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Practice interventions and Mobile Utopias: Workshop methods to make different long term transport futures.

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Introduction

What methods are currently used to vision and plan for transport futures? What do they include and what do they exclude? And, how might they be done differently? In this piece we explore these questions. To do so we draw on Timms et al's (2014) account of 'imagineering' mobility in contemporary planning practice. Addressing the limitations which Timms et al highlight, we describe two workshop methods that we have been involved in over the past two years which take distinctive approaches with different starting points. The first looks at intervening in mobility-practice bundles and starts with the present. The second develops utopian everyday lives (i.e. everyday life in an imagined future place), and speculates the mobilities which such everyday lives would desire, require and produce. We present some of the outcomes of these workshop methods and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses.

In contemporary practice, scenario building is the main method of planning for transportation in the long term (Timms et al, 2014). According to Timms et al (2014) the potential outcomes of approaches which use this method are limited in two key ways. Firstly, such exercises have almost entirely focused on environmental sustainability, this has resulted in images of future transport which lack any nuanced critique of their social ambitions, implications or viability. Secondly, the decline in socially-oriented utopian thinking over the past 20 years means that any overall image of the future societies that transport would be part of remains outside the debate.

We are interested in developing methods that bring one or both these aspects into the frame. In the paragraphs that follow we introduce two different workshops. The first involves Mapping Mobility-Practice bundles. This workshop focuses on the social practices currently connected by transport (Watson, 2012) in participants' lives, how such connections might be different and the professional jurisdictions with the potential to intervene. The second workshop focuses on co-creating 'utopian everyday lives' and imagining the mobilities and infrastructures that such everyday lives would desire, require and produce. Through comparing and contrasting the methods and our experience of them, we comment on the future thinking that each makes possible and their limitations.

Strategic transport planning and everyday futures

Timms et al (2014) argue that strategic transport planning for the long term uses methods which inadvertently overlook the social sustainability and governance aspects of transport futures, and instead focus on aspects of built environment and infrastructure. They take two examples of high profile 'practical' scenario building exercises with a strong transport element, namely Intelligent Infrastructure Futures (IIF) from the Foresight Programme of the UK Office of Science and Technology, and Megacities on the Move from Forum for the Future. They analyse the scenario sets used by these exercises in terms of images of utopia, dystopia, and dystopia avoidance. They do this along three dimensions of the transport system, namely: the mobility of people and goods, physical aspects that facilitate or inhibit such mobility, the system of governance with respect to formulating and implementing transport policy. There are two aspects of their work that we are interested in developing. The first is their claim that social issues have

been treated superficially. The second is their observation that over the past 20 years there has been a decline in utopian thinking.

We agree with the former point, and push it a step further, suggesting that taking account of 'the social' includes looking at the social practices which everyday mobility interconnects. Recent developments in social theories of practice (Watson, 2012; Spurling and McMeekin, 2015; Shove et al., 2015) show that contemporary levels of travel demand should not simply be viewed as non-negotiable, but rather as contingent. Demand is an outcome of social practices and how they become spatially and temporally interconnected across time by transport modes and particular vehicle designs. Demand patterns are not just inevitable but an outcome of everyday and professional practices (Foulds and Jensen, 2014; Jensen, forthcoming) which co-evolve together. As such futuring transportation might focus on the temporal and spatial relationships between social practices, as well as the modes of connection between them: it might proceed by mapping, and then reconfiguring, 'mobility-practice bundles' (Spurling and McMeekin, 2015).

We also think that utopian thinking can be brought together with these ideas, because imagining utopias emphasises the overall societies of which future transport systems will be a part. Importantly it recognises that such societies will most likely be different from today. The value of this includes the ability to identify challenges of equality and diversity, and the potential for opposing desires to be considered – for example desires for fast and slow lifestyles. Imagining utopias might also help to create solutions and ways through these seemingly contradictory issues and futures. The method Timms et al (2014) propose (to separately 'utopianise' three elements of the transport system) overlooks the fact that transport demand is contingent, and directly related to everyday practices and their temporal and spatial interconnections. Our proposal on this is that futuring methods should take as their starting point 'the utopian everyday' and from imagining that, then consider the mobilities and infrastructures of those everyday lives. The utopian everyday is thus not a 'fourth element' in utopianising, but rather the necessary starting point for proceeding along the lines that Timms et al suggest.

