Governing the im/mobility of elderly travelers: the case of 'free' public transport

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Samenvatting

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'Gratis' openbaar vervoer is momenteel één van de kernthema's in het politieke en beleidsmatige discours rondom (personen)vervoer in Nederland. De veronderstelling is dat 'gratis' openbaar vervoer een bijdrage levert aan het reduceren van allerlei sociaal-maatschappelijke problemen. Daartoe behoren onder meer de vereenzaming en relatief slechte financiële positie van ouderen. Het huidige kabinet heeft recent vier lokale experimenten met 'gratis' openbaar vervoer per bus, tram en metro voor ouderen geïnitieerd en (mede) gefinancierd. Deze paper bevat een kritische evaluatie van de effecten van deze experimenten aan de hand van de sociaal-theoretische 'governmentality' benadering, welke is ontstaan uit de intellectuele nalatenschap van de Franse filosoof Michel Foucault.

De kern van mijn betoog is dat de effecten van de experimenten niet onverdeeld gunstig zijn. Ongetwijfeld zijn er ouderen die van het aangeboden 'gratis' openbaar vervoer hebben geprofiteerd en wiens welzijn mogelijk is vergroot. De experimenten hebben echter veel meer gedaan dan simpelweg het vergroten van de mogelijkheden van ouderen om zich buitenshuis te verplaatsen. De manieren waarop mensen verouderingsprocessen, ouderdom, mobiliteit en immobiliteit begrijpen en van betekenis voorzien zijn mogelijk ook beïnvloed. De experimenten – hier opgevat als heterogene assemblages van mensen, instrumenten, technologische artefacten, (wetenschappelijke) kennis, regels en ideeën – hebben de mobiliteit van ouderen op specifieke wijze vormgegeven als discursief object. Belangrijke dimensies van hoe ouderen zich daadwerkelijk verplaatsen al dan niet met assistentie van verwanten, vrienden, buren en andere informele zorgverleners worden stelselmatig veronachtzaamd in het discours van beleidsmakers en politici. Bovendien zijn de experimenten geworteld in denkbeelden over ouderen die op geen enkele wijze recht doen aan de heterogeniteit in hoe ouderen zich verplaatsen of mobiliteit ervaren. Het is zeer waarschijnlijk dat de experimenten hebben bijgedragen aan de reproductie en versterking van stereotype beelden van ouderen als zwak, behoeftig en achtergesteld.

Ik concludeer dan ook dat de mobiliteit van ouderen op een andere manier verbeeld en benaderd dient te worden in politieke, beleidsmatige en sociaal-wetenschappelijke kringen. Daarmee wordt uiteindelijk ook (discursieve) ruimte geschapen voor andere vormen van regulering en stimulering van de dagelijkse mobiliteit van ouderen.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, 'free' public transport[1] is currently a dominant theme in political and professional discourses about transportation. Some even see it as a panacea for various social problems, including some of the challenges posed by the ageing of the population. 'Free' public transport promises to increase the social participation of older people, make them happier and improve their financial position. It is this argument that underpins the multiple local plans and initiatives to provide 'free' travel by bus, tram or metro to seniors. The 'buzz' has also moved into the national political arena: the current government has instigated and sponsored four experiments in specific geographical settings – Rotterdam, Nijmegen, Parkstad Limburg and North-Holland-North – in the second half of 2007. These experiments have been monitored extensively and recently the official evaluation report (Schoonveld 2008) has been delivered and submitted to the House of Representatives. Widely claimed to be a success, the State Secretary of Transport, Mrs. Huizinga-Heringa, has announced new experiments with 'free' public transport, although these will target other potential user groups. Beyond these national-level actions, it is almost certain that more and more municipalities will actually implement their own initiatives, many of which will explicitly target senior citizens.

In this paper I re-consider the state-sponsored experiments with 'free' public transport for older people through the governmentality perspective, originally put forward by French philosopher Michel Foucault and subsequently developed by sociologists, geographers and other thinkers. My motivation for adopting this framework is twofold. First, governmentality scholarship seeks to excavate the 'hidden' and taken-for-granted ideas, concepts and truths on which policies as well as their social-scientific evaluations are premised. Second, the governmentality approach does not *a priori* assume everyday mobility to be mere movement from A to B by autonomous and coherent individuals, as most transportation researchers (implicitly) accept. This understanding of everyday mobility is considered a product of the historically contingent interactions between human bodies, machines, roads, scientific expertise and procedures, and cultures of mobility (Bonham 2006). Hence, the governmentality approach constitutes an appropriate framework for understanding transport policies in ways compatible with the recent 'mobility turn' or 'new mobilities paradigm' in cultural studies, sociology and geography (Merriman 2005; Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007). What holds for mobility and travelers is equally true of older persons: Foucaultians consider the conventional view of ageing as a process of 'natural' decline a product of the particular trajectories of Western knowledges and cultures (Marshall & Katz 2002; Gilleard 2005).

