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Constructing the cycling citizen: A critical analysis of policy imagery in Brisbane, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Cycling is often promoted as a low cost, accessible and virtuous strategy for solving many urban problems, including air pollution, congestion, climate change and the 'obesity epidemic'. Yet the status of cycling as a quick and easy transport solution available to all is rarely problematised in policy documents. Focussing on cycling policy documents in sub-tropical Brisbane (Australia) we apply interpretive policy analysis to identify the ways policy representations of cycling and cyclists may work to exacerbate the marginality of certain groups by excluding them from representation. Through analysis of these policy documents, and reference to international research on cycling and the right to the city, this article sketches out the figure of the 'Cycling Citizen' constructed within them. The Cycling Citizen is characterised in these policy documents by a combination of actions (such as demonstrations of speed and skill), personal attributes (such as body-type, clothes and gender) and attitudes (particularly around virtue). We argue that the dominance of representations of MAMIL (middle-aged men in lycra) cyclists in the policy documents analysed may work to make cycling less accessible to those less likely to identify as MAMIL such as women, people of colour, people with lower incomes, and fat people, and this may effectively exclude them from cycling policy decisions, and negatively shape personal choices about cycling. We further argue that policy representations of cycling and cyclists matter because they have the potential to influence infrastructure and funding decisions which may have material consequences with respect to cycling mode share, equity and safety.

1. Introduction

Heralded as a sustainable mobility capable of addressing social, environmental, economic and personal ills, the status of cycling as an accessible transport solution for all citizens has been largely taken for granted in policy documents (Spinney, 2009). As a result, much of the literature exploring the adoption or rejection of cycling has focussed on the quality and availability of physical infrastructure, perceptions of traffic and hazards, and local urban form and streetscape (Aldred et al., 2016; Chataway et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2010; Garrard et al., 2008). This emphasis has also dominated transport planning and policy efforts to increase cycling mode share (Pooley et al., 2013). There is, however, an emerging international body of research which engages with social and cultural factors that influence cycling behaviour and modal choice (Daley and Rissel, 2011; Gatersleben and Haddad, 2010; Spotswood et al., 2015) and which recognises that the accessibility and adoption of sustainable mobilities — like cycling — are affected by identity and social positioning, in addition to expenditure, infrastructure and education. Decisions to adopt cycling as a personal transport mode can thus be understood to be shaped by a range of physical, social, and cultural factors which are, at least in part, shaped by cycling policy. However, social and cultural factors are rarely reflected in, or explicitly addressed by, policy documents. This omission is important because public policy plays a "crucial role…in encouraging bicycling" (Pucher et al., 2010, p. 106).

The development and implementation of cycling policy can be contested and controversial. In practice Australian cyclists are often marginalised as road users and their claims for space delegitimised (Vreugdenhil and Williams, 2013). Research also shows that investment in cycling infrastructure, a central plank in cycling policy, has also been implicated in processes of gentrification resulting in unequal benefit and contributing to broader exclusionary productions of urban space (Stehlin, 2014, 2015). Bicycling accounts for approximately 1% of daily trips in most Australian capital cities (DIRD, 2015). This is comparable with the low cycling rates experienced in the UK, the USA, and Canada (Fishman, 2016), but as noted by Pucher et al. (2011) considerably lower than bicycle mode shares typically enjoyed in northern Europe. In countries where cycling remains a very low proportion of total trips by

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mode, the 'cyclist' has become an identity in and of itself; an identity that sits more comfortably and consistently with some than others (Gibson, 2015), in turn shaping travel practices and choices.

Some cycling scholarship has engaged with questions of justice, often invoking or adapting the right to the city or just city language and frameworks to discuss cycling justice and just mobilities, and to highlight intersectional concerns (Batterbury and Vandermeersch, 2016; Goddard, 2016). Much of this literature considers how cycling has become subordinate and other to motorised private transport (Blickstein, 2010), and how this subordination represents a restriction on mobility that may subvert an individual's capacity to exercise their right to the city. Some of this work has focussed on the cycling experiences and needs of particular populations. For example, Whitzman et al. (2010) focus on cycling and children's independent mobility, while Whitzman (2013) highlights the implications of modal choice on women's safety and right to the city. The ethic of the right to the city (Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009a, 2009b) is characterised by the prefigurative and ongoing making of a just city and focusses on equitable access to public services, infrastructure, and spaces (Parnell and Pieterse, 2010), including for cycling (Norcliffe, 2016). It embraces an intersectional view of injustices in city life, and provides a framework for understanding the inequities constructed by and reflected in urban form and associated policy (Fainstein, 2010; Marcuse et al., 2009). Interrogating cycling policy through the lens of the right to the city can foreground the ways transport policies aimed at increasing the uptake of cycling may have unintended repercussions for, and exacerbate the marginality of, certain groups by excluding them from representation, and potentially rendering their mobilities 'uncycleable' in the eyes of those intended to apply the policy and make infrastructure decisions, such as planners, and those contemplating cycling as a personal mode of transport.