Workshop methods for transport futures

We have been involved in developing, facilitating and participating in two different workshops trying out ways of incorporating the social, everyday life aspects of mobility. In the following we present the workshops, their scope and intention, along with some reflections upon carrying them out. Both the workshops conceptualize everyday life as comprised of interconnected social practices, the difference between them is that one begins in the present – real lives and places,- and the other in utopia – 'good place' or 'no place'. The two approaches are described next.

Mapping Mobility-Practice Bundles

The workshop Mapping Mobility-Practice Bundles starts in the present, and workshop participants are asked to go through different stages of mapping their own mobility related practices. A brief introduction is given which offers a conceptual frame of mobility as a (dynamic) matter of 'derived demand'. The introduction reflects on mobility and travel as an outcome of social practices in different ways. The point of departure is that:

"patterns of contemporary travel are influenced... by the practices in which they participate"(Hui, 2013:90).

This is further exemplified, for instance:

“... the shifting character of grocery shopping is inseparable from shifting patterns of personal mobility, with out of town supermarkets co-evolving with patterns of personal car mobility, and with broader restructuring of the temporal rhythms of daily life.” (Watson, 2012: 491).

Building on past work (Spurling et al, 2013; Spurling and McMeekin, 2015), the workshop intends to explore the possibilities of intervening in practices that are currently dependent on mobility in order to change the level, scale and character of current demand.

Moving around is a result of the need to carry out practices related to shopping, working, going to school and so on. The workshop introduction gives examples of how practices (e.g. work) have changed, how configurations between practices (practice-bundles) have changed (e.g. work and family life), and how mobility patterns have changed with it. The introduction also emphasizes how different modes of transportation are connected to different places and situated within particular practice-bundle constellations. For instance, cycling is often associated with cycle lanes. Cycling to work from home requires the possibilities to shower at the workplace (a particular practice-bundle). Driving (by car) would not require that. The workshop participants therefore get introduced to think about places of practices (destinations), infrastructural connections (e.g. roads, cycleways), modes of transportation (e.g. bicycle, car, train) and mobility related practices (showering, shopping, working – but also, as Hui notes yoga and patchwork quilting).

After the introduction, the workshop participants draw maps based on their own mobility patterns (see Figure 1), and reflect on which practices are connected through mobility, and why these practices are carried out the way they are.

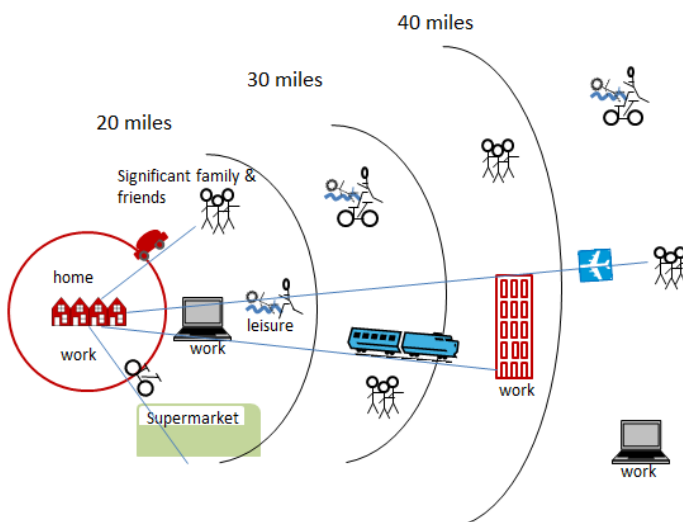


Figure 1: An example map of mobility practice bundles, used to introduce the exercise.

Participants group and talk about the different maps, then design interventions to disrupt the mobility patterns in one of the maps. They then reflect on questions including: What implications would their proposed interventions have for transportation modes, infrastructures, destinations and mobility related practices? And, which professions, institutions or policy making bodies have jurisdictions over everyday life and its mobilities? The interventions can be incremental or radical – the importance lies in reflecting about

what interventions mean 'in practice', and which practices would be intervened in to shift demand for travel.

