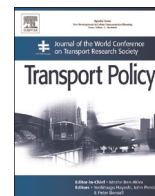




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Commuting practices: New insights into modal shift from theories of social practice



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ABSTRACT

The automobile commute makes an important contribution to carbon emissions but has proven stubbornly resistant to modal shift policy initiatives. In this paper we use theories of social practice to develop insights into why this stubbornness might exist, and what might help accelerate transitions to bus- and cycle-commuting. By analyzing qualitative data about everyday mobility in two UK cities, we examine how the availability of the constituent elements of bus- and cycle-commuting practices is crucial for modal shift to occur, but they are often absent. We also draw attention to time-space contingencies that render recruitment to low-carbon commuting practices more or less likely, including how commuting is sequenced with other social practices and how the sites of these practices interact with the affordances, and spatial infrastructure, of bus- and cycle-commuting. These insights lead us to argue that choice and land use planning focussed policy initiatives designed to invoke modal shift need to coexist in integrated policy configurations with initiatives designed to reshape both mobility and non-mobility practices. This means addressing the structural barriers caused by the lack of availability of the elements that constitute bus- and cycle-commuting, and intervening in the timing and spatiality of a range of social practices so as to reduce the tendency for commuters to have spatial and temporal characteristics that militate against the use of bus and cycle modes.

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1. Introduction

It is now widely recognized that in the context of targets to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, the transport system and its decarbonization has a major role to play (Cohen, 2010; Schwanen et al., 2011). Of course, it is also widely recognized that changing travel behaviors from automobile to lower carbon bus, cycling and walking mobilities is extremely difficult (Cabinet Office, 2009; Whitmarsh and Kohler, 2010). In this context, a now large body of research examines how significant change might be achieved through policy initiatives. Policies informed by rational choice economics, social psychology, and 'nudge' theories have gained particular traction in the UK and other European contexts, fitting with neoliberal logics which encourage the shaping of individuals' choices, rather than direct policy interventions in the conduct of everyday life (Barr and Prillwitz, 2014). Initiatives targeting transport infrastructure have also been important; although it is recognized that investing in transport systems alone is unlikely to lead to rapid moves to low carbon modes (Hickman and

Banister, 2007). Hence, structural interventions that use urban planning to make low carbon travel more feasible, through reductions in travel distance and time in particular (Handy, 1996; Naess, 2012), and policies that render car travel either more difficult or more expensive (Fujii et al., 2001; Thøgersen, 2009) have also been deployed. Such multi-dimensional approaches to policy necessarily take account of the effects of broader societal structures on mobility behavior (Banister, 2008; Marsden et al., 2014).

In this context, this paper builds on growing interest in what a 'theories of social practice' perspective (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996; Shove et al., 2012; Shove and Spurling, 2013; Watson, 2013), hereafter 'practice theory', reveals about both the production of high carbon mobile lives, and about how significant change might occur towards lower carbon, more sustainable mobilities. Using the case of one type of mobility – the commute – and empirical examination of commuting by bus, car and cycle, this paper addresses two main questions. What unique insights can practice theory provide into factors affecting commuting mode, and therefore the uptake of low carbon commuting? What does a practice theory perspective tell us about the configurations of policy (i.e., coexistence and collaborations between different policies) needed to invoke significant shifts to low carbon mobility? In dealing with these questions, two distinctive and interrelated contributions of practice theory are drawn upon and developed.

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First, we show that a practice theoretical perspective stresses the way bus-, car- and cycle commuting are distinctive practices in their own right, involving different social and material conditions than other forms of bus, car and cycle mobility respectively. Through an analysis of the ‘elements’ of different commuting practices, we show that the more social (competence and meaning) aspects especially are tied to the specificities of the practice of commuting by a particular mode. We suggest that societal structures currently constrain the widespread existence of the competencies and meanings that would lead to greater uptake of low carbon commuting practices, necessitating policy that addresses such issues. Second, we demonstrate that practice theory highlights hitherto underemphasised relations between practices, time and space (Schatzki, 2009, 2013; Shove et al., 2012). Empirically examining the sequences of practice of which commuting forms a part suggests that the timing and spatiality of practices sequenced with commuting need better consideration in policy. This involves recognizing the value of land use and transport planning, but also the potential of different forms of intervention which allow the retiming and relocation of sites of practice: policy that extends beyond concerns with transport *per se*, and which considers the influence of factors such as educational, leisure, shopping and healthcare practices on modal choice for commuting (Spurling et al., 2013). Together, these two insights point towards a more holistic approach to low carbon mobility policy. This involves policy configurations which in part exploit already recognized strategies but in more integrated ways. However, developing new policies that target the unique competencies and meanings of low carbon commuting, and the timing and spacing of practices that generate demand for travel, is also important. Towards the end of the paper we, therefore, present a spectrum of policy interventions that holistic policy configurations might include.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we consider existing literature on travel behavior and behavior change, and transport policy approaches towards commuting modal choice. In the subsequent section we identify how a practice theory informed analysis provides new insights into commuting. The second half of the paper, following an explanation of our qualitative methodology and methods, is structured around two empirical sections that in turn identify: the practices of car-, bus- and cycle-commuting and the elements brought together through their performance, and; the spatial and temporal contingencies that affect recruitment to bus- and cycle-commuting practices. The penultimate section of the paper draws out these insights’ relevance for policies to promote sustainable behavior change and lower carbon mobility and we conclude by reflecting on their implications for policy (re)configurations.

