ACTIVE TRAVEL STUDIES

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COMMENTARY

The Hoops Through Which We Already, Actively, Jump: Active Travel Through Parenting, Poverty, and Pain

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Active travel affords many personal and societal benefits, but opportunities to take part are not afforded equally. Disabled people who walk, wheel, and cycle can find it left to themselves to highlight and resolve accessibility problems, creating a further burden and potentially greater symbolic exclusion. Likewise, our lived experience rarely informs active travel interventions, nor is our expertise afforded space in planning, design, and decision-making.

This lived experience account by a disabled, Autistic, and chronically ill cycler, stroller, and public transport user traces where current interventions (re)produce normative ideas of who active travel is for or ignore the diversity of bodyminds already partaking in it. Participating in active travel is examined through my intersecting experiences of disability, poverty, and caring responsibilities, and contextualised in the social, material, political, and personal to evoke and reveal barriers to taking part.

Keywords: Active Travel; parenting; poverty; disability

Introduction

I am a person who already actively travels; that is, I walk and cycle for short journeys, and between public transport journeys, where infrastructure, rules, and time allow. I am a person who finds it increasingly difficult, where I live, to do this. Writing about the seemingly mundane petty details of my ambulatory life can, I hope, outline what navigating taking part in active travel that is not designed for me entails in the nuances of daily living, and how infuriatingly distant, at those fumbling times, an *active travel for all* can seem.

To start plotting what to write, I scribble out a mind map of where and when different parts of my life overlap with and impact one another, attempting to spot what might be worth including in such an account. I quickly run out of space, and it becomes a jumbled mess of connections. Where the lines and words intersect, it is difficult to spot what might be the most important bits and it becomes overwhelmingly impossible, momentarily, to focus my attention. So I go for a walk.

Work

I use public transport every day; in fact, I rely on public transport, alongside walking and cycling, to get where I need to go and do the things I need to do. These things aren't much different from the things most people need to do: grocery shopping, getting my child to and from school, hospital appointments, visiting family, going to work, and other community responsibilities. And, dare I say, occasionally hanging out with friends and having fun. I live in a relatively large town that is connected to the city by two bus routes (commercially operated by different bus companies, so there is no unified fare or ticketing system) and the Metro (increasingly unreliable, and overly expensive). There might be more than two buses, but I don't know of them. Information on how to travel around my region on public transport is disparate and confusing, at best. If I want to find out how to use public transport as well as cycling between different connections, it can get even murkier. Information is habitually presented in ways that are overwhelming or unnecessarily various, or is simply not available. Public transport, for me, is intrinsic to my active travel journey as a whole, so it seems trite to attempt to separate which bits are active and which are not. Likewise, navigating often overwhelming or confusing systems is a very active endeavour indeed for me. I work in the city, and travel there regularly, working from home as much as possible, which saves me some money, energy, pain, and time. I use the term work to describe what I do as a doctoral student, and occasional teaching assistant, for which I am paid a meagre stipend and inadequate hourly wage, respectively. Many people don't describe this as *work*. Traditionally academia is ill-suited, by design, to poor and disabled candidates, with its out-dated structures, expectations, and lack of flexibility (Modern 2025). At least two people I know (not academics) have told me that I ought to choose to do something that is better paid, highlighting a misplaced belief that people living in poverty are to blame for their condition and somehow socially inferior. This is povertyism in action (De Schutter 2022). Working as a doctoral researcher suits my needs and ways of working. My supervisors have a good understanding of the types of flexibility I need to work well and support me in navigating an inequitable institution as best they can. Such allies in working with more expansive definitions of accessibility are welcomed. Working from home, I get to spend swathes of time alone, moving about as much as I need to without worrying that I'm interrupting or distracting my peers, and I have more control over my surroundings and how stimulated I am by distractions. As a single parent, it also means that I can make sure I have laundry done and food cooked for my son in the Crip timeframe (Kafer 2013) that my body and mind works on, moving through a world which systemically neglects caregiving roles. Disability and my experience of it shifts unpredictably over time and space, so simply asking for things to be made more accessible mostly fails (Price 2024). The majority of disabled people, who increasingly live in the most destitute of social conditions, are left with the burden of labour to enact change, often at the risk of further exclusion (Larrington-Spencer et al. 2021; Spencer 2023). This means that other work that I do is often unpaid, unseen, and undervalued, such as community organising, campaigning, volunteering, caring for my child, housework, and so on.

