	Bunac	2012	Work, intern or volunteer abroad	n.p.	Brochure
13	Camp Leaders	n.d.	Explore America. Go with the leaders	n.p.	Leaflet
14	Camphill Movement	n.d.	Practical in Brachenreuthe	n.p.	Brochure
15	Changing Worlds	n.d.	Travel with purpose. 1 week to 1 year Gap Year, Career Breaks & Adventure Travel	n.p.	Leaflet
16	Coral Cay Conservation	n.d.-a	Coral Cay Conservation Expeditions	n.p.	Brochure
17	Coral Cay Conservation	n.d.-b	Marine expeditions in the Philippines and Cambodia	n.p.	Leaflet

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

<b>No</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type of material</b>
18	CSV	n.d.	Stand out from the crowd	n.p.	Leaflet
19	Department of Labour, Immigration New Zealand	n.d.	Working holidays in New Zealand	n.p.	Leaflet
20	don Quijote UK	n.d.	Learning Spanish in Spain, Mexico & Latin America	n.p.	Brochure
21	Engineering Development Trust	n.d.	The Year in Industry. Student information sheet	n.p.	Leaflet
22	Ethical Gap Years*	n.d.-a	For parents: are gap years worth it?	n.p.	Leaflet
23	Ethical Gap Years*	n.d.-b	Possible plan for a gap 15 months	n.p.	Leaflet
24	Ethical Gap Years*	n.d.-c	Gap year travel safety	n.p.	Leaflet
25	Ethical Gap Years*	n.d.-d	What is your gap year fee spent on? Gap Year Fundraising Guide	n.p.	Leaflet
26	Ethical Gap Years*	2013	Database of organisations offering gap year opportunities	n.p.	Excel print out
27	Flying Fish	n.d.	Professional training, international adventure	n.p.	Leaflet
28	Gap Force	n.d.-a	Gap Force since 1989	n.p.	Brochure
29	Gap Force	n.d.-b	Gap Force since 1989	n.p.	Leaflet
30	Gap Guru	n.d.	Gap year travel, volunteering, teaching and internships across the world	n.p.	Brochure
31	Gap Year Canada	n.d.	Gap Year Canada - Live, work, play	n.p.	Leaflet
32	Global Media Projects	n.d.	Learning, giving, experiencing 2010-2012	n.p.	Brochure
33	Global Medical Projects	n.d.-a	Your passport to medical experience	n.p.	Leaflet
34	Global Medical Projects	n.d.-b	Learning, giving, experiencing	n.p.	Brochure

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

<b>No</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type of material</b>
35	Global Volunteer Projects	n.d.	Your passport to volunteering abroad	n.p.	Leaflet
36	IBM	n.d.	Not going to uni after college? Become an apprentice at IBM	n.p.	Leaflet
37	IST Plus	n.d.	Looking for adventure?	n.p.	Leaflet
38	John Hall Venice	n.d.	John Hall Venice since 1965. For students of the arts & sciences	n.p.	Brochure
39	Lanacos	n.d.	Real Guaranteed Language Learning	n.p.	Leaflet
40	L'Arche	n.d.	L'Arche provides things money can't buy	n.p.	Leaflet
41	Latin Link	n.d.-a	How?	n.p.	Brochure
42	Latin Link	n.d.-b	Stride. Working with Latin Americans to see God's kingdom come	n.p.	Brochure
43	Latin Link	n.d.-c	Step	n.p.	Leaflet
44	Latin Link	n.d.-d	December Step Team. Help run a children's Christmas holiday club in Guatemala	n.p.	Leaflet
45	Latin Link	n.d.-e	Step Team opportunities - summer 2014	n.p.	Leaflet
46	Latin Link	n.d.-f	Spring Step 2014	n.p.	Leaflet
47	Lattitude Global Volunteering	n.d.-a	Top-up here. Bursary information	n.p.	Leaflet
48	Lattitude Global Volunteering	n.d.-b	no title	n.p.	Brochure
49	Leiths	n.d.	Leiths School of Food and Wine	n.p.	Leaflet
50	Mission Africa	n.d.	Serve a year in Africa. Our medium term Gap year programme.	n.p.	Brochure
51	Nonstop	n.d.	Become a ski or snowboard instructor in Canada	n.p.	Leaflet
52	Operation Mobilisation	2013	go4it. Short term mission with Operation Mobilisation	n.p.	Brochure