In the remainder of this paper I will investigate how 'free' public transport for seniors can be understood within a governmentality approach and what the experiments of providing 'free' travel by bus, tram and metro mean for how mobility, ageing, and seniors are understood by politicians, policymakers, older persons themselves and the general public. Before addressing these questions, I will provide a brief introduction to the by now extensive literature on governmentality.

2. Governmentality and beyond

In his later writings, Michel Foucault examined the multifarious ways in which power shapes societies, and this work has inspired numerous social scientists. There now exists

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[1] Free is put between quotation marks because it may be free for the travelers but is still paid for by a third party, which is usually one or several public authorities (municipalities).

a well-established body of work about *governmentality* (Dean 1999; Rose-Redwood 2006), a concept Foucault discussed at length in his 1978 lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault 2007a). Different understandings of governmentality circulate through the literature, in part because Foucault defined the concept in multiple ways himself and re(de)fined it over time. Here I use it in two ways.

First, the word governmentality is a combination of 'government' and 'mentality'. Hence, the concept puts the worldviews, logics and objectives – that is, the rationalities – at the basis of 'government' upfront. This, I believe, is important because these rationalities are typically taken for granted and simply considered true in policy evaluations and (transportation) planning documents. However, it is essential to define what 'government' means in a Foucaultian context. Perhaps the best definition is Mitchell Dean's (1999, 11):

> "*any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seek to shape conduct by working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definitive but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes*".

This definition is useful because it foregrounds that government is not the exclusive domain of the state or public authorities but rather a collective outcome of assemblages of heterogeneous agents – from ministries to scientists to the media to individual citizens – who try to influence the actions of others and/or themselves. It also draws attention to the role of techniques and knowledges. Techniques are the mechanisms through which people and institutions attempt affect, shape and normalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others and themselves in order to achieve a certain set of specified objectives. The heterogeneity, interdependence and operation of techniques, as well as the effects they produce have been at the heart of Foucault's (later) analyses of the workings of power (e.g. Foucault 1990, 1995, 2005). He placed particular emphasis on the role of (practices of) knowledge and expertise as intellectual technologies in the exercise of power. He considered power and knowledge as inseparable, for information and knowledge "is not the outcome of a neutral recording function. It is itself a way of acting upon the real, a way of devising techniques for inscribing it (birth rates, accounts, tax returns, case notes) in such a way as to make the domain in question susceptible to evaluation, calculation and intervention" (Miller & Rose 1990, 7). Such techniques as statistics *articulate* objects of government. These objects do not exist in reality 'out there'; they are actively crafted (Law 2004) and made governable. A governmentality approach, then, critically interrogates the rationalities underpinning policy-making and their effects. It also analyzes how these rationalities, intellectual and other technologies and governmental practices dynamically co-constitute one another.

Second, Foucault and others have also used governmentality to indicate a particular mode of government that emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries when states began to manage the life, death and wellbeing of the inhabitants of their territories. It was then that the concept of the population – a group of humans as "living beings, traversed, commanded, ruled by processes and biological laws" (Foucault 2007b) – was invented, that a whole series of techniques for observing the population was developed (including statistics), and that bio-political technologies as Housing Acts or laws for improving public hygiene were gradually put in place. The purpose of all these innovations, which are still being used, was and is to enhance the productive and generative capacities of populations. Importantly, bio-political technologies worked and still work 'from within':

they are not imposed with brute force but act through self-policing by individuals. The state tries to create a congruence between its own interests and those of individuals, as a result of which the former are internalized by its citizens who start acting accordingly (Foucault 2007a).

While Foucault sketched out the foundations of an analytical framework for analyzing governmentality, it was left to others to apply and develop his conceptualizations and make them amenable to the study of contemporary socio-spatial processes. A rich literature has ensued, from which two sources are particularly relevant for my purposes. Mitchell Dean and others have developed a 'analytics of government', which is built around the following, interdependent dimensions (Dean 1999):

(i)   *Problematization*: when, how and why are settled modes of governing the actions of others or the self called into question?

