

Commentary for the New Zealand Geographer — as part of the special issue ‘New research on cycling in New Zealand’, edited by Mike Lloyd and Kirsty Wild

Cycling and how to study it: looking at the New Zealand case

Abstract

Cycling has the potential to play a key role in developing environmentally and socially sustainable cities and neighbourhoods in New Zealand. Realising this potential requires understanding how different groups within New Zealand society relate to existing patterns of cycling, and how they might respond to the introduction of a range of new cycling oriented infrastructures. Commenting on articles from the special issue ‘New research on cycling in New Zealand’, this article argues that human geographers and other social scientists have much to offer policy makers and planners in understanding how a transition to more people oriented, sustainable, urban mobility systems might be fostered.

Key Words

Mobility; cycling; sustainability, New Zealand

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I'm from Palmerston North. Its streets used to be chock full of kids cycling to and from school. Not just high school students, students from intermediates and primaries too. Girls and boys. Cycling wasn't really something many adults did, but it was ordinary. The entrance to the Lido — the city's 60s California modernist homage to water sports — had a large bike park at its entrance; rammed on hot summer afternoons. My high school had parking for 500 bikes, when school got out finding your bike amongst the mass of 10 speeds, mountain bikes, and cruisers was no easy thing. Later, when I was at Massey University, students cycled to lectures, to the pub, to each other's flat parties. Cycling isn't ordinary anymore. Things changed some time in the 1990s. Cars got cheaper. People decided that cycling on roads was dangerous, certainly not something for children or teenagers. Following the dogged campaign of Palmerston North mother Rebecca Oaten — whose son had suffered severe head injuries in a cycling accident — bike helmets became mandatory. Cycling slowly turned into a leisure activity; something done on the weekend — as exercise or recreation — rather than being a practical, economical, way of getting about. The grassy area where the Lido's bike park once was has been carved up for car parking. A big chunk of my old high-school's bike park has been turned over to parking for senior students. Massey built an enormous car park at the back of campus so students had somewhere to park. Those who cycle have morphed into a tiny, eccentric, minority.

That cycling used to be something that more people did in New Zealand, and yet at the same time is something that has become an increasingly popular leisure activity, is something of a paradox. Cycling is simultaneously an outdated technology that has been overtaken by newer, faster, more comfortable ways of moving about, and potentially a key mobility practice that might help in building healthier, more equitable, environmentally sustainable cities. There is a further paradox. As a growing proportion of New Zealand's population expresses concern for the environmental impact of their consumption decisions, few are prepared to take practical action when it comes to how they move around their cities. For many cycling activists — and indeed many sustainable transport advocates — encouraging people to cycle is obvious and straightforward. We just need to build the right kind of cycling infrastructure — bike lanes, advanced stop lines, and the like — and the benefits and pleasures of cycling will be obvious.

There is robust international evidence that the provision of high quality supporting infrastructure has played a central role in the maintenance and growth of cycling in cities where it is a key transport modality (Oldenziel et al. 2016; Puchler and Buehler 2012). But it doesn't follow that simply building cycling infrastructure leads to more cycling. Cycling — and the question of how people move about their neighbourhoods, towns, and cities — is not just an infrastructural or engineering problem. It is

also a social problem. How people move around cities, whether they walk, drive, use public transit, is enmeshed with the social networks to which they belong and with the social norms of the communities of which they are a part. That mobility is a social problem that needs to be studied in all its social dimensions is an insight central to the articles collected together in the special issue 'New research on cycling in New Zealand'. It matters whether we are talking about Māori, Pākehā, or Pasifika when trying to understand a group's relationship towards cycling. As Jones et al. (2020) stress in 'Cycling among Māori: patterns, influences and opportunities' Whanaungatanga profoundly shapes how Māori approach transport. Mobility choices are intimately bound up with obligations and responsibilities towards whānau; obligations and connections that reach well beyond standard Eurocentric sociological models of the nuclear family. To travel — to be mobile — is to travel with (and often) for others. Cycling as a mode of transport and as a leisure activity — and the infrastructures that support it — needs to be framed in terms that recognise that it is something that is done along with others.

That everyday mobility is something done with others is also central to Thorne et al.'s 'Cycling projects in low income communities: Exploring community perceptions of Te Are Mua — Future streets.' Again we encounter the importance of understanding how people's mobility patterns are shaped by their obligations to others, but also how automobility has come to monopolise many low income people's mobility options in New Zealand. A central argument in favour of cycling as is that it is a low cost mode of transport that — given the right conditions — is suitable for a broad section of the population; young and old, women and men, the physically fit and not so fit. In an abstract sense this is true. However, in urban environments set up for automobiles, owning and maintaining a bicycle may be seen by many as a luxury that can only be thought about once the financial demands of owning an automobile have been met. So, cycling is not only a social problem, it is an economic one too. But it is an economic problem — at the level of individual households and communities — that can only be understood in the context of how economic decisions are framed by the existing social and infrastructural context. For many automobiles are an essential fact of life, a necessity without which family and community life doesn't function. And because of that cycling doesn't register as possible way of moving through and navigating everyday life.