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

No	Author	Date	Title	Publisher	Type of material
53	Orchards Cookery Ltd	n.d.	The Orchards School of Cookery	n.p.	Brochure
54	Outreach International	2012	Gap year and volunteer projects	n.p.	Brochure
55	Oyster Worldwide	n.d.-a	Animal welfare projects	n.p.	Leaflet
56	Oyster Worldwide	n.d.-b	We specialise in providing paid or voluntary work in exciting locations	n.p.	Leaflet
57	Oyster Worldwide	n.d.-c	Australia	n.p.	Leaflet
58	Peak Leaders	n.d.-a	Ski instructor courses & improver camps	n.p.	Leaflet
59	Peak Leaders	n.d.-b	Mountain Bike guide courses	n.p.	Leaflet
60	Peak Leaders	n.d.-c	Snowboard instructor courses & improver camps	n.p.	Leaflet
61	Personal Overseas Development Charity	n.d.	Life changing volunteering	n.p.	Leaflet
62	PGL Travel	n.d.	Careers: Instructors, hospitality, languages	n.p.	Brochure
63	Project Trust	n.d.-a	12 & 8 month volunteer placements in Africa, Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean	n.p.	Brochure
64	Project Trust	n.d.-b	12 & 8 month volunteer placements in Africa, Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean	n.p.	Leaflet
65	Projects Abroad	n.d.-a	Help... Learn... Explore!	n.p.	Brochure
66	Projects Abroad	n.d.-b	Help... Learn... Explore! Sport	n.p.	Brochure
67	Projects Abroad	n.d.-c	Volunteer overseas	n.p.	Leaflet
68	Quest Overseas	n.d.	Quest overseas. 2012-2013 edition	n.p.	Brochure
69	Raleigh International	n.d.-a	Raleigh expeditions. Venturers, aged 17-24	n.p.	Brochure

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

<b>No</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type of material</b>
70	Raleigh International	n.d.-b	17-24? Take a crash course in life	n.p.	Leaflet
71	Sarum St Michael Educational Charity	n.d.	Applicants wanted	n.p.	Leaflet
72	Shumba Experience	n.d.	Gap year in South Africa. Conservation - Community - Veterinary	n.p.	Leaflet
73	Simpson, Kate	n.d.	The ethical volunteering guide	n.p.	Leaflet
74	Soul Edge	n.d.	Live the adventure. Break down barriers. Bring the Kingdom	n.p.	Leaflet
75	Soul61	n.d.-a	Rebuild, renew, restore. The leadership course	n.p.	Brochure
76	Soul61	n.d.-b	Rebuild, renew, restore. The leadership course	n.p.	Leaflet
77	Soul61	n.d.-c	Rebuild, renew, restore. Streams	n.p.	Leaflet
78	Sport Lived	n.d.	Active breaks in amazing destinations	n.p.	Leaflet
79	Sporting Opportunities	n.d.-a	Play, coach, train. Get qualified in sports overseas	n.p.	Leaflet
80	Sporting Opportunities	n.d.-b	Developing sport for a developing world	n.p.	Leaflet
81	STA Travel	n.d.-a	Volunteer & Learn	n.p.	Brochure
82	STA Travel	n.d.-b	Your Big Trip	n.p.	Brochure
83	STA Travel	n.d.-c	Your Big Trip: Round the world travel and multistop flights	n.p.	Brochure
84	Tall Ships Adventures	2012	The ultimate sail training experience for ages 12-80	n.p.	Brochure
85	Tearfund	n.d.-a	Go overseas with Tearfund	n.p.	Leaflet
86	Tearfund	n.d.-b	Adventurer	n.p.	Leaflet
87	The Book Bus	n.d.	Improving children's lives one book at a time	n.p.	Brochure

