



## Viewpoint

## A transport and health geography perspective on walking and cycling

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## ABSTRACT

The impetus for this Viewpoint is to explore the ways in which health and transport geographers can add to understanding of the inter-relationship between health and non-motorised travel, through interpretation of a conference session titled: “Walking and Cycling – The contributions of health and transport geography” from the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) annual conference in 2013 convened by the authors, then to highlight where geographers can contribute theoretically, methodologically and practically.

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## 1. Background

The motivation for this session, which was co-sponsored by Geographies of Health Research Group (GHRG) and the Transport Geography Research Group (TGRG), was to highlight to geographers the potential for the discipline to play a growing role in understanding the health benefits of non-motorised travel. We emphasise how research by geographers can complement the growing contributions of researchers from disciplines including public health and the built environment, particularly following the publication of the “National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) public health guidance 41” (NICE, 2012) which called for more to be done to encourage walking and cycling, in recognition of the potential health benefits. The motivation for the Viewpoint is to share details of the sessions with the wider research community – geographers and non-geographers. We would welcome a wider dialogue in response to this.

Questions we posed in our call for papers included: “Do people walk and cycle because of the perceived health benefits, because it is seen as sustainable and environmentally friendly or is it simply a necessity for some people, especially in the current economic climate?” Essentially we wanted to bring together geographers working in this field in order to establish the research being undertaken and create links as well as discussing how we can influence public policy and discuss more theoretically the role of geography. This expands on the work of Andrews et al. (2012) by emphasising the role of transport geographers as well as health geographers. As a whole, the session aims were aligned with those of the Journal of Transport and Health, which are to understand: “the many ways in which transport policy affects health and inequalities, how awareness of these links can affect transport policy decisions – and how poor health can affect transport options for individuals” (Mindell, 2014), in our case from a geographical perspective.

## 2. Walking and cycling: the contributions of health and transport geography

The session sought to represent a range of methodological and critical viewpoints on walking and cycling. This resulted in what initially seemed an eclectic mix of presentations, exploring the contribution of geographers' research into active modes from theoretical through to applied and practical perspectives. From these it is clear that interaction between the health and transport geographers draws on a range of other disciplines to inform the theoretical and methodological approaches. Here we summarise the presentations in turn and reflect upon how they add to existing disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge and understanding.

Firstly, Davidson's “A political ecology of the body in urban cycling”, looked at the potential to apply new theoretical approaches to cycle commuting, drawing on a bodily approach (Davidson, 2013). Political ecology is a human geography approach to exploring complex relationships between nature and society (Gregory et al., 2009), applied here to the body it critiques environmental deterministic

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approaches to understanding cycling. Davidson's proposed Ph.D. research uses this as a lens to explore urban cycling practices, arguing that this advances current research which examines the influence of individually held perceptions (e.g. Heinen et al., 2011) or capacities, cultural narratives (e.g. Aldred and Jungnickel, 2014), or analyses of the built environment (e.g. Meng et al., 2014), or alternatively a combinations of these factors (e.g. Heesch et al., 2014). As an example of bodily approaches Davidson noted, that although political ecology has been applied in urban research on water (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), lawn care practices (Robbins et al., 2001) and obesity (Dodd, 2011) there has been less focus on transport, specifically cycling as noted by Creswell: “real bodies moving have never been at the top of the agenda in transport studies” (Creswell, 2010, p. 19). When presenting her work Davidson highlighted that research often concentrates on inanimate objects, such as social norms/habits/clothing/road conditions yet does not provide sufficient consideration of the relationship with the body. She explored the experiences of cycling, raising questions regarding the political and power dynamics of cycling for environmental reasons, knowledge which she intends to deepen through her postgraduate research. While the importance and valuable contribution of this research was discussed in the session, the challenges of influencing policy with theoretical work were recognised during positive dialogue between the author and civil servants at a pre-conference event at the Department for Transport (DfT).

Davidson's perspective is part of a wider movement to further research based on bodily capabilities and inclinations. For instance, Andrews et al. (2012) argue that the disembodiment of walking has resulted in research which assumes a deterministic relationship between walkability, walking and health whereas other methodological approaches favoured by human geographers could deliver more critical approaches to understanding of walking.

