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Analysing cycling as a social practice: An empirical grounding for behaviour change

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ABSTRACT

Despite significant national and local efforts over the last decade to stimulate uptake of cycling in the UK, levels of cycling (particularly utility cycling) remain at around 2% of journeys. Understanding of cycling behaviour and subsequent development of interventions has typically been undertaken using an individualist approach, often relying on psychologically based models of behaviour. This paper argues that Social Practice Theory (SPT) may be a valuable addition to practitioner's toolboxes by providing an alternative means of understanding the complex dynamics between the elements that constitute the practice of utility cycling, allowing it to be considered as a social issue, rather than focusing solely on individual behaviour. This is demonstrated within the paper by the use of SPT to reanalyse quantitative and qualitative datasets that explore views and experiences of both cyclists and non-cyclists. Therein, the practice of utility cycling is described according to its three elements; materials, meaning and competences and the potential benefits of this approach are discussed; particularly its ideological shift away from 'victim blaming' and its natural support of interdisciplinary intervention design.

1. Introduction

Changing the behaviour of a population has been described as the challenge of our time (Johnson, 2013). These sentiments are particularly appropriate when applied to western car-dependence, particularly when it is considered that overuse of the car has led to increased pollution, congestion, environmental damage, and serious health problems associated with lack of exercise (Dora, 1999; Dora et al., 2000; Gärling & Schuitema, 2007; Jain & Guiver, 2001; Jones & Hervik, 1992; Wootton, 1999). Shifting travel away from the car and towards more sustainable modes such as cycling has proven to be a particular challenge. For example, engineering-led solutions to transport problems from the 1960s to the 1990s (Dudley & Richardson, 2000) actually marginalised cycling to the point that utility trips dropped from 13% in 1952 to around 1% by 1972 (Watson, 2012). Now the UK has a stubbornly unshifting 2% rate of cycling for total trips made (DfT, 2005-11), compared to 27% and 18% of trips in the Netherlands and Denmark respectively (Pucher & Buehler, 2008). Thus exploring how the UK might catch up with these European cycling nations has become the subject of considerable debate and research (e.g. Anable, 2005; Anable & Wright, 2013).

Historically, the UK government has attempted to tackle the country's car-dominance through economic instruments (Avineri, 2012), urban compaction, infrastructure development (Boarnet, 2010) and technology development (Marsden,

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Mullen, Bache, Bartle, & Flinders, 2014). For example, congestion charging has measurably reduced traffic flows in central London (Beevers & Carslaw, 2005), and the £14.5 billion investment in the Crossrail project in London (DfT, 2012) is designed to further reduce inner city car traffic in the capital. Specifically around cycling, a project of funding has been invested in cycling infrastructure since 2005, e.g. through programmes like Cycling City and the Local Sustainable Travel Fund (DfT, 2010, 2011a). However, with cycling levels remaining low in the UK (DfT, 2014), for the past ten years 'soft' policy measures have attracted increased attention (Bamberg et al., 2011; Cairns et al., 2008). These measures are primarily based on the UK Department for Transport DfT, 2005 Smarter Choices report, which recommends applying measures which *"seek to give better information and opportunities, aimed at helping people to choose to reduce their car use while enhancing the attractiveness of alternatives"*. The report's recommendations include workplace and school travel plans, personalised travel planning, public transport information and marketing and travel awareness campaigns. In addition to continued investment in infrastructure, these 'soft' interventions have now become commonplace in the UK transport planning sector as methods designed to encourage individuals to use sustainable modes of transport, and were predicted to be able to lead to an 11% decrease in national car traffic levels in ten years (Cairns et al., 2004).

