Exploring the Practice of Cycling

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Introduction

This note summarises the discussions held at a meeting of a sub-group of the Social Change/Climate Change working part at the Institute of Civil Engineers, London on 16th November 2009. The broad aim of the meeting was to explore cycling as a social practice and to consider potential methodologies for its further study.

Cycling was selected as a relevant practice for study under the auspices of the working party because transport currently generates around a quarter of the UKs CO_2 emissions and is the only sector where emissions levels are currently rising. Within this, cycling represents one of the most efficient forms of transport available, yet cycling levels declined dramatically in the post-war period having levelled off at around 5bn km/yr in 1970 (from 24bn in 1949). Reversing this trend should therefore be central to attempts to cut CO_2 emissions from transport. Further, and with regards to social change, patterns of cycling throughout the UK are idiosyncratic. Certain cities e.g. York and Cambridge have quite high levels of cycling (18 and 15% of all journeys, respectively) whilst other, often similar places have much lower levels. On a national level, despite their similar climates, in the UK less than 2% of all journeys are made by bike, compared to 27% in the Netherlands.

The specific aims of this cycling sub-group meeting were therefore to use social practice theory as an attempt to understand these cycling patterns and to devise new methodologies for the study and promotion of cycling. In particular, the group aimed to think about cycling in the context of individuals' daily routines (daily path), their life patterns (life path), and also how it is organised more broadly as a social practice within wider socio-technical regimes.

To do this, discussion at the meeting focussed first on reviewing current approaches to promoting cycling in the UK and analysing the models of social change they rest upon. Second, the group attempted to define cycling as a social practice before, third, clarifying a set of research questions and beginning to think about potential methodologies for studying it further. It is here that we call for input from other working party members and we hope to develop this at the working party meeting in January 2010. This note is organised broadly to follow the contours of the discussion.

1. Current approaches to promoting cycling
Based on the expertise and experience of the discussants, current approaches to promoting cycling in the UK were summarised as follows:

i. *Build more cycle lanes and paths*: All Highway Authorities are obliged to produce 5-year Local Transport Plans which must incorporate better measurement and promotion of cycling. Within these, the predominant approach to promoting cycling is simply the provision of more cycle paths.

ii. *Provide cycle training for children*: There is a national 'Cycle Awareness Training' scheme designed to give children the skills to cycle safely. Very limited training is available for adults.

iii. *Incorporate cycling into travel plans*: Initiatives such as Sustrans' 'TravelSmart', the 'Cycling Cities and Towns Programme' and the 'Smarter Choices' programme, are designing travel plans that promote cycling for towns, schools, workplaces and even at the level of individuals. This is a relatively marginal activity, but incorporates such things as cycle to work week, cyclists breakfasts, the provision of better infrastructure e.g. showers for cyclists, and the tax-free bike purchase scheme, all as means to incentivise cycling.

Based on this review, the group analysed the implicit theories of social change these approaches rested upon. First, it was thought that the provision of cycling paths was a kind of 'technofix' solution. It assumes that people do not cycle due to a lack of adequate facilities and therefore the provision of more cycle lanes, closer to people's homes, schools and workplaces will serve a latent demand to cycle more. Second, the provision of cycling training to children, particularly awareness of how to cycle safely on roads, presumes a current lack of such skills and that cycling on roads is unsafe and demands a particular level of competence. Third, the provision of incentives (and removal of 'barriers') to cycling as part of travel plans at various scales, assumes that individuals are currently making more or less rational choices not to cycle, and therefore that if cycling can be made into a better offer, more will rationally choose to do it.

Overall, all of these strategies were viewed as top-down approaches that assume that once policy makers have provided facilities and incentives, and removed various 'barriers', cycling rates will respond and rise accordingly as more individuals choose to get on their bikes. Further, this approach was thought to isolate cycling from its broader context. For example, it separates cycling from other modes of transport and neglects their inter-relations. It also shuts cycling off from other aspects of daily routines and activities such as where people work, or what they are cycling to etc. The group considered these to be potentially critical omissions.

