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Conference Communication

## **Surrey Think Tank – Reconceptualising Visiting Friends & Relatives (VFR) Travel**

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### Abstract

This paper summarizes the major outcomes of the Surrey Tourism Research Center’s “Reconceptualising Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR Travel)” think tank held on July 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, at the University of Surrey in Guildford, U.K. This conference communication will briefly highlight the context, approach and main discussion themes of the event. In addition, it will summarize the implications and key outcomes, leading to the identification of further research topics.

### Keywords

VFR travel, migrants, migration, mobility, tourism

## **1. Introduction and approach**

While the concept of Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel has long been acknowledged, it was not until Jackson’s (1990) research on the estimated size and economic importance of international VFR tourism that the significance and extent of this group of travelers began to capture the attention of industry and researchers alike, as an “underestimated”, and to some extent a hidden, group in international tourism.

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In the era of globalization and increased mobility by transnational workers, individuals are more often leading mobile and geographically dispersed lives, leading to the extensification and intensification of mobilities. Moreover, the conceptualization of migration as a long term, one-way journey from home to destination country has shifted to include more short-term, circular, and sequential understandings. As a result, new questions arise as to how mobile individuals maintain ties with family, friends and loved ones – both at a distance, and through VFR mobilities. The changing parameters and dynamics of these mobility flows have transformed not only the needs and opportunities for VFR travel, but also their meanings. The latter can only be understood as being embedded in a wider network of relationships that include: transnationalism, diasporas, inter-generational transitions, as well as the affirmation and re-creation of identities.

Given the complexity of, and the fragmented scope of studies regarding VFR travel, the concept remains “chaotic” (Sayer 1992) and unstructured. To this end, the think tank sought to provide a platform to deconstruct the concept of VFR and explore potential gaps in the current literature. In particular, the think tank addressed the changing conceptualization of VFR brought about by globalization and technological advancement, particularly in regards to maintaining transnational ties amongst the increasingly mobilized migrants of today.

The Surrey Tourism Research Center proposed to hold a think tank exclusively dedicated to the topic in order to reconceptualize VFR as a subject area. As the title of this think tank implies, the aims of this workshop were to explore new directions in VFR travel research, providing a unique opportunity to critically assess existing research, and to discuss future research agendas while also establishing a network of researchers in this important field. Strictly limited number of places at the think tank facilitated a more intensive and creative discussion.

The Surrey ‘Reconceptualising Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR Travel)’ think tank took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. The day brought together international scholars representing universities from Europe, North America, Oceania and the Middle East, researching tourism and migration. After an opening by Dr Scott Cohen, the discussion started with an overview of VFR travel research delivered by Dr Hania Janta on behalf of the Surrey team. Keynote presentations then provided different disciplinary angles on particular issues: Professor John Urry (Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University; Editor of *Mobilities*) spoke from the mobilities perspective on the importance of friendship and VFR, Professor Russell King (Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex; Editor of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*) delivered a keynote on VFR travel, the concept of return and its multiple links with international migration, and Dr Jane Vincent (Digital World Research Centre, University of Surrey) spoke on the facilitative and transformative roles of mobile phones and migration.

After the lunch break, the afternoon provided opportunities to deliver brief synopses of individual research from international scholars researching various aspects of VFR travel. Participants presented short reviews of their current research, which were arranged thematically into two segments; eleven (11) presentations were made, each being allocated a 10-minute time slot. This range of presentations approached VFR travel from contrasting perspectives. They covered different world regions including Europe, the Middle East, the Pacific Islands, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, and addressed some of the technological, political, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of those flows. The day ended with a discussion and forward thinking agenda initiated by Professor Allan Williams and farewell drinks by the lakeside, in evening sunshine, provided by the Surrey Tourism Research Center. Selected papers will be submitted to a Special Issue of the leading migration and population journal, *Population, Space and Place*.

## **2. Think tank overview**

Ultimately, VFR travel is an expression of the intricate relationship between tourism and migration. The main theme of the think tank explored the measures migrants utilize to overcome and compensate for the loss of what Urry (2002) refers to as face-to-face, place-specific connectivity with their friends and family. Discussion centered on the means migrants utilize to maintain (or to reshape) social relations, expectations, norms and trust at a distance, such as technology and physical travel. Connectivity in this context represents a diverse set of constitutive flows: flows of money, flows of knowledge and flows of emotions that travel across distance. Moreover, VFR travel challenges the traditional dichotomy of mobile migrant versus static non-migrant. In essence, non-migrants are potentially only a journey away from being 'persuaded', 'collected' and 'pulled' towards a new destination (White and Ryan 2008), while their lives 'at home' are reconstituted by both actual and potential migrations. Tourism and other short-term visits help create 'search spaces' as well as strengthen mobility competencies (Williams and Hall 2002), again affirming the strong linkage between the fields of tourism and migration studies.