This was followed by presentations from Lindelöw and Rind, who each looked at facets of “walkability”. The extent to which the environment is conducive to walking is a growing area of study which Talen and Koschinsky (2013) call a “crowded research landscape” and which Andrews et al. (2012) claim is “one of the most popular focuses of ‘non-medical’ research today”. Andrews et al. also highlight that measuring such a concept is inherently geographical. Whilst research on walkability traditionally focuses on the built environment Lindelöw and Rind each adapted their approach to consider the influence of other factors. In contrast to the first paper they each take a more positivist approach; these are discussed in turn.

Lindelöw (2013) draws upon social ecological theories (Humpel et al., 2002), conceptualising the inter-relationships between an individual's walking behaviour and their environmental perceptions, highlighting that walking is a function of an individual's interaction with and perception of the environment, rather than simply environmentally determined. The theoretical and methodological underpinnings are based on the work of Alfonso (2005), which considers the feasibility of walking. For a more thorough examination of the results, please refer to Lindelöw et al., 2014 (this issue) but key points are that Lindelöw recognises the role that transport studies, urban studies and health sciences have had in shaping research on non-motorised travel so far and he uses this as a basis to argue that researchers must understand individual time/space influences upon the feasibility of walking for everyday activities. During the session he presented a compelling argument for more research into walking as a mode of transport, focussing on the process and not just outcomes related to crude measures of the built environment, concurring to an extent with the earlier presentation by Davidson. This links to work such as that of Talen and Koschinsky (2013), which questions the normative idea that a walkable environment is good for everyone, or indeed that the same attributes will make an environment walkable for all.

Rind et al. (2013) presented a paper as a step to “[integrate] environmental justice and socio-ecological models of health to understand population-level physical activity” Rind's presentation highlighted the applied approach: utilising multi-level models to examine how indices designed to measure aspects of the natural environment influenced active travel behaviours based on national travel survey data. Whilst the influence beyond the built environment was emphasised, the proposed environmental index held no clear relationship with active travel across the population segments under consideration. However, the paper presented a range of interesting hypotheses and was particularly effective in emphasising inequalities, noting specifically that active travel may not be health promoting amongst all social groups. A more recent paper (Shortt et al., in press) highlights this complexity further with the key findings being that individuals in less deprived areas were most likely to achieve recommended physical activity levels when compared to the most deprived both overall and with respect to walking for all purposes or recreational purposes. However, the reverse was true for non-recreational purposes with individuals in the most deprived areas benefitting most from utilitarian walking.

Whilst this presentation was theoretically grounded and supported by the wider literature, criticism of similar approaches include that many studies of the built environment, or in this case the natural environment, in relation to physical activity assume a deterministic role of the environment (Nelson et al., 2008). Further to this, researchers examining the role and effectiveness of such indices (Talen and Koschinsky, 2013) also highlight caution as to using a “one-size-fits-all” approach. This is countered by the argument that such an approach can also deliver a level of understanding and generalisability. From a pragmatic perspective, Rind's discussion of the inequalities links to Davidson's discussion as to who benefits from active travel and the need to explore the ways in which they benefit. Therefore, it could be argued that in conjunction these approaches can provide a more thorough understanding of active travel in relation to geography and health.

Lee (2013a) and Johnson and Margolis (2013a) each presented case studies evaluating practical interventions to encourage active travel. Lee focussed upon how Living Streets' community partnership approach to delivering environmental improvement, the Fitter for Walking project, encouraged walking, whilst Johnson evaluated the role of adult cycle training in promoting confidence in Tower Hamlets. Each emphasised the ability of simple and relatively cheap interventions to facilitate behavioural change, with Fitter for Walking claiming cost-benefit ratio of up to 46:1 (Lee, 2013a) and Tower Hamlets' adult cycle training achieving cost benefits close to 5:1 (Johnson and Margolis, 2013b). Both studies had used the Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT) (Kahlmeier et al., 2011) to assess the economic cost-benefit of the schemes though they expanded upon this by using mixed method approaches which also considered the stakeholder's qualitative responses.

Lee (2013a) described the way Living Streets engaged with communities to involve them in “creating streets for people” and encouraging them to make walking pledges. Community input steered the “Fitter for Walking” projects which were delivered across range of geographical areas in England. This resulted in a range of environmental and promotional interventions, which, based on surveying residents, resulted in an increased amount of walking, community engagement and contact with neighbours. This shows the benefits of walking beyond physical activity which may have wider health impacts, for example related to loneliness and mental health, particularly in older age. Further, given that Fitter for Walking was delivered as a package through community engagement Lee (2013b) highlights the importance of considering the process by which interventions are delivered, as this may impact on the outcomes which can be achieved.

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