2. Modal shift and low carbon travel policy

Informed by early research designed to forecast demand through modeling travel behavior (Ortúzar, 1994) and assess the economic rationality of transport infrastructure investments, a foundational body of transport policy rests on an understanding of travel as a utility-maximizing behavior, with rational choice models (Gardner and Abraham, 2007) helping predict responses to particular policy interventions. Such work has inspired a vast array of elaborations and critiques, with collections such as those edited by Banister et al. (2013) and van Wee et al. (2013) offering comprehensive overviews of perspectives on what influences how people travel, and the implications for policy. Here we focus on two commonly acknowledged prime influences on travel behavior, given their relevance to the insights provided by practice theory and the impossibility of comprehensively reviewing all of the different literatures: a) perceptions of and attitudes towards costs,

the value of time, and transport modes themselves, and; b) the physical environment (and transport infrastructures) within which these choices are made. Of course, this means taking account of what the literature tells us about the recursive relationship between the two, the latter potentially influencing the former, e.g. as situational influences, and vice-a-versa (Klößner and Blöbaum, 2010).

In terms of perceptual and attitudinal influences on travel behavior, ‘situational factors’ such as cost and travel time (Noland and Polak, 2002), beliefs, norms, values and attitudes (Heinen and Handy, 2012), and the effects of altruistic or egotistic attitudes (Heinen et al., 2011) have been incorporated into models, and also compared and contrasted with approaches such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the norm-activation model (Schwartz, 1977). More recently the Comprehensive Action Determination Model (Klößner and Blöbaum, 2010) combines “intentional, normative, situational, and habitual influences” (574) and concludes that not only attitudes but constraints and habit are at least as important as active choice (or norms or deliberation), confirming that changing habits can activate modal shift (Verplanken and Orbell, 2003).

In light of such models, a range of transport policy initiatives have been developed which seek to change attitudinal and habitual influences on travel behavior, often together (Fujii and Kitamura, 2003), with habit change viewed as a more permanent form of attitudinal shift (although see Schwanen et al., 2012 on the complexities of the links between attitudes and habits, and the way policies change one, another or both). Interventions in infrastructure designed to remove choices, e.g. through road closure (Fujii et al., 2001), increased pricing of car parking (Thøgersen, 2009) or congestion (Shiftan and Golani, 2005) etc. have played some role, but ‘soft’ interventions designed to influence or ‘nudge’ choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) have become more prevalent in recent years, these not changing the alternatives available or their costs, but seeking to raise awareness of already existing low carbon possibilities and promote their use through (often personalized) marketing. Such approaches seek to ‘voluntarily’ (Cairns et al., 2008) change behavior, with smarter choices (Barr and Prillwitz, 2014), sustainable travel town (Sloman et al., 2010), and Personalized Travel Planning initiatives (Bamberg et al., 2011) exemplifying this. Such approaches have grown in popularity as they are politically palatable, because they fit neo-liberal agendas of choice (Jones et al., 2011; Marsden et al., 2014; Pykett, 2012). Recent assessments of such voluntary behavior change policies suggest that there is disagreement over their effectiveness (Bonsall, 2009; Brög et al., 2009; Chatterjee and Bonsall, 2009). However, they are a central plank of UK and many European policies promoting low carbon travel.

It is, though, known that “individualistic, rational paradigms fall short on understanding certain complexities of travel behavior” (Carrasco and Farber, 2014: 1). Whilst not completely discounting the kind of policy approaches outlined above, a growing body of writing has called for recognition of how social (Lin and Wang, 2014) and spatial and temporal (Yoon et al., 2014) contexts also influence travel behavior and could be addressed through policy. Revealing the importance of spatial and temporal factors, the activity-based approach (ABA) (Axhausen and Gärling, 1992; Jones et al., 1983; Kitamura, 1988; McNally and Rindt, 2008; Shiftan, 2000) highlights the ‘derived demand’ for travel as people access and accomplish activities. This approach helped to move transport policy from a ‘predict and provide’ mode to demand management (McNally and Rindt, 2008) in which a focus on temporal and spatial constraints features center stage, with “where and when the activities can be carried out and how they may be scheduled” (Algers et al., 2005: 767) becoming recognized as fundamental to producing travel patterns. The intellectual roots

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