
COMMENTARY

Defining Active Travel: A Response to Cook et al. (2022)

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Cook et al. (2022) have defined active travel as that in which “physical exertion of the traveller directly contributes to their motion”. This response argues that there is more value and justice in an inclusive definition that incorporates non-normative conceptualisations of physical activity.

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I meet Janet at her house to conduct a go-along interview as part of a wider research project. The plan is that I will walk, and Janet will use her mobility scooter as she has rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, both of which make walking painful and difficult. Janet answers the door to me and as I wait, she manipulates a mobility scooter from her living room, through a narrow L-shaped porch, and outside. We proceed on the go-along, making our way around Janet’s local neighbourhood. Many of the pavements are poor quality and Janet’s body jolts as she wheels over lumps and bumps. As she meets kerb drops that are not flush to the road surface, she braces as she rolls over them. Whilst navigating one of these kerbs, Janet reflects on the not-uncommon occurrence of an absence of kerb drop: “there was no drop and I couldn’t reverse because it was a very narrow thingy [pavement], so I ended up having to get off my scooter and literally just shove it off the pavement”. (26 July 2022)

Active travel is defined by Cook et al. as “travel in which the sustained physical exertion of the traveller directly contributes to their motion” (2022, p154). Their definition is an important move to expand understandings of active travel from only being about walking and cycling and to include other “active” forms of transport, for example using a manual wheelchair, skateboarding, or running. Use of electric assisted forms of micromobility, such as e-bikes and e-handcycles, would also be included as active travel as they still necessitate the user contributing to motion. Motorised forms of transport like electric wheelchairs, mobility scooters, and e-scooters, however, are classed as micromobility but not active transport modes. Cook et al. quite rightly consider that expanding the definition of what is “active travel” has the potential to expand the appeal of active travel, challenge preconceived notions of the active traveller, and diversify who we see travelling actively. And the definition works.

Indeed, I've recently used it with colleagues to define parameters within a systematic review on the efficacy of interventions aiming to increase levels of active travel (see Roaf, Lawlor and Larrington-Spencer, 2024).

But the definition doesn't sit right. And that's a very hard position to be in when it has been developed by your colleagues. It's because of this that my response is somewhat delayed (two years), but recognising the popularity of the article (38 citations in journal articles, and 4 policy citations at the time of writing), I felt it was time. I also want to highlight that I do not think Cook et al. (2022) were ever seeking to achieve the definitive definition, but rather were starting a conversation which I am continuing here.

Cook et al.'s definition of active travel doesn't sit right with me because every time I read it, I think of my go-along interview with Janet. I think that whilst her mobility scooter is electric and doesn't *technically* require physical exertion to contribute to its motion, there is a lot of physical exertion involved in her use of it: for example, getting it out of her house, staying upright and balanced going over bumps and kerb drops, and having to push it off pavements that don't have drops. A similar consideration can be applied to electric wheelchairs. Whilst they again don't technically require exertion for motion, the user must generally transfer in and out of them, use their core to maintain an often-sitting position, and use hand, arm, or tongue to direct their chair.

I suppose these electric forms of micromobility haven't been included in the definition of active travel, despite physical activity being involved in their use, because they don't involve *enough* physical activity. But such a judgement of what is enough, I would argue, is based upon a normative conceptualisation of activity and exertion and is the materialisation of the "universal body" within active travel studies. The universal body – white, European, non-disabled, masculine, and youthful – has historically informed urban design (Hamraie, 2017) and resulted in a "conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p581), where urban forms do not meet the diverse access needs of the populous.

So whilst Cook et al. (2022) have extended the scope of active travel to incorporate forms of travel more diverse than just walking and cycling, they simultaneously limit the scope of the term by excluding disabled people whose bodily realities mean they simply cannot meet the normate template of how active an actively travelling citizen should be. This exclusion really matters because it compounds histories of the exclusion of disabled people from transport practice and policy, creating a "them" and "us" situation of those contributing to their own motion and those who aren't, when we all (pedestrians, electric and manual wheelchair users, e-scooter users, cyclists) are using the same active travel infrastructure (or absence of infrastructures) to live our lives.

In the introductory article to their e-scooter special issue in *Active Travel Studies*, Jones and Chatterjee (2023) go some way towards recognising alternative forms of physical activity in active travel by calling for e-scooters, as well as hoverboards, monowheels, and e-skateboards, to be encompassed within the definition. This is because they "require sustained motor coordination, sustained posture and the active maintenance of balance" (Jones and Chatterjee, 2023, p2). And I agree. But I think the exclusion of other electric mobility aids, such as mobility scooters and powered wheelchairs, once again reflects normative conceptualisation of activity and that to be sitting, without pedalling, is to be inactive.

In definitions of active travel used by the Department for Transport, active travel is defined as walking, wheeling, and cycling, with wheeling including manual chairs but also extended to powered chairs and mobility scooters. E-scooters, however, are omitted. Whilst this is somewhat understandable from a legal and policy perspective, considering that it is (at publication) against the law to use private e-scooters on public roads, their extended definition fails to consider that disabled people are already using e-scooters as mobility aids

(Alexiou, 2023). Recognising this use of e-scooters as mobility aids by some disabled people, *Wheels for Wellbeing* (2024) provide a more expansive definition of wheeling within active travel that incorporates e-scooters, alongside other forms of fully powered mobility like mobility scooters and electric wheelchairs.

In expanding the definition of active travel that we use in our research and practice to include fully powered mobility aids we perhaps risk the dilution of the concept of active travel. However, I would argue that there is even more value, as well as justice, in an inclusive definition that encompasses the diversity of physical exertion that we all put into our mobility practices, particularly reflecting similar infrastructural needs. For me then, active travel is a low-speed form of travel, all with low levels of kinetic energy compared to vehicles (see Kate Ball's discussion on kinetic energy, 2024), recognising that exertion is highly subjective and will be performed differently according to different bodily capacities.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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