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EDITORIAL

Longer Distance Cycling: Roles, Requirements and Impacts

John Parkin[1] and Anders Fjendbo Jensen[2]

[1] University of the West of England, UK

[2] Technical University of Denmark, DK

Corresponding author: Professor John Parkin (john.parkin@uwe.ac.uk)

This editorial summarises and comments on the five papers in the themed issue on longer distance cycling. In relation to infrastructure, there are contentions which emerge in relation to either the need to simply join together already existing shorter routes, or whether there is a need to provide longer distances routes akin to primary routes for motor traffic. Leaning towards the latter approach, the processes required in planning and design and implementation are considered. In a different dimension, consideration is also given to the design requirements for the cycle as vehicle required for longer distance travel. The benefits of longer distance cycling, especially for older people are also explored.

Keywords: long-distance; cycling

Cycling is increasingly seen by many municipalities as a solution that provides efficient and effective urban mobility, and at the same time, it reduces the negative environmental consequences of motorized transport. Research on cyclists' behaviour often focuses on everyday cycle travel over shorter distances. By contrast, this special issue of Active Travel Studies focusses on longer distance travel for all purposes, which may still be within a municipality boundary or beyond those boundaries.

While shorter distance cycle travel is more common, there are indications of a potential modal shift to bicycles for longer trips if they are facilitated by good quality cycle infrastructure separated from motor traffic and from pedestrians. Longer distance cycleways are beginning to be built between settlements in some places, for example between Arnhem and Nijmegen, and provide continuous, attractive and comfortable routes where progress can be rapid and uninterrupted. Such longer distance routes may encourage existing, everyday shorter distance cyclists to make longer journeys and may attract travellers who would have otherwise used a more energy intensive form of travel.

Scott (2022) provides an exploratory analysis where he combines the evolving ideas of longer distance cycling and ideas relating to moral obligations to non-human species and habitats, something he calls interspecies mobility justice. Based on his own qualitative

definition of longer-distance cycling, he describes how an inclusive and ecologically friendly practice can redress complex inequities not only between humans but also between humans and other species. The analysis is based on two cases studies: one in Vancouver, which may be likely to advance justice, and the other in Halifax, Canada, which is at the boundary and less likely to advance justice. The conclusion is that the success of longer distance cycling in Canada depends on "knitting together tens of thousands" of existing routes and places where cycling of diverse kinds already exists.

As well as infrastructure, the development and increasing use of e-bikes may contribute significantly to higher levels of longer distance cycling. Jones et al. (2022) consider the growing population of older people and report results of an e-bike trial for people aged 50 and over. Their paper reports impacts through biographical interviews, rider diaries and a focus group discussion. They found that participants did have increased willingness to cycle farther and into locations they may not have previously ventured on a cycle. This changed behaviour is for both everyday and leisure travel. In particular, the authors note the benefits of physical activity for the health and wellbeing of older cohorts in an ageing society.

A further vehicle-related issue for longer distance cycling is the availability of non-conventional cycles. Increased cycle speeds can be derived from auxiliary e-power and enhanced vehicle dynamics in the shape of enclosed recumbent cycles, called velomobiles. Cox (2022) explores longer distance cycling in an integrated way from a socio-political point of view. Taking the laws of physics as read, he suggests the need to re-evaluate the planning and design of infrastructure for cycling given the nature of the full range of cycles and how they, in combination with their riders, perform. Current expectations of cycle performance are limited by historical precedent and current legislative control (e.g., on power output of an e-cycle). He argues that increased cycle speeds due to increased power and enhanced efficiency would overcome the time penalty of greater distance more than is currently possible. Open-ended thinking is needed to develop new designs and regulations that will be far superior to current solutions for vehicles and infrastructure.

Returning to the level of lived experience, Sabelis (2022) presents an auto-ethnography of longer distance cycling using a velomobile for (very) long distance leisure purposes and for a daily 24km one-way commute. Most of this cycling was in her home country of the Netherlands. She says the "promises" of the experiences all came true: faster in congested conditions, greater journey time reliability, and sensory "delights" as a result of fresh air, exercise and freedom. However, surfaces frequently caused discomfort, and picking up on Cox (2022), the issue of political priority for motor traffic was evident in traffic signs and control, which themselves are evidence of underlying constraints imposed by regulation. Sabelis (2022) notes that infrastructure planning is subject to constraint as well, and she observes it is unlikely a primary motor traffic route would be required to use a series of secondary roads to travel from A to B. In sum, the indictment even for a country as cycling friendly as the Netherlands is that long-distance cycling is not as well developed as its reputation would suggest.

Finally, Lagendijk and Ploegmakers (2022) argue it is not only necessary to show initiatives promoting longer distance cycling work, but also what is required is an understanding of the process by which such initiatives become more strongly embedded in, and diffused through, policy systems. They provide a detailed investigation of the development of a novel concept in active mobility promotion, namely "fast cycle-routes" in the Netherlands. Based on interviews with 27 planners, engineers and lobbyists, the paper traces the success of the initiative. It details the policy practice at six different locations with the aim of diffusing these practices.

The combination of efficient and more powerful (e-)cycles and longer distance good quality infrastructure may act as encouragement both for additional travel to be made by cycle and for people who do not currently cycle to start. Covid-19 has affected social connectedness, and longer distance cycling may be a valuable method for enhancing connectedness and wellbeing. It may also create a greater level of mobility justice.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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