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Transportation Research Part A

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tra

Sociological perspectives on travel and mobilities: A review

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 5 April 2014

Keywords:

Travel behaviour
Car dependence
Emission reductions
Mobilities
Sociology
Transport

ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest in understanding and achieving changes in travel behaviour, but a focus on individual behaviour change may overlook the potential for achieving change via transformation at the levels of institutions, cultures and societies – the domains of sociological inquiry. In this paper, we review sociological contributions to the literature on travel and 'mobilities'. We summarise four key themes which supplement or contradict arguments made in mainstream transport debates on behaviour change. The first involves focusing on travel 'practices' as social entities with dynamics of their own, rather than on individual behaviours. The second relates to the changing natures of societies, and the implications for travel. The third explores and interprets the issue of car dependence in ways which highlight the ethical, experiential and emotional dimensions associated with car use, its symbolic role in societies increasingly concerned with consumption, and its differing roles within different cultures. Finally, the 'new mobilities paradigm' highlights issues such as the increasing links between travel and new technologies, and the primacy of social networks in influencing travel decisions. These themes emphasise the importance of understanding the broader contexts in which travel choices are made. In particular, the implication is that the creation of more sustainable travel patterns will require changes at a range of social levels, not simply in individual behaviours, and that changes to transport will inevitably be linked with, and influenced by, broader changes in the values and practices developed by societies as a whole.

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1. Introduction

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is seen as one of the greatest challenges facing the world. Modelling of abatement options has shown that technological developments, whilst essential, will not be enough on their own to enable sufficient reductions in cumulative CO₂ emissions from the road transport sector (Skippon et al., 2012b). Changes to travel behaviour, which potentially can be achieved sooner, will be essential too.

Interventions aimed at achieving behaviour change in the transport sector have often aimed to encourage changes in the behaviours and choices of individuals (via the types of initiatives discussed in, for example, Cairns et al., 2008 and Graham-Rowe et al., 2011). However, this focus risks missing the opportunity for achieving greater levels of transformation via change at the levels of institutions and societies – an issue articulated during the UK House of Lords inquiry into behaviour change (House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, 2011).

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In particular, in the climate change debate, sociologists have been critical of the way in which policy makers have aimed to alter behaviour. For example, Webb (2012) argues: “*The framing of the problem as one of behavioural adjustments to individual self-interest obscures alternative understandings of society as a collective accomplishment*” (p. 109). Meanwhile, Shove (2010) comments on “*what seems to be a yawning gulf between the potential contribution of the social sciences and the typically restricted models and concepts of social change embedded in contemporary environmental policy*” (p. 1273).

In this paper, we attempt to bridge this apparent gulf through a narrative review of the sociological literature on travel and mobilities where it appears most directly relevant to transport policy and practice. Some key themes and ideas are identified, and we have included a commentary that discusses our perceptions of how they supplement or contradict those currently embodied in models of travel behaviour change derived from disciplines such as psychology and economics. We have approached the review as transport researchers who have an interest in exploring how sociological research can contribute to, challenge and change our understanding of travel and mobility, the formulation of transport policy and its practical implementation; though we are not, ourselves, sociologists.

This review focuses on four broad themes from the sociological literature. The first is a focus on travel ‘practices’ as the units of analysis, rather than on individual behaviours. The second argues that the fundamental nature of societies and social identities are changing in various ways that impact on people’s travel and consequently on transport policy. For example, the self-creation of identity has become increasingly important, with more focus on the role of consumption (including travel) as a means of identity creation. Changes in family structures and living arrangements also have important implications. In the third theme, sociologists have explored and interpreted the issue of car dependence in a number of different ways, highlighting the multiple ethical, experiential and emotional dimensions associated with car use; its symbolic roles in a society increasingly concerned with consumption; and its different roles within different cultures. Finally, the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ highlights issues such as the increasing links between travel and new technologies, and the primacy of social networks in determining travel decisions.

Overall, perhaps the key message for future transport policy is that encouraging more sustainable travel will require changes to the *context* in which individual decisions are made (or practices are performed), which will inevitably be a complex and multi-stranded endeavour.

2. Scope and methodology

The validity of attempting to explore how far sociological insights can inform other perspectives on transport is, itself, a matter of controversy. For some, it seems obvious: “*Of course, different disciplines have different strengths and weaknesses, which is precisely why we need interdisciplinary approaches to address important societal and environmental problems*” (Whitmarsh et al., 2011, p. 258). However, for others, it is problematic: “*contrasting paradigms are incommensurable on a number of counts. They generate different methods of enquiry, different meanings of evidence, and different sorts of research agendas*” (Shove, 2011, p. 262).

In this paper, we have not attempted to develop a coherent theoretical position that integrates sociological, psychological and economic concepts. However, we assume that the policy goal of interest – namely, changing travel behaviour or travel practices in ways which will reduce their contributions to climate change – is one which is valid for all disciplines.

A further essential caveat is that, as a narrative review, this paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive, systematic survey of the relevant sociological literature, nor a complete summary of its main insights, nor to presuppose a full and complete knowledge of either sociological or other work on the social dimensions of transport and mobilities. It would be unrealistic, indeed a matter of hubris, to presume that this might be possible, not least since these bodies of knowledge are not defined objectively. Deciding what is relevant to transport policy and practice and what is not, and what counts as sociology and what does not, are, in themselves, topics for endless debate. Rather, we have sought to provide a broad overview of those sociological perspectives that may be of particular interest to the transport community, outline key relevant sociological concepts, and comment on how these add to, or contrast with, mainstream approaches to transport. To an extent, we have also tried to draw on sociological reporting conventions, using quotes from key authors to substantiate arguments, given that sociology is primarily a subject of ideas, analysis and commentary.

A third, important caveat is that we have restricted our scope to themes that appear directly relevant to transport policy and practice in developed countries with high carbon lifestyles, correlated with high levels of material consumption, car ownership and use, and technological development. In contrast, in developing countries, sustainability issues are less to do with giving up high-carbon lifestyles, and more with ensuring that lifestyles develop along different, low-carbon pathways as economies grow; and where, instead of reducing car dependence, the issue is about meeting aspirations in alternative ways that limit the development of car dependence in the first place. In addition, the sociological literature on mobilities contains considerable material on migration and transnational flows, although these topics were also outside our scope.

Our scope has also partly been defined by methodology: this work is based on systematic searches of English language journals (including the journal ‘Mobilities’) and Google Scholar, using combinations of the terms sociology, sociological, sociologist, travel, transport and mobility, with scrutiny of more than 1500 abstracts to identify relevant work. Moreover, it is well-known that there are some fundamental divides within mainstream transport research, over issues such as the value of time, the rationality of transport choices, or the usefulness of transport modelling, and that sociological research provides certain types of insights on such issues. Pragmatically, while we have concentrated more on work by sociologists, we have

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