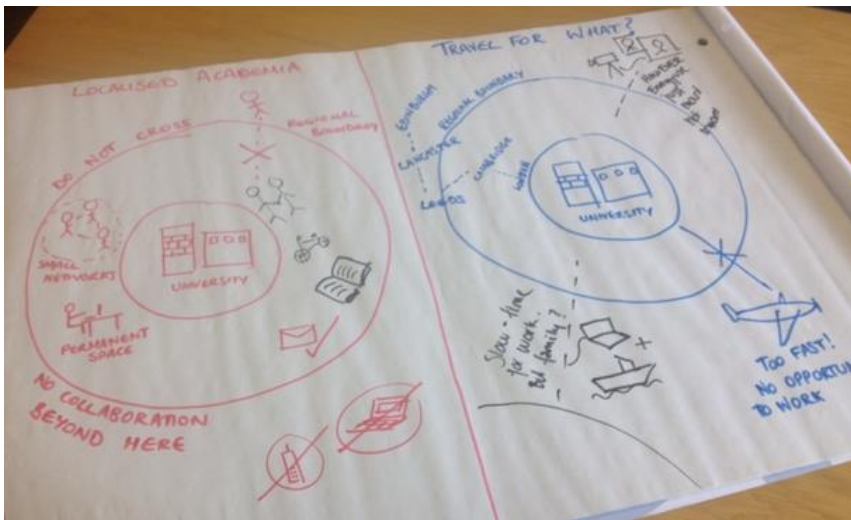


Figure 2 Inventions in mobility practice bundles: to shift carbon intensive patterns of academic travel, the practices of academia, and associated cultural and career capital associated with long haul travel becomes the target of interventions

From 2014 workshop, Professions, Built Environment and Sustainability, Cambridge UK.

We have introduced the Mapping Mobility Practice-bundles Workshop in a number of different settings, with both academic and non-academic participants¹.

The Utopian Everyday and its Mobilities

The second workshop was developed as part of the Mobile Utopias Project². Levitas (2013) 'Utopia as Method' inspired a contrasting approach. Linked to celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, a range of academic and non-academic participants were invited to imagine and develop utopias of everyday life, and how their respective 'utopian everyday' might be lived in practice. In the second part of the workshop participants explored how to bring these utopias into being, in particular what infrastructures and built environments were needed, and the forms and types of movements of information, people, goods and ideas that everyday life would require and produce.

Discussions began with objects. Each workshop participant brought an object that would be part of their utopian everyday, and explained to the rest of the group what it was, and the everyday life that it would be part of. Objects varied, for example a piece of knitting that was tied up with the desire to slow down the the pace of contemporary life:

"It is a piece of knitting but this [object] is about pace of life. Knitting by hand can only happen at a pace that is human and when I do it, it slows me down. In my utopia there will be many of these activities that go at a human pace."

To a particular design of bike light, that could be taken from the past into the future, where cycling in the dark (e.g. to get home from work) would be a normal and safe thing to do.

¹ At the PBES (Professions, Built Environment and Sustainability) Workshop <date, location.>; participants from a range of professions who are part of the post graduate programme on Sustainable Transitions at Aalborg University in Denmark

² The workshop formed part of the AHRC Connected Communities Project 'Mobile Utopia 1851-2051' <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/mobility-futures/mobile-utopia/>, Buscher, M., Dunn, N., Pearce, L., Lopez-Galviz, C., Spurling, N.)

The groups each took five objects and, along with a range of materials and resources in the room, set about co-creating their utopias. The infrastructures and flows of resources, people and information through these utopias was subsequently added in. At the end of the day, groups had to distill their ideas into a powerpoint template which provided fields for a title, short description and picture which represented the utopia. For example, these included:

Green Corridor Time Space Infrastructure



#1 The green knitting (a participant's object) represents that the roads have been reclaimed for farming purposes. Roads are too expensive to build and maintain. Instead, investment in engineering has resulted in the development of a hovercraft vehicle which uses green corridors to move around.

#2 The green knitting represents a time space infrastructure. This is an infrastructure that creates rhythms of life that are human – a pace of life that is good for our wellbeing.

Rurban Utopias

This utopia focused on the unevenness of space across communities, and enabling movement across urban and rural space, distributing the benefits of different types of lifestyle and making them accessible to all. For this group, utopia is about the ability to shift and move fluidly between the urban and the rural, rather than being stuck in one place.

Space of Possibility

This utopia focused on a shared space – the town square in Carnaefon, Wales. It is a space of possibilities, it can be used and reused in different ways, it is non-hierarchical shared space which allows users independence and free movement. Deregulation, common access, flexibility, contingency. Utopian space as a product of multiple small changes, reworking, repurposing.

What did each of the workshop methods produce?

