

# Meanings of (Im)mobilities: A 'New Mobilities' Perspective

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

How do you think about mobility? What are the many ways in which mobility can be experienced and defined?

### METHOD:

A total of 15 participants (55+ living in Hamilton) were interviewed and observed across a range of settings including: 5 older people who self-identify as active, 5 people aging with disabilities, and 5 seniors deemed clinically 'frail'. Participants in each nested group were asked to discuss their experiences of mobility and immobility.

### FINDINGS / THEMES:

#### 1. A 'NEW PERSPECTIVE' AND DEFINITION OF (IM)MOBILITY

- ▶ Defined beyond simply movement from Point A to Point B:  
*"Movement to me is obviously very, very different than what movement would be to you. Turning from one side to the other in bed or something - which fortunately I'm still able to do on my own - that's movement"* (Female, 63, Disability)
- ▶ Perceived as independence:  
*"I usually wheel myself independently..."* (Female, 56, Disability)
- ▶ Understood as unrestricted movement and freedom:  
*"trying to go places, however that is. Luckily, with this chair, I can drive it anywhere. You have way more freedom."* (Female, 61-70, Active)
- ▶ Adaptation: Adapting physically, mentally and socially to continue habits, activity and movement:  
*"I use elastic laces so I can just slip on my shoes. I don't have to bend down and tie them. They're permanently tied"* (Male, 74, Frail)

#### 2. INFLUENCING FACTORS OF (IM)MOBILITY

- ▶ Accessibility of the built environment:  
*"Just because you put a sign on the door that says you are wheelchair -accessible, I assure you, does not mean that they are"* (Male, 69, Disability)
- ▶ Unreliable transportation (public & private):  
*"Sometimes I can call the day before and get the ride I want. Sometimes I call a week ahead and I don't get to ride I want"* (Male, 69, Disability)
- ▶ Weather Conditions:  
*"I don't ever worry about walking, but when I am taking that garbage out or walking on ice, I am like an old lady, because I do worry about falling"* (Female, 61-70, Active)
- ▶ Physical ability:  
*"...My walking ability is limited...Labored. Probably 3, 4 times as long as if I was healthy"* (Male, 74, Frail)
- ▶ Caution/Risk analysis: Evaluating the risk of danger, impacting routes and action taken.  
*"So I think, as active as I think I am, at the same time, I am aware of the fact that your kind of almost one step away from a disaster, and the trick is how to avoid the disasters..."* (Male, 70+, Active)

### 3. INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE MOBILITY

- ▶ Improved built environment: Improve the accessibility of the built environment to suit the needs of older adults.
- ▶ Retrofit: Physical adaptations to home spaces to increase its usability.  
*"It was renovated so we could live here. We put the second story on and it ended there at the house. We built this great room for mom, built the laundry room on one floor and extended the big kitchen that would be available"* (Female, 79, Frail)
- ▶ Technology: For some, technology was a means of overcoming distance, cost, physical and social barriers.  
*"There's just lots of places and things that I can - I will – a lot of doors that will open to have the chair. That's my thinking"* (Male, 74, Frail)
- ▶ Resources/ Financial Support:  
*"It is basically unbelievable, the cost. This chair that I'm in now was, if I'm not mistaken, roughly about \$22,000.00"* (Male, 59, Disability)
- ▶ Positivity/Optimism:  
*"Strong-willed, whatever you want to call it. Keep going. I'm not going to sit on the chair and die there. I want to keep moving"* (Female, 79, Frail)

### CONCLUSIONS:

Although mobility tends to be conceptualized as simply movement from one place to another, our study has shown that to older adults with a disability, frailty and to those considered active, the concept of mobility entails more than movement. Mobility means independence, freedom, accessibility of the built environment, reliable transportation, adequate space, and social connections. Yet, across all groups, the participants of our study seemed to be more civically engaged than would perhaps be expected and many chose to be advocates for those most often silenced in the conversations related to aging and mobility. We thank all participants for sharing their experiences in an effort to better equip researchers and the public about 'what it means to be mobile in contemporary society.

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### PARTNERS:



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### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Grenier, A., Griffin, M., Andrews, G., Wilton, R., Burke, E., Ojembe, B., Feldman, B & Papaioannou, A. (2019). Meanings and feelings of (Im) mobility in later life: Case study insights from a 'New Mobilities' perspective. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 51, 100819. P. 1-10. (If you would like a copy of the article, please contact the Gilbrea Centre: [gilbrea@mcmaster.ca](mailto:gilbrea@mcmaster.ca))

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