Appendix 10: List of leaflets and brochures

<b>No</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Type of material</b>
88	The Karen Hilltribes Trust	n.d.-a	Volunteer in Thailand with The Karen Hilltribe Trust. Gap years, career breaks.	n.p.	Brochure
89	The Karen Hilltribes Trust	n.d.-b	The Karen Hilltribe Trust. Building a better future	n.p.	Leaflet
90	The Leap Overseas Ltd	n.d.	Intern Leap	n.p.	Brochure
91	Travellers Worldwide	n.d.	Voluntary work and internships abroad	n.p.	Leaflet
92	Wild Working	n.d.	Global wildlife encounters	n.p.	Leaflet
93	WWOOF UK	n.d.	Get back to your roots with WWOOF UK. World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms	n.p.	Leaflet
94	Year Out Drama Company	n.d.	Looking for drama?	n.p.	Leaflet
95	Youth for Christ	n.d.-a	YFC One. One team, one mission	n.p.	Brochure
96	Youth for Christ	n.d.-b	Change you can be part of	n.p.	Brochure
97	Youth with a Mission	n.d.-a	World changers and how you can be one	n.p.	Brochure
98	Youth with a Mission	n.d.-b	Year for God. Life changing training, mission and adventure	n.p.	Leaflet
99	Youth with a Mission	n.d.-c	Don't take chances... Take risks!	n.p.	Leaflet
100	Youth with a Mission	n.d.-d	Don't live behind closed doors...	n.p.	Leaflet

**Interview excerpt:**

“I think that kind of side of the globe is way more common for gap years. Than, say, like America. I don’t know, but I’d prefer to go that way. Go, like, east, instead of west. Because I see America as more like a kind of family holiday or something. Yeah. I don’t know why, I just do.” (Lauren, talking about Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and India)

**Analysis:**

*Theme:* Meanings

*Sub-themes:* Gap year mobility conventions

*Justification:* This quote shows the internalized expectations regarding gap year mobility. Lauren suggests the existence of commonly shared understandings regarding appropriate gap year destinations – “the east” being the appropriate direction of travel. These are clearly positioned not in relation to her own motivations or aspirations, but to what is widely considered “normal” in this context (“I don’t know why, I just do”, “that kind of side of the globe is way more common for gap years”).

**Interview excerpt:**

"Personally, I wouldn't want to go to lots of different countries. For me, it would be more important to understand that place, meet local people in more detail, get to know how they survive. I think it depends what you want to get out of it." (Lily)

**Analysis:**

*Theme:* Active agency

*Sub-theme:* Mobility choices: number of destinations

*Justification:* This quote suggests that there is scope for mobility choices in relation to the number of destinations depending on “what you want to get out of it”. For Lily, it is important to immerse herself in the culture and spend a prolonged period of time at her destination, which elsewhere in the interview she contrasts to those who hop from one country to another on around the world gap year trips as a “different way of doing things”. Therefore, the gap year practice offers some opportunity for choice – both types of mobility have systemic legitimacy and participants are able to choose. Lily was able to mobilize her travel knowledge and preferences derived from her previous travel experiences as well as those of friends and family, to make reflexive choices regarding gap year mobility.

**Secondary material excerpt:**

“The greatest reward of AgriVenture is the people and Trainees you meet along the way. You can make connections for a lifetime and know you have people to visit all over the world. You will never forget your experience of travelling and if you’re like me, it will become the centerpiece of your life.’ Katie Partlow, Trainee from the USA 2010” (Agriventure, n.d.)

Analysis:

*Theme:* Norms

*Sub-theme:* Social capital

*Justification:* This excerpt from Agriventure (n.d.) brochure advertises normative rewards associated with taking a gap year, in this case developing social capital in the form of friendships with people around the world, which can make travel in the future easier (through having people to visit all over the world). It highlights, in line with evidence from other sources analyzed in this study, that developing friendships with other “gappers” is one of the key expected rewards of the gap year experience.

**Interview excerpt:**

“I have considered it, but it sounds very expensive. I'd love to do it, but I don't have the money at the moment, that's the main issue. Maybe just a quick trip to Morocco, or something, that would be great. Or maybe Paris, or somewhere. But I couldn't do it for months, I don't have the money.” (Amy, talking about the potential of travelling to shorter-haul destinations on her gap year, instead of her planned trip to Southeast Asia).

Analysis:

*Theme:* Resources

*Sub-theme:* Cost

*Justification:* In structuration theory structures of legitimation include material and non-material resources that students can draw upon when performing practices. In this case, the reality of the cost of travel in Europe as compared to her available budget and time, restricted Amy’s choice of gap year destinations.

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