Unveiling unseen labour is as complicated as unveiling my "unseen" impairments. A lot of labour goes into advocating for myself and into providing proof of how disabled, or poor, I am at any given time (e.g., asking for accommodations, navigating healthcare interventions), or, for example, making sure my son's access needs are met at his school. There is a heap of unseen labour in filling out application forms for hardship grants, or PIP, which takes a toll on my physical and mental health. A particularly typical example of the labour involved in applying for disability-related benefits is having to prove oneself disabled enough, whilst navigating how much to divulge about cycling and walking to the assessors dealing with your claim, who often lack insight and experience. This is debilitating. Any visible ability, such as cycling, can be used to question my eligibility, reflecting the attitudinal barriers in state policies shaped by outdated perceptions of disability and normative expectations of what disabled bodies should and should not do (Hamraie 2020; Wheels for Wellbeing 2021).

Even when writing descriptively about how my body moves as I attempt to navigate the structural barriers to taking part in active travel, a paranoia inches up my spine. Active travel is often encouraged by the UK government on the basis that it can improve mental and physical health, yet there is little to no alignment between transport policy and welfare policy, with nowhere to dwell that won't have me stuck between a rock and hard place. The question is, whilst my cycle is not classed as a mobility aid, will I be penalised for cycling (as in, being active) as a disabled claimant? I don't know the answer, and I don't think the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) knows the answer, but I live in fear anyway. On the topic of rocks and hard places, as a doctoral student, I am no longer entitled to claim Universal Credit, even though my income is too low to meet all of the needs of me and my child. My stipend is not classed as income, but as a student grant. There was a lot of labour and worry involved in navigating finding the answer to whether I would be able to claim or not. It took about nine months of back and forth between well-meaning advisors, the DWP, institutions, and charities to conclude: no, I am not entitled. Even though there is still no clear guidance, that was a lot of work.

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The assessment has been moved online at my request. My mobility has been crappy for the past week and getting to the assessment centre means getting two buses and walking across a large intersection. There are building works going on which means loads of dust which always triggers a flare. I am reading over, again and again, the instructions they have sent for accessing the video call. They seem cryptically complicated for "click join call" and I am sure I have missed something. I have spent months gathering information, letters from doctors, gaslighting myself. I join a call with a seemingly benign assessor who will "just go over the information they have on file, to make sure it's all correct, before we begin."

There follows about half an hour of questions about how I manage to use the toilet myself, clean myself, and feed myself. I talk in detail about how I manage to wipe my own arse or how using particular cleaning detergents flares up my arthritis and skin into a vicious cycle of horrible. My breath catches when I'm asked about how well I can actually look after my child. I'm being asked about how I move around and how difficult it is from one day to the next for me. I talk in detail about how I walk my son to school and the kinds of days where I need to stop and rest. I talk about the days that I might use my cycle to get there and back. A silence. I'm asked again about my cycling. How can I cycle but not make the journey by walking on some days? I can see how this is not making sense to my assessor. After a further ten minutes I ask for a break. I cry, stretch, rejoin the call.

Cycle

I was diagnosed with a form of inflammatory arthritis at 31, though I'd had symptoms since my early teens. Pain, stiffness, exhaustion, and the all-encompassing "ugh" of chronic illness. I've owned several second-hand bicycles, a few of them stolen over the years, and my current cycle is old and heavy. I bought it through a community recycling organisation years ago when I lived in a different local authority that funded such schemes. I rent a first-floor flat from a private landlord, and live with my eight-year-old son. My cycle is stored in a small wooden storage shed in my concrete backyard. I bought this shed a few years ago on credit, after spending a summer carrying my cycle upstairs, and keeping it on my landing, bashing my legs almost every single time I walked past it. I can no longer carry my cycle anywhere, let alone up a flight of stairs, without injury and weeks of pain afterwards, and there is nowhere else to store it. The town I live in is heavily planned for car use and roads are dangerous and busy. I use my cycle for utility trips, mostly in my own neighbourhood, and increasingly refer to them as futility trips, meaning there is always something in the way of me getting to where I need to go.