Here is yet another paradox of cycling in New Zealand. Despite the fact that cycling is an inexpensive form of transport it is seen by many as being something that only economically privileged Pākehā people do. Thorne et al. highlight how cycling is seen by Pasifika and Māori communities as something done by other people — not by them. This points towards the complicated politics of cycling infrastructure provision. Standing inside of the world of cycling infrastructure advocacy — or indeed the world of sustainable transport planning — the building of infrastructures for cycling is straightforwardly a progressive act. It isn't necessarily apparent as such

for many who aren't in a position to take advantage of it. Rather it feels like the wrong kind of infrastructure in the wrong place.

Infrastructure is only realised as infrastructure at a personal or community level when it can be put to use; or put another way, infrastructures only become infrastructures through practice (Star 1999). The key challenge in moving towards more people — as opposed to traffic — oriented neighbourhoods is how to plan for a transition in how people move about their cities and neighbourhoods, whilst also recognising the immediate needs and views of those who live in them; especially in neighbourhoods that have been poorly served by infrastructural planning in the past. Cycle lanes, for example, can feel like an imposition, or worse a kind of colonisation where outside experts come in and redesign and rebuild in ways that feel alien to existing communities. Indeed, some North American researchers argue that sustainable transport infrastructure acts as the advance guard of gentrification (Hoffmann 2016; Stehlin 2019). Perhaps. But Thorne et al. also suggest that the arrival of new cycling oriented infrastructure might also be viewed as a demonstration that an otherwise neglected neighbourhood is being valued — the challenge is in finding ways of working with communities that respect their values whilst not simply taken the existing system of automobile oriented infrastructure as given.

Before we go about building new cycling infrastructures it is also worth reflecting on how existing infrastructures are used for cycling. Thorne et al. highlight how much everyday cycling in Māngere takes place on sidewalks. Interventions to encourage more people to cycle need to work with and respond to these popular infrastructural interpretations, not least because they point to the de facto ways communities understand street infrastructure; that, in Māngere's case, streets are for motor vehicles and very competent cyclists and sidewalks for everything else. What counts as infrastructure at a practical level isn't defined by simply highway rules or transport engineers. It is also defined by wider community norms and imaginaries (Latham and Wood 2015; Larkin 2013). In Palmerston North the decline in cycling had little to do with changes in infrastructural provision — there is now arguably more attention to road based cycling infrastructure than when I lived in the city in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather a key transformation has been in how people understood cycling — it shifted from being a sensible, taken-for-granted, near ubiquitous, way for children and young people to get around, to something fraught with risk.

It might also be useful to think beyond the idea of infrastructure as simply the hard material stuff out on city streets. We might think about ways of shifting popular imaginaries of cycling — adopting strict liability laws, for example, might help assert cyclists' right to use the carriageway as equals with motor vehicles. Accommodating people cycling in groups, as both Jones et al.'s and Thorne's et al.

highlight, might make cycling more attractive for many — especially for Māori and Pasifika communities. New kinds of infrastructures might also be important in pushing cities towards less automobile centric mobility systems. Infrastructures such as dockless bike or e-scooter rental systems have the potential to transform urban mobility systems in all sorts of ways. Curl and Fitt's (2020) article gives an initial overview of how dockless e-scooters have been taken up in Auckland and Christchurch. The promise of new platform based micro-mobility technologies is that they will introduce a range of sustainable mobility modalities — cycling amongst them — to new demographics of users. There isn't much evidence of this in Curl and Fitt's survey. Rather e-scooter users tracks quite closely existing patterns of cycling use. This doesn't mean that dockless e-scooter or bike schemes don't have potential. It does point to the need for active and informed interventions by public policy makers if such new platform based public mobility infrastructures are to contribute any transition towards more sustainable and equitable mobility systems in New Zealand's cities and towns.

To finish up, it's useful to reflect on the tools human geographers and other social scientists should use to study everyday urban mobility in New Zealand. The four articles in the special issue each adopt different methodological approaches. Jones et al.'s discussion is based on a careful summarising of existing research on Māori and cycling. Curl and Fitt use an on-line survey. Thorne et al. used a combination of 'key informant' interviews and focus group material. Lloyd's (2020) article used naturalistic video material to demonstrate the usefulness of thinking with ethnomethodology. Of the articles, Lloyd's approach perhaps is the most unfamiliar and challenging to human geographers. It argues that to understand what is going on on New Zealand's streets — as cyclists interact with automobiles, pedestrians, and others — researchers need to attend to how such interactions are structured in naturally occurring situations. Were we to adopt a strong ethnomethodological stance, this would preclude us from also for reaching for more conventional social scientific tools such as interviews. There is no reason, however, to demand methodological purity. Finding ways to transition the mobility systems of New Zealand's cities and neighbourhoods away from automobility and towards more people oriented modes of movement is going to take every trick in the social scientific toolbox.

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