(ii)   *Field of visibilities*: how are the objects of government made visible, perceived and apprehended? What is the substance acted upon?

(iii)   *Techne*: how is government put in place? What means, mechanisms, procedures, tactics, vocabularies, etc. are employed to modify the actions of the agents to be governed?

(iv)   *Episteme*: how and which forms of knowledge and expertise are implicated in, constitutive of, and produced by governmental practices?

(v)   *Subjectification*: how are the agents to be governed understood, represented and imagined? What are they to become?

(vi)   *Telos*: which utopian elements and ideas underpin government?

The importance of paying attention to how the agents to be governed are understood becomes evident once we realize that imaginations of subjects play an important part in the formation of policies and plans. These imaginations start out as paper passengers (Latour 1996) articulating how the subjects to be governed are and behave and what they want and need. Over time, though, these imaginations become so normalized and reified that they come to re-present real persons (cf. Richardson and Jensen 2008).

Processes of subjectification often entail the production of social inequalities along lines of gender, race and also age. Donna Haraway's work (1991, 2004) helps us to understand the production of such inequalities. For Haraway and other feminists, gender and race – and also age – are not fixed, preformed social identities of human beings that reflect biologically inscribed (essentialist) or culturally-defined differences. Rather, they are intersecting, emergent and fluid relationships that are produced in historically and geographically contingent ways. Age, gender and race are ongoing accomplishments of interacting people, material objects, ideas, etc. in concrete geographical spaces that can be made and unmade (Valentine 2007). Haraway has examined how science and technology – computer code, the Internet and mundane technological artifacts – actively mediate the production of social inequalities and the provocation of the productivities of life itself.

Analyzing 'free' public transport
Drawing on the analytics of government and Haraway's take on the production of social inequalities, I have examined the four state-sponsored local experiments to provide 'free' public transport for seniors aged 65 or over in the Netherlands in the second half of 2007. More specifically, I have sought to excavate the following aspects of how seniors' mobility is governed through 'free' public transport in the Netherlands:

(i)   How can free public transport be understood from a governmentality perspective? What kind(s) of work is it supposed to do?

(ii)   How is seniors' mobility brought into being and understood in the governmental processes? Which of its facets are made visible, which are backgrounded?

(iii) How are seniors and old age understood and represented in recent Dutch initiatives to provide 'free' public transport for the elderly?

To answer these questions, I have collected relevant text documents provided by the Dutch Parliament, information from local authorities, and the recent official evaluation report of the effects of the experiments (Schoonveld 2008) and subjected these to a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001). Especially the evaluation report allows us to better understand how (applied) scientific research, including the use of statistics, as a series of intellectual technologies is internal to the governing of seniors' mobility.

3. A brief genealogy

According to Dean (1999), the identification of problematizations – geographically and temporally specific events[2] in which existing ways of governing others or the self are thrown into question – is the key starting point for any analytics of government. It would be impossible to identify a single event that marks the genesis of 'free' public transport for older persons in the Netherlands; however, a key point in which multiple sequences of geographically dispersed and local events find themselves connected and from which new sequences of governmental actions have proliferated since is the publication of the 2005 *Initiatiefnota 'Gratis' Openbaar Vervoer* by Ms. Dijksma, then representative of the Labor Party (PvdA) in the Dutch House of Representatives. This document makes a double move: it seeks to re-invigorate local public transport by allowing certain groups deemed vulnerable to travel 'for free' and so help to solve some of (what she considers) the main problems that have dominated Dutch national politics in recent years: the increased road congestion, emission of pollutants and small particles, the widening gap between rich and poor, difficulties of the unemployed to find a job, and social inactivity in an ageing society. Dijksma proposed to make local public transport 'free' for the following groups: commuters traveling along the most congested highways in the Netherlands, older persons aged 65 or over (after the morning peak hour and on weekend days), disabled travelers, vocational training (MBO) students aged 16-17, and those unemployed persons registered with a Center for Employment and Income (CWI).

In the subsequent political trajectory, Dijksma's proposals were embraced by left wing political parties but criticized by the christen democrats and liberals. The right-wing Balkenende-II cabinet was prepared to set up experiments for commuters on congestion-intensive routes but refused to make public transport a mechanism for income support and welfare redistribution (Peijs 2006). Pressed for action by the House of Representatives, the then Minister of Transport, Mrs. Peijs, agreed to further examine the relations between pubic transport, congestion, the environment, economy and society. In the meantime, several municipalities developed and implemented their own plans to provide free public transport for elderly travelers independent from state support. For instance, the municipality of Tilburg – the sixth largest city in the Netherlands – set up its own experiment that allowed travelers aged 55 or more to travel for 'free' in the period October 2006-June 2007.

