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# Cycling on the verge: The discursive marginalisation of cycling in contemporary New Zealand transport policy

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the potential of utility cycling to contribute to a more resilient, just, and environmentally sustainable transport system, its mode share in New Zealand has remained persistently low. Efforts to increase utility cycling have been pursued by government authorities through a range of supportive strategies. This paper explores the disparity between this policy intent and outcome. It draws on a discourse analytical approach to examine how utility cycling has been positioned in transport policy documents alongside other priorities. Transport-related policy and strategy documents for the period 2008–2013 from central government, and regional and city councils are analysed. The analysis reveals how changing use and meaning for the term ‘sustainable’ has narrowed transport objectives, restricting outcomes that address the pillars of environmental and social sustainability. It demonstrates how transport policy has been framed as a driver of economic growth, how this has been interpreted as requiring a narrow range of transport policy solutions, contributing to the devaluing of utility cycling, despite its potential (and existing) impact on health and well-being, social justice, and environmental sustainability. These practices have systematically privileged motor vehicle use, helping to legitimate and maintain that privilege, while marginalising utility cycling as an effective mode of transport.

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## 1. Introduction

The past few decades have seen rapid increases in the movement of people and goods about the globe. Overwhelmingly dependent on motorised transport, the social and environmental costs of current mobility patterns sees transport becoming “. . . one of the most problematic areas for sustainability” [14, p. 1]. As the overall sustainability of transport systems comes into greater focus, broader objectives for transport must be addressed in terms of all three pillars of sustainability—economy, environment and society [99]. The notion that each pillar is a foundation for sustainable development illustrates the need for an integrated perspective, acknowledging that for many “. . . justice and sustainability are intimately linked and mutually interdependent. . .” [2, p. 3, original emphasis].

Concerns of the third, and oft neglected, pillar of social sustainability as they relate to transport and mobility, have been the focus of growing scholarship and policy interest, particularly through a social justice lens (e.g. Refs. [10, 55, 94]). Social justice is fundamentally concerned with equity in relation to “. . . the distribution of impacts (benefits and costs) and whether that distribution is. . . fair

and appropriate” [53, p. 3]. The social justice impacts for transport policy are diverse, affecting access to social and economic opportunities, the allocation of direct (e.g. household and government expenditure) and indirect (e.g. congestion, pollution, accident risk, undesirable land use) costs, and resource allocation (e.g. funding between modes and transport activities) and distribution (e.g. place and type of infrastructure or services developed) [53]. Attention to sustainable transport and the social pillar allows renewed consideration of the contribution cycling can make to a sustainable and socially just transport system.

In addition to being one of the most sustainable means of transport, cycling for transport (utility cycling), has the potential to address a number of social justice concerns. Cycling has been shown to make positive contributions to, social inclusion efforts (e.g. Ref. [22]), alleviating transport poverty (e.g. Ref. [57]), and improving access to employment and services (e.g. Refs. [92, 94]). An increasing number of national and sub-national jurisdictions are focussing policy efforts on improving cycling mode share (e.g. Australia [6]; London [31]). Efforts to increase utility cycling in New Zealand (NZ) occur at all levels of government through a range of supportive strategies, research, and guidelines (e.g. Refs. [35, 62, 64, 104]). Despite these efforts, cycling levels (1.2% mode share for trip legs 2011–2014) have remained persistently low for more than two decades [71].

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This paper explores the disparity between the policy intent to increase cycling mode share and the actual outcome by employing a discourse analytical approach to examine how utility cycling has been positioned alongside other priorities in transport policy documents. Politics, through policy, uses discourse to produce certain types of problem definitions, which in turn, allow for certain types of solutions [7]. These discourses are, at times complementary (particularly where ‘sustainability’ is used as a legitimising tool for neoliberal economic priorities), and/or conflicting (when sustainability’s ‘other’ concerns of social equity and the environment are to the fore). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) facilitates examination of how context shapes and influences the discourse of policy, which in turn influences and legitimises a particular course of action over another [100,102].

The analysis contributes to a developing scholarship on the discourses that shape transport policy in NZ and elsewhere (e.g. Refs. [4,17,39,42,54,103]). The examination of the position of cycling in the NZ policy context, contributes to understandings of how different ‘national policy contexts’ frame sustainable transport and shape transport policy including the extent to which social justice goals are recognised and pursued. Aldred and Tepe [4] see clearer understandings of these contexts as helpful in identifying pathways to “...more sustainable transport futures” (p. 1568). The NZ case has wider relevance as an example of how narrowly-defined economic objectives for transport have undermined planning for sustainable transport, particularly in relation to social justice issues. This paper explores the NZ case by looking more specifically at the discourses of neoliberalism and sustainability that shape the policy framework, and in turn, the position of utility cycling. NZ illustrates the powerful influence of the national policy framework in determining the priorities in transport planning, and the prospects for the development of a long-term sustainable transport system that responds to environmental and social justice concerns.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Sustainable transport, social justice, and cycling