In these respects, the group summarised current approaches to promoting cycling as based on a reductive, deterministic and linear (i.e. cause-effect) model of social change. In particular, it was felt that such an approach neglected the cyclists own point of view, the 'view from the saddle'. To exemplify this, the groups emphasised that even though most Local Travel Plans espouse a

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hierarchy of pedestrians, then cyclists and public transport users, and finally motorists, various design rules and laws mean that the provision of new cycle paths and facilities is designed around existing roads. In this respect they do not necessarily represent the 'routes that cyclists want'. Here, the group felt that despite a discursive or rhetorical shift in policy towards the promotion of cycling, underlying this was a rationality that continues to enshrine the private car as king of the road.

2. Understanding cycling as a social practice

To begin to address this, the group then attempted to conceive of cycling more broadly as a social practice. Social practice theory, although there is no single unified approach, broadly contends that everyday life is divided into culturally recognisable blocks (e.g. cooking, working, playing football, cycling) called practices. It suggests that rather than focussing on individuals and their attitudes and values, or on infrastructure provision, in isolation, these should be understood as only elements within particular social practices. It is the combination and inter-relationships of specific elements that makes practices, and this should be taken as the key unit of analysis in the study of society.

Crucially, such an approach emphasises the complex and non-linear nature of the evolution of practices and bundles thereof. It notes that they are situated within, supported by, but also constitutive of broader 'socio-technical regimes' (Rip and Kemp 1998[1]). Such an observation implies that as long as the regime – comprising material artefacts, forms of knowledge and skills, rules and laws all of which are embedded in infrastructures and institutions – is left unaddressed on the whole, attempts to change practices by appealing to individuals or by providing new services are likely to have little effect. Or at least little of their intended effect.

Images	Stereotypes of the "good or bad cyclist"; Social norms regarding transport use; Personal identity; Perceptions of weather and comfort; Perceptions of time and convenience; Morality and the environment; Fun; Perceptions of air quality; Perceptions of safety and crime, fear; Health and fitness; Media representations of cyclists etc.
Skills	Basic cycling ability; Cycling in traffic skills; Local geographical knowledge – geographical; Local understanding s– norms, expectations, rules and when to break them; Navigation and map reading skills; Bike maintenance skills etc.
Stuff	Bikes; Helmets; Clothing, Gear; Locks; Lights; Bags; Panniers; Other things you have to carry e.g. shopping; Puncture repair kit; Maintenance tools; Cycle paths; Roads; Cars, buses and other road users; Traffic lights; Junctions; Roundabouts; Road signs etc.

Table 1: Elements of Cycling Practices

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[1] RIP, A. & KEMP, R. (1998) Technological Change. IN RAYNER, S. & MALONE, E. S. (Eds.) *Human Choices and Climate Change (Volume 2).* Columbus, Ohio, Battelle Press.

In order to assess cycling as a practice, the group use Shove and Pantzar's (2005)[2] empirically useful understanding of practices as assemblages of images/meanings, skills/competences and stuff/artefacts. Table 1 illustrates just some of the many and various components of cycling the group identified.

As table 1 illustrates, the practice of cycling comprises multiple elements that can combine and re-combine in a large number of configurations. Critically, it was felt that current approaches to promoting cycling fail to capture this richness and diversity.

At the same time, this analysis helped the group to observe that cycling cannot be easily separated from its broader spatial and temporal setting, or from other surrounding practices. For example, it was recognised that cycling as much as representing a practice performed for its own sake, served to underpin other practices e.g. cycling to work, cycling to the shops. Further, that cycling occurs within a specific geographical area, described as a 'doughnut around your house/workplace/school' in which journeys under a certain distance are deemed too short to cycle, where journeys over a certain distance are deemed too far. Moreover, each individual cyclists' doughnut is not a perfect circle, but is distorted by other geographical features such as main roads, rivers/canals, safe or unsafe areas and the provision of services such as cycle paths or shopping centres. In this respect, the practice of cycling was recognised as relational – as depending on other surrounding practices.

Finally, given these observations, the group noted that currently, cycling as a practice might also be described as divided. On the one hand, and on one scale, there is the practice of the individual cyclist comprising the elements reviewed in table 1 above. On the other hand, there is the practice of the cycling policy maker or programme manager who conceives of cycling as a quite different kind of practice, operating on wholly different temporal and spatial scales. Here, the group noted that the policy makers view of cycling currently appears to have more power (at least in terms of budgets, planning decisions etc) whilst the 'view from the saddle' continues to be neglected and marginalised.