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[2] I understand the term 'event' here as a series of actions or practices that produce a difference between the past and the present for specific people in a specific context and so constitute one of the seeds for new relations and events in other space-times (cf. Prigogine and Stengers 1989)

It is only with the Balkenende-IV cabinet, which took office in February 2007 and also included Dijksma's Labor Party, that the State Secretary of Transport Huizinga-Heringa became seriously interested in providing 'free' public transport for older persons. Early 2007 she asked regional authorities to submit proposals for experiments with 'free' public transport, one of which should be situated in a rural and the other in an urban setting, which she was willing to co-finance. Ten proposals were submitted, four of which were selected for financial support (Huizinga-Heringa 2007a): the cities of Rotterdam and Nijmegen and the more rural areas of northern North-Holland and Parkstad Limburg. The experiments received state subsidies during the period June-December 2007 and were accompanied by an extensive monitoring and evaluation, which will constitute the basis for further political decision-making at the national level. The central role of this monitoring and evaluation attests to Foucault's observation that social-scientific expertise is centrally implicated in governmental practices and rationalities. The final evaluation report (Schoonveld 2008) was sent to the House of Representatives early July 2008.

4. A new technique for self-improvement
Having summarized national-level support for 'free' public transport for elderly travelers, I will now turn to what this instrument is supposed to do. Obviously, the substance that is being governed is immobility on the part of seniors, i.e. their (varying levels of) inability to reach distant places beyond the home. In her *Initiatiefnota*, Dijksma (2005) cited the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands that, on the basis of own statistical calculations, attributes seniors' lower mobility levels to their deteriorating health, limited ownership of driver's licenses and private cars, and the weak financial position of many elderly. This citation again supports the Foucaultian argument that social-scientific expertise and statistics are centrally implicated in governmental processes. Dijksma also related older people's relative deprivation to macro-level political decisions: in her view the cutbacks in the Balkenende-II's expenditure on local public transport has exacerbated the precariousness of older persons' mobility.[3]

However, for Dijksma and other advocates of 'free' busses, trams and metros, public transport is a means to an end. Movement is no more than getting from A to B in this functionalist discourse – itself a product of the governing of traffic movements since the (early) 20th century (Bonham 2006). Hence, rather than immobility *per se*, it is the personal and social effects of the inability to reach distant places that is at the heart of governmental practices: lack of social participation or isolation from social networks and loneliness among older people are acted upon first and foremost. Dijksma (2005, 4) uses the description of *sociaal-maatschappelijke winst* (social and societal gains) of 'free' public transport in this respect – a term that has been taken up in several subsequent documents (Peijs 2006; Schoonveld 2008; Huizinga-Heringa 2008). The importance of governing the effects of immobility can be glimpsed from Dijksma's (2005, 5) remark that "[a] major problem at the moment is loneliness among elderly, the disabled and the chronically ill. The costs of loneliness probably put a greater strain on the national budget than providing 'free' public transport for this target group" (my translation).

The above leaves the mechanisms through which 'free' public transport works – or is envisaged to work – in the everyday life of older people unspecified. Interestingly, the analyzed text documents are silent as to how 'free' public transport is supposed to

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[3] In my view the causal structure of Dijksma's reasoning is muddled here; her argument is perhaps best thought of as a rhetorical device to distanciate 'free' public transport as a social-democratic political strategy from the neo-liberalist political agenda of Balkenende-II.

actually modify the actions of older persons.[4] Nonetheless, Foucault's work on biopolitics (1990, 2007a-b) and people's self-government (1988, 2005) is, I would argue, extremely useful here. Like other bio-political techniques, 'free' public transport works – or is assumed to work – from within: public authorities remove what they perceive as barriers to older people's agency, after which seniors start to 're-invent' themselves. That is, authorities try to stimulate mobility by enhancing seniors' motility – their capacities to be mobile in socio-spatial space (Kaufman et al. 2004) – and ensuing mobility practices may then engender a particular reflexivity on the part of older public transport users: they may come to see and realize the benefits of being able to participate in social activities and meet other people and start to act accordingly. In this way, a process of self-improvement will materialize, in which beliefs, aspirations and practices that are partially responsible for spatial withdrawal, inactivity, isolation and poor health are transformed into a greater disposition toward active living and participation in the world. 'Free' public transport, then, is what Foucault (1988) calls a *technique of the self*, through which people take care of and improve their body, person and sense of self.

