



When transport policy becomes health policy: A documentary analysis of active travel policy in England

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There has been a succession of policy documents related to active travel published by the British government since the implementation of a National Cycle Network (NCN) in 1995. However, as the latest National Travel Survey (NTS) reveals, the number of journeys made by bike in the UK has remained steadfastly around only 2% (Department for Transport [DfT], 2018a). By using documentary analysis of the available official policy documents and statements, the aim of this paper is to make sense of the policies that have been published concerning active travel (AT) in England. This is done from a figurational sociological perspective. Three key themes emerge from the analysis: (1) the rhetorical, advisory level of the vast majority of the policies; (2) the reliance on a wide network of local authorities to implement AT policy; and (3) the focus placed on individuals to change their behaviour. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that despite a large number of policy publications from a range of government departments claiming to promote AT, little has actually changed in this time period in terms of a national agenda. Despite the successive policies, it seems there is little appetite on behalf of recent governments to make widespread infrastructural changes, where instead the focus has largely been on persuading the individual to seek more active modes of travel, increasingly for their own, individual 'health' gains.

1. Introduction

Despite the apparent success of implementing active travel (AT) policies within certain countries in continental Europe (see Pucher and Buehler, 2007; Pucher and Buehler, 2008), and the considerable attention from successive British governments, there has been, it would seem, little national success in promoting AT in the United Kingdom (UK). Whilst London saw a rise in those cycling to work between the last two Census programmes (circa 2001 and 2011), cycling actually decreased in the majority (202/348) of English local authorities (LAs) (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Although there have been policy documents produced in this country that have sought to promote AT, and particularly cycling, since the 1970s, the establishment of the National Cycle Network (NCN) in 1995 and the subsequent government publication of a National Cycling Strategy the following year have been followed by regular government publications and policies that have sought to promote cycling as a method of transport. However, the formation and evaluation of cycling policy in Britain has received relatively little attention academically (Gaffron, 2005; MacMillen et al., 2010). This is with the notable exception of Aldred (2012), who aimed to place cycling policy “in the context of broader shifts in policy governance” (p. 95). No other papers have yet to examine this issue since,

and there has yet to be an overtly theoretical analysis of AT policy. As such, by using documentary analysis, the aim of this paper is to examine the development of AT policy since 1995 from a figurational sociological perspective. Thus enabling us to appreciate the complexities of the AT policy process more in the round than has feasibly been the case in previous studies.

In the first instance, this paper offers a short précis of a figurational sociological perspective on policy per se. This is followed by a brief account of the methods. The paper will then examine, in greater detail, successive policies that have been introduced by various different governments since 1995.

2. Policy as a process

Whilst there have been numerous papers that have examined AT in England (and elsewhere) published already, a key feature of this paper is the particular sociological examination that is provided in order to understand the policy process more generally. Figurational sociology has yet to be used as a way of developing knowledge on transport policy processes, however there is a growing field of figurational analyses for studies on sport policy (e.g. Bloyce and Lovett, 2012; Bloyce and Smith, 2010; Stuij and Stokvis, 2015) and health policy (e.g. Henderson et al.,

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2018). It is therefore argued that figurational sociology can help us more adequately understand the AT policy process. As Malcolm (2008, p. 261) has argued “the maturity of figurational sociology is now such that we can move away from extended theoretical re-statements and assume that such information is readily available elsewhere”. Nonetheless, it is worth offering a brief overview of the manner in which it might be employed to help explain the policy process more generally, before then seeking to apply it to an understanding of the development of AT policy specifically.

Placing human figurations at the centre of the analysis of the policy process helps to illustrate the ways in which these figurations enable and constrain the actions of the people involved. It also helps to point towards how policy processes can be seen as an expression of the differential constraints and unequal power relations between groups of people whose interests and perceptions are likely to be at variance with one another (Elias, 1978). Policies begin life as issues that develop over time. At different times, some groups are more able to take up interests in some developments whilst simultaneously ignoring others in order to sustain, protect and advance their own interests (Murphy, 1998). Whilst it is not possible within the confines of this paper to offer a fuller socio-historical analysis of the emergence and development of AT policies, it is, therefore, important to at least provide some detail of the changing emphasis on AT over time. This is especially important because figurational sociologists also emphasize the tendency for policy-makers to ignore the significance of the long-term interweaving of planned and unplanned processes. The sheer complexity of the patterns of interaction, involving large numbers of people all of whom have an interest in a particular policy area, inevitably give rise to unplanned outcomes. Those involved in the planning and implementation of policy, however, rarely reflect upon the possible side-effects of pursuing their favoured policy. This is primarily because they “are all too often involved in networks of relationships which constrain them to deliver results in the short-term” (Dopson and Waddington, 1996, p. 535).

