1. Crossed Perspectives

Changing behaviour for a low-carbon future

Between Matt Watson (Géographe)
And Frédéric De Coninck (Sociologue)

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British geographer Matt Watson and French sociologist Frédérick De Coninck discuss the role of practices in reducing our carbon footprint. Can taking into account people’s daily

constraints more seriously be the key to developing more effective policies and hastening the transition towards low-carbon mobility?

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01. To what extent is it useful to look at our daily practices as a way of understanding how we organise our physical movement and, more generally, the way we live today?

Matt Watson

How we move about is too often presented as a matter either of personal choice (amenable to shifting through information or incentive) or as structured necessity (‘I have no choice but to drive’). Thinking about mobility in terms of practices is a means of escaping this dualism between a focus either on individual agency or social structure. Instead we can focus on the practices of mobility such as cycling, driving or passengering, and the ways in which those practices relate to others such as of working, playing and shopping. Through this the ways in which we accomplish mobility emerges as an outcome of collective routines, norms, meanings, competencies, technologies and purposes, transpiring amidst the organisation of space including infrastructures and built environments. Such understanding helps to account for the obduracy of unsustainable and unhealthy ways of doing mobility, and promises to illuminate diverse means of intervening to shift such patterns.

F. D

This dichotomy underlines the difficulty facing public authorities today when it comes to taking action: either it’s far too general and uses moralising statements, overly-complex, all-encompassing norms, and facility-oriented policy, or it’s far too individually-centred, via fiscal incentives and taxes. Nowadays things are moving through networks of inter-connected knowledge, virtual communities and connected services that are neither macro-social, nor individual, but somewhere between the two.

Frédéric De Coninck

Observing routines - time-dependent strategies individuals and families use on a repeated basis - is a good way to understand modal choices. These routines are often the result of

complicated decisions that reflect the contradictory constraints people have to juggle in their everyday lives. They have to cope with time constraints that are sometimes incompatible (work, child rearing, opening hours of shops and services, leisure time, rush hours, etc.), and at the same time organise their schedule in a way that works for the other people they live with. And they don't find the best solution straight away; it's something that only happens over time. But satisfactory arrangements do eventually emerge, become fixed and are transformed into regular routines. But if we don't understand the roots of these routines, there is no way we can understand why our daily lives are organised as they are.

M. W

I am in agreement that looking at daily travel routines is only a start; we do indeed need to follow the roots that give rise to those routines. So we need to seek to understand the way that social norms, spaces, technologies, values and more get negotiated together into people's daily lives to make shared patterns of action, including recognising how travel routines are constituted by the piecing together of the wide range of other routines that comprise peoples' days.

02. This approach by looking at practices seemingly indicates that there is a certain degree of permanence in people's behaviour. Is there a reason to believe our mobilities could changed at some point in the future?

Matt Watson

Practice theory's emphasis on themes of convention and habit can obscure the ways in which it provides distinctive means of accounting for change. Rather than assume permanence, it starts from an understanding of all social relations as essentially mutable, meaning that we need to account for the remarkable continuities of individual lives, of institutions and of patterns social order. Recent work in the field has sought to develop and demonstrate the inherent capacity of practice theory to account for change and inform intervention, including in relation to personal mobility. For example, by understanding the diverse shifting relations that underlie the decline of cycling and the rise of car driving in the mid-20th century northern Europe we can more usefully understand the contemporary increases in cycling in some places, and better inform interventions to enable change more broadly.

F. D

What becomes clear from these studies is that practices remain fairly stable and resistant to change, at least in the short term, given that they are the result of different adjustments that are not questioned on a daily basis. Major changes occur when the family organisation changes, in other words moving, the birth of a child, becoming a couple or separating, illness, changing jobs or unemployment. It would be interesting to study what happens at these times in more detail, because it is at such key turning points that things change.

Frédéric De Coninck

The individuals' and families' lifestyles are rigidly set in the short term, but adaptable over the long term. It's especially useful to ask people about times in their lives when a particular event caused them to rethink their arrangements (moving home, career change, birth of a child, a child becoming independent, separation or divorce, etc.). At that point, what they're in a position to manage and can change (control over working hours, the means of transport available, help from family members or neighbours, etc.) become clear, as do the constraints that limit their choices (forced schedules, people to look after, geographical distances, limited financial resources, etc.). Environmental considerations tend to have little impact in the short term, but people do sometimes mention them, for example, when they talk about their choice of a new place to live that enables them, for example, to use public transport more often.

M. W

Points of life transition do indeed show the malleability of individual and household routines. But we need to move still further beyond the question's focus on current routines. Some historical depth shows that at a more collective level, taken for granted routines are continually shifting. Analysis of past changes to collective ways of doing can give clues to future possibilities of change.

03. In the context of climate change and the aim of moving towards a more sustainable society, what kinds of action could be taken in terms of mobility following this approach? Who might be involved in driving such actions?

Matt Watson

First, practice theory accounts for the profoundly limited effects of interventions based on informing people to make ‘better’ choices. Mostly, the way people do mobility is structured into the ways their lives are organised in space and time leaving limited space for choosing to travel otherwise. Second, it can illuminate different means of intervention, such as seeking to normalise lower carbon means of mobility, as can be seen in a few places in the UK where cycling has become increasingly normal; or by shifting the social meaning of higher carbon modes of mobility so they are relatively less acceptable. A focus on practices also illuminates how mobility is largely a means of coordination between other practices – getting from one site of doing specific things (say home) to another site (say work) with an acceptable amount of time and trouble. Interventions to make mobility more sustainable might therefore better look to intervene in the practices which engender mobility. Ultimately, though, shifting personal mobility to a meaningfully sustainable state means a degree of transformation which entails change throughout the system of mobility, requiring changes to practices also in planning offices, company board rooms and government ministries, as well as on the roads.

F. D

The point of departure of this theory is that commuters are not virtuous (and why should they be?). Above all they are seeking solutions that will save them time and make their lives easier. Innovation in this area is still too top-down. It's only by working with passenger groups to develop comfortable solutions that the constraints can be dealt with. Such acceptable solutions are not just mobility solutions. They can involve timetable management, teleworking options, new urban resources, etc.

Frédéric De Coninck

There are some structural realities that are still fairly difficult to change. Big cities, for example, allow for dense public transport networks. However, at the same time, these networks also lead to high housing costs in central areas, which are a major driver of urban sprawl. One easy incentive would be to give people access (either by phone or via the web) to a clear picture of their energy consumption. Today, the vast majority of people underestimate the (energy) cost of their transport and have only a vague idea about how to control their consumption at home and the main elements of their carbon footprints. This is holding back the development of more local, shorter-distance lifestyles.

M. W

It is easy to imagine how people could be better informed about the carbon implications of their travel. But as we have both argued, how people travel results from how whole range of different things are made to relate together in the context of people's lives. Modes of travel are consequently not very elastic in responding to price, and less to changes in knowledge of effects on climate. In the light of how routines come about, action needs to be framed more broadly.

Matt Watson

Géographe

Matt Watson is lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Sheffield. He has conducted research in the areas of sustainability, governing, technology and consumption.

Frédéric De Coninck

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