By identifying 'free' public transport for older persons as a technique of the self, I am positioning it in a repertoire of instruments for resisting bodily ageing: exercise, dietary supplements, cosmetic surgery and even such sexual technologies as Viagra (Marshall and Katz 2002). However, what sets those techniques apart from 'free' public transport is that their use tends to be promoted by private actors (multinational firms, advertising agencies, etc.) who benefit from today's consumer culture. Still, *all* technologies to resist morbid old age are underpinned and justified by a normative discourse of lifelong fitness (Gilleard 2005): ageing people are expected to mitigate the negative consequences of ageing such as impairment, bereavement and social isolation. Hence, we might say that with 'free' public transport for seniors the rationalities of neo-liberal consumerism are migrating into transportation policy-making. Moreover, the *telos* of this way of governing old age is a society where ageing people and their bodies are mobile, active, socially autonomous and actively resisting morbid old age

While it is important to appreciate the connections between 'free' public transport and other techniques for resisting bodily ageing should be appreciated, we should realize that 'free' public transport is itself a heterogeneous assemblage of such materialities as bodies, technical devices and paperwork, as well as immaterialities like rules, procedures and knowledges brought together to produce certain effects. It is, in short, what Foucaultians call a technology of government (Rose 1996; Merriman 2005). Not just human bodies and busses are involved; so too are the public transport passes sent to older people, the questionnaires some of them had to fill in, the money flows between public authorities and public transport agencies, the ads in newspapers and brochures informing seniors about 'free' public transport, the statistical procedures and software to make sense of the information collected for the monitoring and evaluation, etc.

Scrutinizing the circulations of these rather mundane devices and artifacts is important for at least two reasons. First, they are the means through which public authorities – both at the national and municipal level – are able to act 'at a distance' (Law 1986). It is through these circulations that the modification and normalization of older people's

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[4] The mechanisms through which 'free' public transport operates at the individual level tend to be 'black-boxed' (Latour 1999): they are taken for granted and put outside the political domain. However, in the few instances that these mechanisms are discussed, then doubts are expressed as to whether the monetary price of traveling is the primary barrier that prevents older people from using public transport. This is, for instance, the stance taken in the official response of Minister of Transport Peijs in Balkenende-II to the *Initiatiefnota*.

practices works. One example may serve to illustrate this. In Rotterdam the 'free' public transport for elderly experiment was coupled to the introduction of the *OV-chipkaart* – the electronic pass that is currently being introduced in public transport systems throughout the Netherlands. Seniors had to apply for an OV-chipkaart to be eligible for free public transport, about which they were informed through a letter of the Rotterdam alderman for transport in May 2007. The coupling of free public transport and the OV-chipkaart was accompanied by an elaborate media campaign, several brochures, information on websites, posters in transit vehicles, information meetings, and a symbolic kick-off meeting at start of the experiment. State Secretary Huizinga-Heringa attended this event and held a short speech, in which she also discussed the rationale for coupling 'free' public transport and the OV-chipkaart (Huizinga-Heringa 2007c):

> "*Rotterdam has coupled the experiment to the introduction of the OV-chipkaart. That I find very smart. If you have grown up with cardboard tickets and conductors with ticket punches, you might to get accustomed to such a plastic pass. Now the seniors of Rotterdam can use the coming four months to try out the OV-chipkaart. Without costs, without risks. You will* gradually notice *how convenient the OV-chipkaart actually is*." (my translation, emphasis added)