The struggle for just mobilities and the right to the city we focus on in this paper is not between dominant cars and subordinate bicycles, but rather within the category of cyclist itself. Drawing on how policy documents conceptualise and represent the 'Cycling Citizen' in an exclusive, kyriarchal (Osborne, 2015) way that undermines the capacity of cycling to help marginalised people claim their right to city, we argue that cycling policy is complicit in constructing the Cycling Citizen, i.e. the normative cyclist at whom cycling policy and infrastructure provision is directed. With a view to informing more inclusive and just cycling policy we interrogate representations of cycling and cyclists within policy documents governing cycling in Brisbane, Australia. Following Steinbach et al. (2011), through analysis of these documents we explore cycling practices as influenced by intersectional factors beyond those traditionally represented in cycling policy, and expose the limited and limiting ways in which cycling and the Brisbane Cycling Citizen are typically reflected in, and constructed by them.

2. Cycling in Brisbane

The Brisbane Vision 2031 is unambiguous in its pursuit of "sustainable travel choices such as cycling" (p8) for Brisbane. However, despite considerable investment in cycling infrastructure,[1] cycling remains an unpopular modal choice. Census data suggests that in 2011 only 1% of people living in the Greater Brisbane Area travelled to work by bicycle (TMR, 2011). Consistent with trends across Queensland and Australia more generally, women in Brisbane were significantly less likely to cycle than men (Garrard et al., 2006; TMR, 2011). This is in sharp distinction to countries like, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands, which approach gender parity in cycling behaviour, sometimes with women cycling slightly more than men (Aldred et al., 2016; Garrard et al., 2006). This obvious gender disparity (considerably less is known about class and ethnic disparities) is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a product of local cultures and contexts. The importance of diversifying cycling to improve mode share has been acknowledged by transport planners and policymakers (Aldred et al., 2016). However, much of the effort in this area to date has tended towards unproblematised accounts of cycling's benefits, emphasising personal behaviour change through individual interventions based on education and marketing campaigns focussed on the environmental and health benefits of active travel, and raising awareness of the availability of cycling infrastructure, rather than any meaningful engagement with the structural and social influences on travel behaviour (Marinelli and Roth, 2002; Yang et al., 2010).

The Transport Plan for Brisbane (BCC, 2008) describes cycling as "clean and green", "healthy and efficient" (p10) and "safe and attractive" (p46); descriptions echoed across the policies analysed. Cycling is also generally promoted as a more affordable travel choice than running and parking a car or taking public transport, and is a form of transportation that may offer children a chance to be independently mobile (Whitzman et al., 2010). Yet these very benefits of cycling may offer reasons to reject it as a preferred mode of transport. An Australian study found that the environmental benefits of cycling suggest to some that it is for greenies, hippies, and/or hipsters, which may not be identities all travellers are comfortable adopting (Daley and Rissel, 2011). Its purported accessibility (particularly for those too young to drive) and affordability have perversely created negative associations in some cultures and places, where because cycling is considered something that children or poor people do, it should be abandoned when one can afford to travel by car (Gibson, 2015; Joshi and Joseph, 2015). Daley and Rissel (2011) also found that cyclists without cars felt stigmatised by other cyclists, suggesting cycling continues to be negatively associated with poverty, and is only socially acceptable when a choice, rather than necessity.

Contra to constructions of cycling as an activity for children, poor people, and hippies, is the figure of the MAMIL. The prominence of the MAMIL in Australian cycling culture is evidenced by the embracing of this persona by former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, in an attempt to connect with voters (McNab, 2015; Minear, 2015). The MAMIL, as stereotyped, is White with a middle/upper-income who can both afford a car and an expensive bicycle and accessories. Indeed, the term MAMIL was reportedly coined by the marketing industry (Shannon, 2012) to represent a premium market segment and unique retailing opportunity. While the term MAMIL identifies members of this demographic as possessing a particular elite status, derived in part by their purchasing power, MAMIL is often used as a pejorative term by those hostile to cyclists. Because the moniker MAMIL has been used to imply vanity, arrogance, and belligerent disregard of other road users, it is a stereotype many cycling advocates and activists are keen to distance themselves from. Despite this the image of the MAMIL continues to feature prominently in Brisbane's policy landscape to the point of being the dominant cycling identity, excluding alternative cycling practices (and people).

3. Methodology

Despite outwardly egalitarian claims to access and participation, cycling policy and infrastructure provision cannot be easily separated from broader neoliberal and exclusionary urban processes (Stehlin, 2014). As such, we have an obligation to critically consider cycling and the differential distribution of impacts and uptake across diverse populations (Green et al., 2012). Cycling is often presented in policy as a socially and environmentally responsible, economical and accessible means of exercising mobility and claiming a right to space. However, gender, ethnicity, class, body shape and age, as well as local contexts and geographies, are implicated in decisions to (or not to) cycle (Burton

[1] The Queensland State Government allocated almost $37 million for cycling infrastructure in 2015–2016, and an additional $163 million (Bailey, 2015) of the total $18.8 billion transport infrastructure budget over the next four years (Trad and Bailey, 2015). Brisbane City Council, the largest council in the greater Brisbane area, reports it will spend $100 million on active transport (including cycling) over the same period (BCC, 2015).