Prof. John Urry, the first keynote speaker, linked the practice of 'visiting' loved ones, to a privilege afforded by the discovery of oil. Drawing a parallel to the notion of 'food miles', he compared VFR travel to 'friendship and family miles' and concluded that travels and meetings are essential to networking and the maintenance of social relations. However, the degree of mobility will be determined by the dynamics of changes in the peak and decline of oil caused by depleting reserves and increasing demand especially from emerging economies. A curtailment in mobility – whether due to regulatory intervention or market mechanisms - may also have the potential to lead to the localization of networking, with distance playing a larger role in new friendships. It is expected that technological

advancement in communicative tools will lead to relationships progressively being maintained 'virtually', although the big question is the extent to which corporeal co-presence, requiring VFR mobilities, will remain essential to these.

The second keynote speaker, Prof. Russell King, based on collaborative research with Aija Lulle, Dorothea Mueller and Zana Vathi, made a three-way comparison of migrants who came to the UK under different circumstances. He explicitly related VFR travel to international migration utilizing a comparative study across three different migrant groups: skilled Germans in the UK who are considered lifestyle migrants, Kosovo refugees, and Latvian labor migrants. The purpose was to unpack the economic, power and cultural dynamics which underpin the three groups, and their differentiated mobilities, through exploring migration motivations, transnationalism, evolving social relationships and emotional geography. Overall, the presentation illustrated the diversity in both migration and VFR experiences as a result of differing circumstances. Even among the same migrant group, inter-generations and duration of migration were also shown to have significant impacts on the interplay and dynamics in social networks. The presentation concluded that VFR is essential to the constitution and meanings of migration, with these interstices yet to be explored sufficiently.

The third keynote speaker, Dr. Jane Vincent, discussed the role of 'virtual connectivity via information communication technologies' and the impact of new media on shaping the patterns of migration and cultural co-constructions in transforming transnational relationships in the absence of physical meetings. Through examining the ways migrants make use of new media, including mobile phones, the Internet and web-based community tools, she explored the ways in which migrants' maintained their identities and their ability to co-construct and integrate communities across continents in order to sustain their sense of togetherness. In addition, we identified the following key discussion domains amongst the other presentations:

1. Roles and potential conflicts between hosts & guests;
2. The underlying reasons for VFR travels, and realization of economic potential in this group of travelers;
3. Diversity in migration circumstances, subsequent effects on migrants' cultural/individual identity and emotional attachment to homeland;
4. Transforming dynamics between migrants and distanced friends and relatives through the aid of information communication technologies;
5. Ever evolving social networks and relationships, especially among the increasingly mobile elites;
6. The role of technology in driving migration, inter-generation learning of new technologies, and maintaining ties with transnational relatives.

### 3. Key outcomes and conclusions

Discussions largely revolved around changing networks/relationships over distance and time, the impact of information communication technology on these relationships and identity building, and migrants' intergeneration linkages with their homeland. Building on these themes, the think tank identified the following points for potential research:

1. The need for new types of research methods to allow researchers to track changing patterns of VFR contacts over time, i.e. to observe the changes due to distance and how the closeness of relationships may shift over time.
2. Ascertain the causalities between prior VFR experience and becoming a migrant. In other words, does prior VFR experience increase the likelihood of a person choosing to become a migrant, or whether such a high degree of selectivity in who went on the VFR experience already pre-existed.
3. Investigate the economic mutual dependence between migrants and their homeland, and the extent to which migrants' return visits and investments are important, both affectively and in instrumental ways, in maintaining and sustaining their homeland's economy.
4. Further explore the relationship between technology and VFR mobilities, and how mobility practices change the meanings and nature of technology. Also, analyze the timelines for researchers to examine the effects of major moments of technological innovations on VFR mobilities, and when these effects were observed.

The think tank was an opportunity for forward thinking and interdisciplinary bridge building. Its immediate outcome will be the submission of a special theme issue to *Population, Space and Place*, and the forging of new research relationships. Longer term, the it is hoped that the think tank will refresh conceptualization of this relatively neglected topic, and re-embed it in a wider social science framework.

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