In summary, the groups discussions about cycling as a practice suggested that it should be seen as complex (comprising multiple elements), relational (it should not be seen as separate from other practices or from its broader geographical context), and as divided (across multiple scales). Such a situation poses very significant challenges for further research on cycling.

3. Researching Cycling

[2] SHOVE, E. & PANTZAR, M. (2005) Consumers, Producers and Practices: Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking. *Journal of Consumer Culture,* 5**,** 43-64.

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These discussions led the group to define a series of more precise questions for the study of cycling as a practice, designed to get beyond the current narrow view of cycling. Specifically these were:

1. What is cycling as a practice? Where do its boundaries lie in relation to other aspects of everyday life and broader transport policy, especially given that cycling is often seen to underpin other practices rather than being a practice in itself?
2. To what extent and how does cycling intermesh with other everyday practices? How does this compare with other modes of transport? How might this link be improved and with what implications for increasing cycling rates?
3. How can the dynamics of cycling practices be captured across multiple temporal and spatial scales, and what are the methodological implications of this?

All of these questions require further thought as well as empirical investigation. The group therefore invite the wider working party to contribute to investigating them and intend to pilot some activities at the January working party meeting with this end in mind.

To close the group's discussions, the third question was taken as a topic and a range of potential methodological approaches were suggested and discussed. Again, we welcome further input from the wider working party on this issue. The methodologies discussed in the group are listed and described below:

- *Perfect or Worst Cyclist and 'What kind of cyclist are you?' exercise*: Designed to be incorporated into interview or focus group discussions, this exercise attempts to understand the images and meanings that cyclists and non-cyclists operate with. It asks them to describe their own what kind of cyclist they are, or what different kinds of cyclists they are aware of, and how this has changed over time, as well as asking them to describe their 'perfect' or 'worst' cyclist.
- *What kind of cycling setting is this?:* This exercise seeks to develop understandings of how cycling fits into specific socio-technical regimes. Again designed to be incorporated into interview of focus group discussions, this exercise involves showing cyclists and non-cyclists pictures or videos of cycling taking place in a range of different settings. They are then asked to describe what different kinds of cycling occur in that setting, how the setting circumscribes the cycling that occurs within it, and how the setting might be changed to promote cycling.
- *Lifecycles of Transport and Moments of change:* This exercise asks individuals to plot how their transport practices have changed throughout their lifetime (similar to the showering exercise conducted in the first working party meeting). At each different point in the lifecycle they are then asked to describe and explain their daily transport/cycling routines. The aim is to understand how different transport modes relate to one another, and how they evolve in relation to other aspects of an individuals daily life. Taking this further, the 'moments of change' exercise

seeks to identify common moments of change across a range of lifecycles (e.g. going to school or university, moving home, having children, getting a new job etc) and design interventions to promote cycling around them.

- *Sensory ethnographies (headcams and 'go alongs'):* Intended to improve understandings of 'the view from the saddle' this approach asks cyclists to describe their thoughts, feelings and sensations as they cycle along their regular cycling routes. The exercise could also be repeated with car drivers or public transport users using the same routes as a means of comparison.

- *Participatory mapping and Qualitative GIS:* This method asks cyclists to plot the routes they regularly cycle and to annotate them with observations they see as significant. It seeks to develop understandings of the broader socio-technical regime in which cycling is embedded by operating at the scale of whole towns or neighbourhoods. Such maps could be annotated by many cyclists, from different areas in order to develop an in-depth view of particular cycling settings. They might also be annotated by policy makers or other key stakeholders for comparison.

- *Representations of cycling:* A more conventional discourse analysis of current cycling policies and programmes or descriptions of cycling in the mainstream media could be conducted to shed light on cycling as a policy practice. This could be compared with cyclists self-descriptions (gathered through any of the above methods) for comparison.

These methodological approaches represent tentative suggestions that require significant refinement. The intention of all of them, however, is to begin to see cycling as a practice, and as something that is broader than currently conventional approaches to its promotion allow.