Difficulties with evaluation and monitoring of 'soft' measures notwithstanding (Bonsall, 2009; Brög et al., 2009; Chatterjee, 2009; Cohen, 2009; Graham-Rowe et al., 2011), the lack of growth of cycling in the UK implies that they have yet to make an impact. Indeed various researchers have argued that there is considerable doubt about the effectiveness of measures which assume that people lack information or motivation, or that they need help, and that once one or more of these is supplied they will be more inclined to change (Bonsall, 2009). For example, Melia (2013) concludes that levels of travel to work by car have not reduced through the Sustainable Travel Towns Project, and Seethaler and Rose (2009) found that even though people signed up for a Personalised Travel Plan scheme this did not translate to a decrease in distance travelled by car. Similarly, Arnott et al. (2014) have found no evidence of a link between 'soft' behavioural interventions designed to address information deficit and the proportion of active travel modes such as cycling in a systematic review of transport behaviour interventions. Overall, UK Government statistics on levels of cycling in the UK in 2012/13 show that more local authority regions are seeing a decline than those seeing an increase, which suggests that 'soft' approaches have not been successful in improving the nation's level of cycling to date (DfT, 2014).

The lack of success of 'soft' measures has prompted a new wave of research into alternative theoretical approaches which might improve understanding about cycling behaviour and about potential travel mode shift interventions (e.g. Marsden et al., 2014; Schwanen et al., 2012). A key debate therein is around the appropriateness and effectiveness of individualist behaviour change approaches; i.e. those which target individual decision making as the point of change. Individualist approaches are politically popular since they are in line with the neo-liberal direction of UK policy which supports individuals to manage their own behaviour change rather than forcing change through the regulation of individual freedoms and/or industry or other societal structures (Disney et al., 2013; Marsden et al., 2014). As Schwanen et al. (2012) note, *"UK policy now holds that citizens must take their responsibility and modify behaviours voluntarily for substantial change to materialise"* (p. 2). Behaviour change policy recommendation reports such as *Mindspace* (Dolan, Hallsworth, Halpern, King, & Vlaev, 2010) and Defra, 2008, for example, firmly position the responsibility for behaviour change with the individual, as does most social marketing (Raftopoulou & Hogg, 2010), on which Personalised Travel Planning is based (Bonsall, 2009). Indeed, as Marsden et al. (2014) note, most of the popular travel behaviour change approaches, like those described in *Smarter Choices*, focus on the individual and their decisions.

Individualist approaches to behaviour change are largely based on social psychological research which uses theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour (Triandis, 1977) and the Norm-Activation Model (Schwartz, 1977). Such theories share the premise that *"social change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes... which are believed to drive the kinds of behaviour that individuals choose to adopt"* (Shove, 2010, p. 1274). Thus change interventions based on these models focus predominantly on changing attitudes or values and only in some limited cases on altering the range of options available (Marsden et al., 2014). In all cases, individual choice is the object of research and intervention.

The individualist foundation of much contemporary transport-related research (e.g. Anable, 2005; Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003; Bamberg et al., 2011; Gardner, 2009) has been criticised firstly for the limited effectiveness of measures based thereon (see critique of 'soft measures' above). Secondly, there is criticism of the assumption that individuals, rather than societal structures are primarily responsible for the transport problems being addressed. Shove (2010, p. 1280) argues that those 'doing behaviour change' need to consider how institutions structure action by *"making some [actions] very much more likely than others"*, and has advocated Social Practice Theory as an approach to help conceptualise this. The view that individualist approaches fail to *"challenge the systems and processes giving rise to social practices of (perhaps increasingly) unsustainable travel"* (Marsden et al., 2014, p. 73) is also shared by those using socio-technical transition theory (e.g. Geels, 2012) and those exploring innovative urban planning strategies as a means to reduce the need for travel by motor vehicle (e.g. Barbour & Deakin, 2012; Deakin, 2011). In line with these perspectives, Schwanen et al. (2012) consider the concept of 'habit' and unpack it to find individual decision-making as relatively insignificant compared with the automated sets of meanings and connotations (for example of cars with freedom) which are embedded in society.

Despite these valuable contributions, the literature providing alternatives to individualist 'Smarter Choices' type approaches for the promotion of utility cycling is sparse. In this paper, we contribute to this literature by undertaking an analysis based on the recently reinvigorated Social Practice Theory (SPT) (Reckwitz, 2002; SPRG, 2012). Although some analysis of car driving has been published using SPT (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012), to date neither general or cycling-specific