

1. Videos

Changing practices: a key role for temporality and spatiality - James Faulconbridge

By
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Governments around the world are looking at ways of encouraging people to walk, cycle or use public transport, rather than to drive. James Faulconbridge of Lancaster University talks about new research that suggests temporal and spatial issues also need to be considered.

In the context of ambitions to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, it is now widely recognised that getting people out of the car and into lower carbon forms of transport – on the bus, walking or cycling – is an ambition that many governments should try and fulfil. However, it is also recognised that making such changes is incredibly difficult. In light of this, a whole range of different tactics has been used to encourage people to get out of the car. Sometimes this involves incentivising. So, for example, making people aware of the health benefits of cycling and encouraging them to choose cycling over driving. In other cases, it involves disincentivising the use of the car, so this can involve increasing the cost of car parking or closing roads to make it quicker or easier to cycle. There's much debate about the success of these kinds of tactics. But what's clear is that if we want to make the radical reductions in carbon emissions that many governments wish to make, the policies taken so far are not going to have the effects we need. Why is this? There's a whole range of explanations, but one of the important discussions in the literature is the role of a wider set of structural factors that shape everyday life and lead to us using the car rather than walking, cycling or catching the bus.

The three factors: practices, spatiality, temporality

In our research, we've looked at one particular set of factors which relates to the way that everyday life is structured around a series of temporal and spatial rhythms and routines that have a big effect on whether people feel able to - or whether they want to and ultimately whether do - give up the car and move into lower carbon forms of transport. So in our research, the first thing we considered was spatial structures or rhythms. So these relate to the different practices that we take part in, as part of everyday life. So, this could be where we work, where our children go to school, and where we do the shopping. And in particular, what matters here is – as land use planning has told us for some time – the distance between the different sites. And, as a result, the implications for the kinds of transport we need to take part in everyday practices. The second thing we explored was the temporal rhythms or structures. This relates to the timing of those practices and in particular the sequencing of practices – one after the other, and the implications that has for how long we have to travel between the different sites. So, how long do we have to get to work after we've dropped the kids off at school? All of this matters because the combination – and it's the combination that really does matter – of distance and time has implications for the likelihood of someone to giving up the car, and choosing to work, cycle or take the

bus.

Factors in the modal shift

So, in our analysis we focus on three interrelated factors that really matter when we consider a modal shift to lower carbon forms of transport. First, the practices that form everyday life: what are they and why do they matter to people? Second, the location of these practices. Geographically, where are they located and what is the relationship between the different sites of practice that make up everyday life in terms of distance? Thirdly, it's timing and temporality. To what extent are the timings of these temporalities fixed? And to what extent are the timings of the practices sequenced, one after another? These are powerful influences on people's choice of whether to drive, catch the bus, cycle or walk. So, drawing on the ideas of Ted Schatzki, we call these the timespaces of everyday life and the timespaces of the practices of everyday life that have to be considered when thinking about the possibilities of moving to lower forms of carbon transport. So let's consider an example of why these temporal and spatial factors matter.

Commuting practices in Brighton and Lancaster

In our research, we looked at commuting in two English cities, in Brighton and Lancaster. And what emerged from the research is that the commute is a much more complex journey than we often assume, so it doesn't simply involve going from home to work. Commutes often involve going from home, dropping the kids off at school, going to work, leaving work and then going shopping, picking the kids up, going to a leisure club and then finally returning home. In our analysis, what we considered was the extent to which the geography of those different practices – so the sites at which those practices happen and the temporalities - have an influence on the extent to which people are likely to walk, cycle or catch the bus. So, what matters then is a combination of the distance between the different sites of practice, but also the timing of those practices. So, for example, the distance between home, school, place of work, place of shopping, etc. are all important, but on their own they're not the only factor. And we often found that actually distance was not the key factor in determining whether people walk, cycle or catch the bus.

Understanding the combination of spatial and temporal structures

What also matters is that the distances between those different sites of practice are connected to particular temporal rhythms. So we often find that school start and end times are fixed, and often people have fixed start and end times for work. What really matters then is the amount of time available to cover the distance between the different sites of practice. And what we found often is that people feel the time available is too small to allow for the additional cost in time of walking, cycling or catching the bus – so people feel squeezed for time and in a rush to travel between different sites of practice. So this combination of the spatial and temporal really matters, and it's understanding these rhythms and the implications for the possibilities of using lower-carbon modes that is really important and at the heart of the analysis that we have done.

The implications of the findings

So what are the implications of the findings of our research? Well, clearly they highlight the importance of taking the spatial and temporal rhythms of everyday life and how they relate to the practices that make up everyday life as a key consideration in attempts to reduce the amount of car-based travel. But what might that look like in policy terms? Well, in terms of the spatial, land-use planning has told us for a long time that reorganising the sites of practice can be a powerful way to increase walking, cycling

and catching the bus. But it's also acknowledged that land-use planning is glacially slow. It takes generations to build new cities, to re-construct the built environment. So how might we do things that have a more rapid effect? Well, because we focused on practices in our research, we suggest that the timing and spatiality of practices – and policy that could intervene in that – might be a fruitful way to move forward.

Thinking about spatiality

What could that look like? First of all, thinking about spatiality. Is it possible for example to intervene through education policy and health policy to ensure that the site of education and healthcare is always located in proximity to the home, so as to reduce the distances between home and school, and home and healthcare? Now that might be radical, of course, because it requires, for example, a change to the idea that free choice in education and healthcare is a priority. It also goes against centralisation agendas, where large schools and large hospitals are the priority. But it would certainly have a big impact on the possibility of walking and cycling or taking the bus when travelling to partake in those practices.

All about timing

But as our research has shown you can't just think about spatiality, you also have to think about the timing of practices. So could policies intervene to re-time practices in ways that encourage walking, cycling and catching the bus? So, for example, could education policy ensure that school start times become flexible, and couple that to work policy which mandates flexible start and end times for all workers, apart from where there's an extremely strong business case for why that's not possible? Such combinations of less temporal fixity and greater flexibility could reduce the need to rush from one site of practice to another and could create greater potential for people to feel less hassled, less stressed and more able to take the time to walk, cycle or catch the bus when moving between these sites of practice. What we think such interventions could enable is the creation of 'enabling time-space matrices', so enabling spatial and temporal orientations of everyday life that encourage walking, cycling or catching the bus. And to do so would require a whole spectrum of policy interventions that in different ways intervene in different practices in terms of temporality and spatiality. All with the aim of creating these enabling time-space matrices that are more conducive to lower-carbon forms of travel. Such an approach could be more or less radical in terms of the interventions made - but would certainly re-orientate policy away from a focus on incentivising or disincentivising. That may work, but could be coupled to a more integrated approach whereby we consider how these structural barriers associated with temporality and spatiality factor into the apparent reluctance of people to move out of driving the car and into lower-carbon forms of transport.

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Change in practices
- Proximity

Policies

- Time policies

- Public transport
- Cycling & Walking
- Cities & Territories

Theories

- Concepts
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His research focuses on business services including architecture, accounting, advertising, executive search and law. He has studied the role of mobility in business service organisations, and its relationship to different digital technologies.

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