The complexity of the policy process is exacerbated further by the “need to balance national and local interests, to integrate national, urban, and rural development” (Church, 2004, p. 555) in considering any type of policy that impacts on the cultural landscape of the environment – which, of course, the majority of policies regarding transport, and thus AT, undoubtedly do. As will become apparent, despite growing concern at the national level to promote AT, this has been met with quite disparate adoption at the local level. It provides a useful reminder of the need to take a more balanced consideration of power relationships within the policy process more generally. The government are not all-powerful and rely on local implementation of policies they establish. Furthermore, the government department responsible for transport in the UK, the Department for Transport (DfT),¹ appears to sit in two camps; at times being seen to be sympathetic to those in support of AT, whilst always being constrained by those groups whose concern lies with increasing the provision for motorized transport. Therefore, in cases such as AT, where a number of different groups are involved in the policy process, some of whom may be in favour of AT policy objectives and some of whom may be opposed to any proposed changes, it is crucial to understand something of the complexity of the networks of relationships of which policy-makers are a part. As such, it is argued that policy tends to be a complex, often contradictory and, as a result, messy process lacking a convincing evidence-base. All policies tend to share several underpinning features. They entail, for example, human

¹ The government department responsible for transport in the UK has been through several variations in titles over the last 4 decades. For example, it has been called the Department of Transport (DoT) 1976–79; 1981–1997, the Ministry of Transport (MoT) between 1979 and 1981, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) between 1997 and 2001, the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLGR) between 2001 and 2002, and the Department for Transport (DfT) since 2002.

action aimed at achieving certain objectives, resolving, or at least ameliorating, an identified ‘problem’, as well as maintaining or modifying relationships within or between organizations (Bloyce and Smith, 2010). Many of these underpinning features of the policy process can be seen within successive government policies towards AT.

3. Methods

Publicly available documents from government departments published between 1995, when the NCN was established, until the middle of 2018, were analysed. In order to ensure the authenticity and credibility of sources (Scott, 1990), the selection criteria were limited by analysing those documents available from each organization's website. The websites were searched using the following keywords: ‘active travel’, ‘active transport’, ‘cycle’, ‘cyclists’, ‘cycling’ and ‘walking’. While most sources published since 1995 are available online, those archived or no longer available online may have been missed. As such, it is not claimed that this is a meta-analysis of the policy documents in this area, rather this is a theoretical analysis of the policy process. Furthermore, in order to limit the sample, the publications were then searched using the same keywords as well as reading the documents at least twice to identify all publications that included statements, comments or plans for AT. A total of 89 publications were included in the sample (a list of publishing organizations is provided in Table 1). Documents were analysed through coding emerging themes relating to AT policy. All publications were read and re-read in order to identify the emerging themes (Prior, 2003).

It is necessary to provide some context of the policy landscape in the UK. ‘Transport’ today is a partially devolved area of governance, as such, after various Acts of devolution, the Welsh Assembly, for example, have assumed full control over transport decisions in Wales, whereas the Scottish Parliament only has control over some transport decisions. Even within England, responsibility for transport is devolved to the Mayor's office within Greater London and Greater Manchester, whilst the majority of AT delivery outside of these regions is under the remit of LAs (Fig. 1 demonstrates the ways in which AT provisions are funded and delivered in England; for a more detailed account of AT responsibilities in England see Hull [2008]). As a result, the specific focus within this paper is on national AT policy within England. Since the NCN was established, there have been a considerable number of official publications and policies concerning cycling as a method of transport. Fig. 2 provides a timeline of key government AT policy events since the establishment of the NCN. Despite the fact that there have been five different Prime Ministers in that time, each in charge of different governments with different ideologies and policies emerging therein, there are many similarities in terms of the policies produced. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking that AT policy is something akin to cycling in treacle. In other words, there has been a lot of words expended by the different governments, but the policy changes have not, in real terms, amounted to significant amounts of policy change. It is to a discussion of the three key areas that have been identified from the policy analysis that we will now turn. Whilst a number of sub-themes were identified, within the confines of this paper three core areas for analysis were established. These are (1) the rhetorical, advisory level of the vast majority of the policy; (2) the reliance on LAs and local business to implement AT policy; and (3) the focus placed on individuals to change their behaviour (in the sociology of health literature, this concept is referred to as healthism [Crawford, 1980]). However, it is important to recognize that, whilst for brevity's sake the areas are discussed discretely, the themes contain several overlapping issues and concerns.

3.1. Policy as rhetoric: advisory level of the policy publications

Although this is far from unique to this particular area of policy, a key theme in the policies analysed for this paper is that they are

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