Sustainable transport is generally grounded in the concept of “...meeting the needs of the present without compromising future generations; ...[through] the three pillars of sustainability: environment, economy, and society” [99]. There are numerous challenges, however, in achieving a sustainable transport system, ranging from problems stemming from a restrictive focus on a single pillar (such as an earlier OECD focus on environmental sustainability [78,79]), to the problems that arise from the potential for multiple interpretations of sustainability, including weak versions [8]. This ready application or exploitation of sustainability can reinforce existing divisions of power, allowing for the further marginalisation of, and impact on, those already bearing the costs of a dominant motorised transport system [32,94]. Tensions exist and trade-offs occur between the dimensions of sustainable transport, where policy actions that address one may negatively impact another [16].

These challenges highlight the need for integrated planning to meet all dimensions of sustainable transport [88,92]. There are a variety of meanings and contexts for integrated transport policy, however, “...the underlying common denominator is that a successful transport policy must be internally consistent (combining different modes of transport), as well as consistent with, and supporting government objectives in policy areas other than transport.” [92,p. 49]. Integrated transport policy is used, for example, by the Victoria State Government [19] to capture the dimensions of sustainability through a Triple Bottom Line (economic prosper-

ity, social and economic inclusion, and environmental stability) approach to decision making [72].

From a social justice perspective, a range of issues arise when the social pillar of sustainable transport is neglected, including specific impacts on the mobility of, particular demographic groups (e.g. Refs. [18,89]) or localities (e.g. Refs. [11,26]), risks associated with the allocations of costs associated with the reaching of peak oil [1,48], and the impact of transport emissions and their management [12,44]. These issues have been examined in terms of the concepts of: ‘environmental justice’, the distribution of a range of environmental effects, such as transport emissions, with particular interest in whether exposure is ‘socially patterned’ [44]; ‘forced car ownership’, the need to operate a car due to lack of viable alternatives [58]; ‘transport poverty’ where “...a household is forced to consume more travel costs than it can reasonably afford, especially costs relating to motor car ownership and usage” [30,p. 102]; ‘mobility or transport disadvantage’, the impact of reduced or uneven mobility through viable transport; and ‘access deprivation’, the reduced or uneven access to good, services and activities, both of which can be contributing factors to the concept of ‘transport-related social exclusion’ (TRSE) [55].

Each of these concepts seeks to account for the way the dynamic interaction of transport-related factors contributes towards social exclusion. TRSE is taken to refer to situations where people are unable to participate in routine employment, education, and social activities, and access basic goods and services [84]. Importantly, the focus on TRSE draws attention to the fact that the important question is not so much whether transport is “...available to people per se but rather the consequences of this in terms of their (in) ability to access key life-enhancing opportunities...” [55,p. 106,original emphasis], and in doing so it provides grounds for considering more integrated policy approaches to transport provision.

Cycling can be seen as ‘self-evident’ in sustainable transport discourses [47], given that it represents a strategy for reducing emissions, fossil fuel consumption, and land-use demand [40]. While addressing environmental sustainability concerns, these benefits also have relevance for social justice, for example, by lowering exposure to the environmental harms of transport which have been found to have greater impact on the most disadvantaged groups in society [44]. Cycling allows for improved access and mobility (evident in cities such as Bogotá, see Ref. [92]) particularly through its potential to address several of the features of transport systems that contribute to TRSE, such as, ‘exclusion from facilities’, ‘economic exclusion’, and ‘time-based exclusion’ (Church, Frost, & Sullivan, 2000, as cited in Ref. [55]). Cycling provides a cost effective way to travel, and in some urban environments, is faster than motorised options [81]. Approximately half of the urban trips currently undertaken by car in NZ are considered to be of a distance suitable for cycling [77], therefore having the potential to minimise car dependency and associated social impacts such as ‘forced car ownership’ and ‘transport poverty’. The development of new technologies for cycling serve to further enhance its potential to improve access and mobility [13].

However, despite these benefits, and the contribution cycling can make to social justice goals, increasing cycling mode share has been a challenge in many countries with auto-dominant transport systems [85,86]. Some of the challenge has stemmed from the influence of the national-policy context [3,4], and the organisation and setting of transport policy and planning [45,46]. All modes of transport are influenced by power relations; where priorities for motorised transport exist, cycling is vulnerable to marginalisation at a political decision-making level (e.g. national over the local [3]), within organisational structures (e.g. transport planning isolated from urban planning [45]), within professional knowledge (e.g. theoretical approaches to transport planning [47]), and on the road (e.g. provision for those who drive over those who cycle

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