The excerpt from the speech makes clear how, by acting on older people's practices, public authorities seek to engender a certain reflexivity through which its aims become internalized and try to enfold new habitual, embodied modes of participating in the world into older people. This bringing into circulation of multiple material and immaterial things to incite self-regulation on the part of older people has significant implications, for we end up with seniors as *more-than-human hybrids*: the older person is more than an ageing body and mind but rather a locally embedded network of body-cum-artifacts with specific performative and reflexive capacities (Haraway 2004; Merriman 2005). This hybrid's practices are likely to differ significantly from the fully human, rational and utility-maximizing subject imagined presupposed by mainstream transportation science.
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5. Crafting mobility as a governable object
Further to the above, the governmentality approach shows that in the four state-financed experiments mobility and immobility are discursively constructed in particular ways, which has profound political implications. To support this claim, I turn to the evaluation of the experiments (Schoonveld 2008), a carefully crafted empirical study that adopted a mixed-method approach: pre- and post-experiment questionnaires among randomly selected persons aged 65 or over, supplemented with on-vehicle observations by researchers and focus group discussions/in-depth interviews with seniors in each of the four regions. This evaluation has an important role to fulfill in the further political trajectory of 'free' public transport initiatives at the national level. It addresses four main questions: (i) whether FPT produce social benefits; (ii) whether the increased use of public transport necessitates the use of extra vehicles or equipment; (iii) what the effects are on the use of paratransit services (Regiotaxi); and (iv) what the effects are on seniors' use of the private car and the bicycle. With regard to social benefits, it is important to note that these are operationalized along three lines: the use of public transport by older people per se; seniors' participation in social activities, i.e. culture, leisure, idealistic and sports activities; and their experiences of loneliness.

The results suggest that public transport use has grown in all four regions, that elderly people in Nijmegen en Parkstad Limburg have undertaken more social activities because

of 'free' public transport, that 'free' public transport has no causal effects on experiences of loneliness, that no extra supply of public transport supply is needed, that only a reduction in the use of Regiotaxi can be observed in Rotterdam, and that shifts from both car use and bicycling to local public transport have occurred (Schoonveld 2008). However, here I am not so much interested in the actual outcomes of the evaluation but rather in the way that it crafts mobility as a *discursive object*, i.e. as something that is represented and made understandable through words and numbers (cf. Frello 2008).

Looking carefully at how mobility is defined in the evaluation study and in the pre/post-experiment questionnaires, we see that it is understood as traveling with four modes: public transport (bus/tram/metro), paratransit (Regiotaxi), car, and bicycle. The use of most of these modes is captured via two indicators: a binary indicator of whether or not the respondent has used a given mode during the past month, and an ordinal indicator measuring the frequency of use that ranges from never to four or more times per week.

This way of representing mobility has at least two effects. First, the binary indicator – used more frequently in the report than the ordinal measure – is very sensitive to incidental use. Thus, if enough seniors use the bus just once (e.g., out of curiosity) simply because they can use it for free, this will produce significant differences in public transport use between the pre- and post-experiment surveys. In other words, the extensive use of the binary indicator is likely to produce a very positive representation of the behavioral effects of free public transport. With regard to the ordinal indicator, we should note that the highest category covers a very broad range of trip frequencies. Four times a week may seem a lot, but given that women (men) aged 75 or more make on average 1.72 (2.14) trips *per day* (Rijkswaterstaat 2008), four trips per week equals roughly one-third (one-quarter) of their total number of weekly trips. The highest category theoretically captures the range 33-100% of the trips by women aged 75 or more (27-100% for men). Thus, the lower bound on the highest ordinal level also helps to produce a positive representation of the use of (free) public transport.

Second and more importantly, certain forms of seniors' everyday mobility are expelled into partial or even full invisibility: no distinction is made between traveling as a car driver and a car passenger and walking is disregarded altogether. This, I believe, has very important effects. Previous studies have indicated that walking and being driven by others not only become more important as chronological age advances but also that older people tend to prefer using these modes most strongly in many circumstances (Schwanen et al. 2001). What is more, the driver/passenger distinction matters greatly to older people, for it is directly linked to questions of independence and interdependence. The former gives seniors the freedom to travel when and where they want; the latter puts mobility in the context of (informal) care and voluntary help. More specifically the being driven dimension ties seniors' mobility practices to the power asymmetries between older people as care-receivers and their spouse, siblings, neighbors, friends, etc. as carers and to issues of the reciprocity of social relations.

We might say that the evaluation study constitutes walking and the sensitivities of driving versus being driven as irrelevant dimensions of mobility, and in the case of walking as non-mobility. Mobility as discursively produced is meaningful to politicians and policymakers, much less to older people themselves. The construction of mobility in this way not just renders invisible mobility assistance as part of a voluntary aid through social networks (*mantelzorg*); it is yet another manifestation of the systematic devaluation of care-work in Western societies (Tronto 1993).

5. Imagining older subjects

The final aspect I want to consider is the subjectification of older people: how do the experiments as heterogeneous assemblages understand, represent and imagine old age and seniors? The textual analysis suggests that the experiment presupposes a particular mix of *subjectivities* – forms of personhood, self and identity – for older people.

