In their new book, Life Phases, Mobility and Consumption: An Ethnography of Shopping Routes, Brembeck et al. (2015) provide a novel contribution to the ethnographic investigation of social mobility and the life phase through the medium of consumption practices. Brembeck et al.'s book takes as its topic the pragmatic and theoretical nuances embodied in consumer logistics, defined as consumers 'moving from home to the store and back home again with recent purchases' (p.1); from its affective dimensions, to the codification of consumer behaviour through their frequent engagement with empirical objects, cognitive devices, and environmental spaces.

The main aims of Brembeck et al.'s book are: first, to explore how ‘investigating consumer mobility through the lens of the life phase can deepen our understanding of under-researched aspects of mobility’ (p. 2); and secondly, to give ‘prominence to the lesser articulated material objects that prove instrumental for the performative functions of consumption’ (p.3). Specifically, Brembeck et al. seek to decentre a priori conceptions of agency in order to substantiate the ‘socio-technical assemblages’ (p.3) and relational network performances that support consumption and facilitate mobility patterns embedded in various stages of the life phase.

According to Brembeck et al., the landscape of consumption and mobility patterns have witnessed a substantial change in recent decades, and the navigation of contemporary commercial spaces, such as towns and cities, is becoming increasingly predicated upon the use of equipment in various forms. Drawing on the work of Dodier, Latour, and Kaufmann, the authors argue that spatio-temporal practices are not executed by concrete ‘consuming entities’, such as individual human agents, but conversely, are undertaken by ‘complex and mutable assemblages’ of persons, vehicles, and containers (p. 138). By deploying a multi-method ethnography of 42 participants situated in the Swedish and French cities of Gothenburg and Toulouse, the authors contend that different actants, such as families (Chapter Two) and the Elderly (Chapter Three) possess differentially distributed capacities for mobility as they transition through the life phase. For example, the authors posit that heretofore mundane shopping practices are increasingly fraught with embarrassment, distress, and temporal adjustments. As one participant stated, ‘if the first tram coach that comes along is an old tram with an entrance with steep stairs and you have to ask for help, then I usually wait for the next coach’ (p. 66). Therefore, contemporary consumers are included or excluded through their latent capacity to negotiate the parameters of public territory and the nuances of technological innovation.

Additionally, throughout the text, Brembeck et al. paint an in-depth picture of the two respective demographics (i.e. families and the aged) grappling with the structural and emotional configurations which aide or hinder the consumption practices of shoppers. By using examples of parental constraints experienced by families and accessibility challenges faced by the aged, the book reveals the intricacies of transportation and the normative considerations that remain incumbent upon policymakers to craft sustainable links between consumption and urban spaces.
The book is segmented into four major sections. In the first (‘Shopping Routes and Being a Consumer on the Move with Recent Purchases’), the authors seek to establish the nature of commercial behavior and its intersection with urban landscapes. In Chapter II (‘Families’) the authors investigate the nascent power dynamics that exists within parental relationships, and reveal how these temporal disruptions affect the ordinary consumption patterns of family units. In the third section (‘Elderly’), Brembech et al. present the physiological challenges which impose themselves on elderly consumers, and address the accommodations made by the aged in order to facilitate continued consumption. Finally, within Part IV (‘Conclusion’), the authors offer a concise recapitulation of prior findings alongside a collection of recommendations for governmental authorities to implement in order to generate sustainable mobility. While the degree to which the reader must be acquainted with technical vocabulary varies throughout the work, notwithstanding these concerns, this book would be suitable for use by undergraduate, graduate, and researchers within the field of ethnography.

Overall, Brembeck et al.’s book is a success and it accomplishes its aforementioned aims substantively. Despite the inherent complexity of the subject matter, the book establishes a concise narrative that consistently engages with both the extant literature and the performative consumption patterns undertaken by families and the elderly. Life Phases, Mobility and Consumption contributes to both our understanding of the influence of infrastructure in assisting (or disabling) mobility, and to our understanding of the life phase in general. By synthesising Actor-Network Theory (ANT), spatial solidarity, and mobility capital, into a comprehensive analytical lens through which to decipher consumption and ‘active ageing’, Brembeck et al. revitalize the field of ethnography, and provide a solid foundation for future research to be conducted in this fascinating direction of study.