'Mobility practice bundles' was held with early career academics already familiar with social practice theory (a workshop on Practices, the Built Environment and Sustainability, Cambridge, UK); a range of professionals attending a postgraduate programme on Sustainable Transitions, Aalborg University, Denmark; and, a group of 4th Semester Students on a Bachelor Programme at the same University.

The strengths of the method varied by group. For example, with the professionals, a broad range of individual mobility maps were produced at the start of the session. Although this provided rich resources for the subsequent discussion, it also diluted the concepts of social practice theory, as the societal patterns of mobility which emerge from practices, institutions and infrastructures were not visible in the small groups. Given that these students were already embedded in contexts where individualistic approaches prevailed, the workshop method to some extent served to further reinforce this perception. This resulted in

a focus on individual behavior change interventions, rather than focusing on how societal patterns of mobility might be understood and intervened in differently.

When the same workshop was conducted with 4th year students it had different outcomes. These students had already been made familiar with an array of different conceptualizations of networks, all of which heavily address relations between actors. Further, the workshop was introduced at the end of 3 classes on theories of practice. With this background, students thought about how their ways of moving around combined practices in different ways, and that changing the timing, place, or character of these practices would potentially change transport demand. In addition, in this group the similar lifestyles of the students meant that individual maps had much similarity. They live and move around in fairly similar ways and for fairly similar reasons and therefore they got to see mobility patterns as heavily embedded in the organization of everyday life. Also, because these students are trained to work visually, the visual mapmaking methods of the workshop spoke to their strengths.

So, the way the workshop is contextualized is important, and the workshop activities do not always produce materials which demonstrate the concepts in question. We are putting further thought on how the methods could reveal concepts of social practice and enable the contingency of current transport demands to be demonstrated.

The Mobile Utopias workshop had quite different outcomes. The most striking was how easily key ideas were conveyed, namely, about the contingency of current patterns of travel, and their relationship to the organisation of everyday life. This is because the workshop focused on creating a utopian everyday, that could be very different to today, and which was based on a range of desires, wants and needs. Thinking through the mobilities that would be part of such ways of life came second, and thus the manner in which they flow in and through social practices in time and space, was obvious. Designing the built environment for these lives and mobilities also emphasized the relationships between infrastructures and practices. In this method, highly mobile futures, if desired, were possible, putting on the table the many positive ways in which the freedom of travel and movement can enhance lives and experiences. Indeed, to be stuck a place where one does not wish to be, is a dystopian idea. Perhaps less useful, it was difficult not to fall into clichéd ideas about everyday life – pace, lifestyle, environment, economy – perhaps revealing the socio-economic position of participants and a socially shared ideal. Some of the imaginaries were closer to the present than others (for example shared space, is with us now, the reinvention of roads as green corridors is not), and for those with longer time horizons, the potential of the workshop for addressing challenges of travel demand in the present, was hard to identify.

Discussion

In the methods discussed the present and the future feature in different ways. The mapping mobility practice bundles workshop starts with the present. Its' aim is to understand the contingency of current patterns of mobility by mapping the practices which mobility connects, and then intervening in different aspects of the connections. For example, to reduce the travel demand associated with the journey to work, interventions might target *where* work takes place, *whether* there will be work in the future at all, *what* temporal patterns of work will exist and so on. However, the focus on the present could make this imagining difficult; radical changes do not seem plausible, and challenges or incremental changes are often put forward.

Mobile Utopias began with the future, and used a participatory approach to create utopias and their mobilities. The real strength of this approach was the contingencies of transport demand which it revealed. It identified some aspects of the present which participants would like to change (e.g. experiences of time compression), and viewed infrastructures and forms of mobility as one way in which such ambitions might be realised. The workshop also identified aspects of the past and present which might be kept – for example the shared space and the bicycle light. And what might be prioritised – for example accessibility, and connections of rural and urban. Starting with everyday life and then creating infrastructures for it, thus helped to emphasise the connections between social practices and the built environment, and the roles of professionals in shaping the everyday. However, the workshop does help to identify ways of addressing challenges of transport demand in the present.

One idea is to bring the two methods together – there are elements of each which seem to work well, and which appear to be complementary. Beginning with the Utopian Everyday emphasises the contingencies of travel demand, reveals relationships between the organization of everyday life and mobility, and the connections between the built environment and social practices. The workshop might then turn to the present, drawing on participants' own maps, to consider interventions that might help to move to desired futures.

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