First, in line with the above, older persons are positioned as *neo-liberal subjects*. They are considered active entrepreneurs capable of improving their own selves (Dean 1999). Additionally, they are understood as *homines economici*, rational human being whose conscious decision-making is to a considerable degree contingent upon monetary price levels. Yet, this neo-liberal paper passenger (Latour 1996) has a definitive social-democratic twist. Seniors are imagined as socially dis-embedded or autonomous: they are – and should be – independent from relatives, friends and neighbors for mobility assistance. If they need help, then it should come from public authorities. That the 'free' public transport assemblage embodies traces of traditional social-democratic philosophy should be no surprise given the genealogy of state support for 'free' public transport discussed above.

Second, the ways in which old age is understood draws on essentialist and ageist discourses. *Essentialism* is the tendency to locate social differences in biological factors and to assume that bodies have fixed properties. *Ageism* is a difficult concept with multiple meanings (Laws 1995). It relates to processes of stereotyping and (positively or negatively) discriminating older people simply because they are old. However, in the social sciences the term is also commonly used to refer to the socially produced norms and expectations about how people of different ages behave and relate to each other. Essentialist and ageist tendencies come together in the assumption of old age as a period of universal deprivation and decline of physical, cognitive and financial capabilities that is one of the key rationales for providing 'free' public transport to older people. The use of a single chronologically based criterion – the threshold of 65 years – for granting people the privilege to travel on buses, metros and trams for free is also ageist. Moreover, the aforementioned governmental rationality that older people are expected to actively resist the negative aspects of old age and adhere to the ideal of an active life and lifelong fitness is ageist as well. This is because it embodies certain culturally prescribed norms about how older people should behave. A final ageist element is the implicit assumption that runs through the Rotterdam experiment that older people have difficulty in handling the new digital technologies through which public transport can be accessed.

In short, old age is discursively constituted through the mobilization of neo-liberal, essentialist and ageist understandings of personhood. Drawing on those discourses implies that other understandings of ageing and old age are partially or completely expelled into invisibility. This holds particularly true of understandings that foreground the complexity and heterogeneity of older people's lived experiences and capabilities. Of course, bodies lose certain capabilities as they age, but the tempo and rhythm of this process differs greatly among individuals and is seldom characterized by linearity. Also backgrounded are the ways in which the meanings of old age intersect with those of other social identifiers, such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class and residential neighborhood. Experiences of, say, a white, middle-class widower of about 70 who still drives his own car and lives in suburban location differ so much from those of, for instance, a woman of the same age, born in Morocco and living with her husband in a

post-World War II estate in a large city that it is very unlikely that 'free' public transport caters to each of their mobility needs in similar ways or to the same extent.

Based on the discussion so far, we might be tempted to conclude that the discursive framing of the experiments (re)produces a very one-dimensional view on ageing as a process of universal deprivation, but the construction of subjectivities is more ambiguous and multiple than that. Interestingly, the evaluation report (Schoonveld 2008) to some extent challenges the neo-liberalist, essentialist and ageist understanding of ageing and old age described above. It is here that Haraway's notion of age – and gender, race, etc. – as contingent and fluid outcomes or accomplishments that can be made and unmade becomes most visible.

The evaluation crafts old age differently than public authorities do in at least two ways. First, it provides a rather nuanced understanding of the link between old age and loneliness. As with mobility, the author constitutes loneliness contingently, i.e. by drawing on a psychometric scale comprising eleven items about one's social contacts developed by well-respected Dutch social scientists. The results show that in all four regions 75-82% of the survey respondents do not feel lonely at all, 13-17% somewhat lonely and 5-8% strongly lonely. Of course, the number of (somewhat) lonely seniors is substantial but this understanding is much more nuanced than the discourses mobilized in the political arena. Second, while the intersections of age with gender, race/ethnicity, class, dis/ability and space are backgrounded in the political trajectory, those of age with disability, class and space are given at least some attention in the report. Many of the statistical results are segmented on the basis of income and dis/ability (even though most of the indicators are crude and static). The summary descriptions of the focus group discussions in each of the regions also suggest that the meaning of old age and its relations with mobility cannot be separated from those of gender and space. Moreover, the summaries foreground the heterogeneity of older persons' lived experiences quite well and challenge the stereotypical links of old age with inactivity and poor health. Paradoxically, this process of challenging works in part through the use of implicitly ageist formulations (Box 1).[5]

Box 1: Excerpts from the description of the focus groups with 14 seniors in North-Holland-North (Schoonveld 2008, 30; my translation; emphasis added to indicate implicit ageism)

A. The text includes the sentence "*Despite* their advanced age (66 till 88), almost all participations have a rather active life", which is followed by an inventory of the diversity of activities the participants engaged in. It then continues: "For these activities they [the respondents] leave their house frequently. *Only a few* are tied to their house more firmly because they have few or no hobbies, are less mobile (rollator), and/or have few social contacts".

B. Another sentence is: Most of the participants in the group discussion in North-Holland are *still* so health that they cover small distances on foot or by bike.

Nonetheless, the more nuanced ways in which the evaluation understands and imagines ageing and old age do not travel very far; in the end the simplistic ageist and essentialist understandings of ageing in relation to 'free' public transport prevail. To a certain extent this reflects that standardized, universalist understandings of phenomena circulate more swiftly and easily than do those emphasizing multiplicity and particularity

(Latour 1999). Yet, this is also a consequence of the rhetorical strategies adopted by the author of the report and of how the media and Ministry of Transport and Waterworks inform their publics about the outcomes of the monitoring and evaluation. The author does not convey his more nuanced understandings of old age in the executive summary at the beginning of the report, which makes it a time-intensive exercise to extract those understandings from the study. Towards the end of the executive summary he does refer to the use of qualitative methods but downplays their relevance by noting that "[t]he results of these discussions are mostly indicative, because they concern small numbers of people" (Schoonveld 2008, 5; my translation).

Similarly, the differentiation in older people's lived experiences and use of 'free' public transport is also expelled into invisibility in the press release about the evaluation study on the website of the Ministry of Transport and Waterworks (2008), as the following excerpt shows: "from the experiments it appears that free or cheap public transport attracts new travelers. It also results in extra trips by elderly and more activities. … No relationship was found between feelings of loneliness among elderly and free or cheap public transport". Although the assumed causal link between 'free' public transport and reduced loneliness is negated, statements like these do little to break the universalism and simplicity of essentialist and ageist understandings of seniors and old age. On the whole, then, we might conclude that (applied) social-scientific research and the media play a doubtful role in the (re)production of stereotypes about older people and mobility.

Discussion

I hope to have made clear that the assemblage of actors, material devices, ideas, and knowledges associated with the state-sponsored experiments with 'free' public transport constructs both mobility and old age in non-innocent ways that have significant political implications. Much more is going on than simply improving or extending older persons' motility. Along the way, the socially produced understandings of ageing, old age, and im/mobility of both seniors and other cohorts are (re)configured in a particular manner.

I consider the four state-sponsored experiments a mixed blessing. Yes, there are older people who have benefited from the provision of 'free' public transport and whose wellbeing must have been improved. Most likely, these are not-too-frail elders on a limited income, without a car but with a fairly extensive, spatially dispersed social network and living in areas where public transport supply is well developed.[6] However, the ways in which politicians, the Ministry of Transport and Waterworks and the popular press have framed, justified and portrayed the experiments have turned public transport into a site of *intensified* ageism.[7] The implicit stereotyping of older people and their mobility may well have dis-empowering effects on certain groups of older persons. It is not inconceivable that, if 'free' public transport for seniors becomes a structural feature of the transport system in the near future, significant others (e.g., siblings) may put more pressure on elderly persons to stop driving their own car.

Whether or not such dis-empowering effects will actually materialize is currently unclear. More in-depth research is needed about how older people tactically renegotiate and re-appropriate 'free' public transport – that is, how they re-interpret and use it in

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[5] The sections about the focus group discussions are not written by the author of the evaluation report but literally copied from an earlier report by another consultant agency.
[6] In my opinion the evaluation study fails to demonstrate convincingly which groups of older persons truly benefited from the experiments because of the methodological approach adopted.
[7] Public transport thus complements other sites where ageism plays out, including the labor market, the family, popular culture, the state and the built environment (see Laws 1995).

ways that are unforeseen by those (public) actors who seek to govern their behavior (cf. De Certeau 1984). This is important because public authorities cannot simply dictate what older people actually do in a bio-political/governmentality regime; processes of subjectification unfold in the "dialectical space between the state's will to orchestrate urban mobility and the multiple actual coping practices and strategies of the individual in his or her daily moving through the city" (Richardson and Jensen 2008. 221). As long as we have no access to detailed ethnographic studies foregrounding the complex ways in which older persons in concrete geographical settings make use of and think about 'free' busses, trams and metros, I will be hesitant to recommend continuation or extension of no doubt well-intended initiatives to provide 'free' public transport to seniors in general.

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