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I walk tentatively down the rickety, mouldy staircase at the back of my kitchen. It has a very narrow wooden handrail to my right on the wall, which is wide enough that I can rest the palm of my hand on it, but there's not enough space to grip it. A large patch of wall plaster has blown, falling off due to damp after a winter of condensation and poor ventilation/insultation. Two springs ago, my landlord sent someone to repaint it with anti-mould paint (grey, to hide the inevitable sporing regrowth), but that has proved merely cosmetic. He says that someone will be sent round to fix it as soon as he has worked through the backlog of other jobs, from other properties he owns. I first reported this to him ten months ago, and then again almost every month subsequently. I am a member of a community union that works in solidarity to challenge shoddy landlords like mine, but I am currently so exhausted and at capacity that I have not even raised this problem any further than asking, asking, asking. I am going to cycle to the supermarket to pick up some things to make dinner with, before I collect my son from school. I am low on energy today and have not slept very well. A bulging disc in my neck is pressing on a nerve, rendering sleep futile and pain victorious. I have had to spend a considerable amount of time limbering up for the day, with stretches, and nerve flossing exercises so that I can adequately use my left arm. I cancelled a meeting this morning that might have led to a small amount of paid work, but I could not have spent time at my computer in the pain and exhaustion I am in. I have learned the hard way that if I pretend that my body behaves in the ways I am told it is supposed to, I will pay for it with more pain. No matter how much time I take to care for myself, I still find that I need to bend and twist into a form that can get things done. Either that, or the things don't get done, which is often not an option. My neck is flaring up because I pulled my son up from falling as he tripped when we were walking hand-in-hand to school. I'm annoyed at myself for this. Then I despair at thinking that maybe I should have let him fall instead. He and I will be penalised for being late to school, regardless of falls or injury.

My flat has stairs up the front and down the back. Sometimes I like to think of it as a bridge, which adds a little imaginary delight to an otherwise dingy Tyneside flat. I unlock the uPVC back door, which sticks and needs a shove, and enter my backyard. It is technically a shared yard, but with a flimsy fence splitting it in two, so I hear but do not see my cat harassing my neighbour's indoor cat through the glass of their living room window. I take my keys out of my pocket and get down onto one knee, so I am eye height with the rusting lock on the shed door. You could probably just heave the door off its hinges, so the lock is in vain, but hopefully a deterrent to anyone wishing to break in. I have brought the wrong set of keys down with me. I have two keys for this shed. One is on the set of keys I have left upstairs. The other is on another set of keys that I have given to my brother, who helps me with occasional last-minute childcare, and various other unforeseen crises. I haul myself back up the steps, inadequate banister under my left hand this time. I had to remove the moulding carpet tiles from the stairs when I moved in and discovered an infestation of carpet beetles. They had migrated from the loft space, where pigeons had nested before I moved in, leaving a rotted mess that had not been cleared. They soon filled the entire flat, beetles not pigeons, and I spotted them for months after the eventual fumigation, hearing them bobble about in my lightshade at night. I didn't sleep very well during that time and my mental health spiralled. The carpet tiles have not been replaced so the stairs are bare and dusty, with the occasional spiky bit, of which I have a mental map, and which I try to avoid. The correct set of keys is on my kitchen counter. I've been meaning to put these keys onto the same keyring as the other bunch that holds my front door key. There should already be more keys with this one as my front door can technically be shoved open with just enough knee force, with its wonky door frame and single night latch lock. It's the type that has what we call in my neck of the woods a sneck, which doesn't actually work, meaning it can close behind me and lock me out. There should also be a deadlock that I can lock and unlock as I come and go. I can see, on the front door, a painted-over outline of where this might have once existed. I go back down the stairs, feeling a pang of fatigue up my back and shoulders, straight into my brain. I get down, again, and unlock the shed. The doors open outwards together, forcing me into a sort of hokey cokey with them in the limited space in the yard. I navigate the towels on the line that I can't unpeg because lifting my arms above my head today would spell an afternoon in bed. I drag my cycle out of the shed, do more dancing with doors, and manage, finally, to stand my cycle against the wall whilst I close and lock the shed. In my frustration, I have also forgotten to bring my helmet downstairs with me. I will go without it; it's not far. I take the back door key out and lock it from the outside. I'm leaving via my back gate, which I can't lock from the outside, so I need to make sure the back door is secure at least. That key stays in the lock in the door, so I always know where it is. I strap my bag onto the rear rack with a bungee cord and wheel my cycle into the back lane. There's an embankment of fly-tipped rubbish along one side, including some furniture, loose screws and broken roof tiles, a duvet spilling out of a bin bag. A dog is being walked past and stops to urinate over it. I fling my leg over the crossbar and set off, pedalling the 100 yards to where the back lane meets the main road. A familiar *pa-flaff, pa-flaff, pa-flaff* sound and I know my back tyre is punctured. A screw sticking out of the side wall. I don't have a spare inner tube because I have forgotten to put that on my to-do/shopping list (endless).

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Sometimes the labour of navigating a transport system that does not accommodate non-normative bodyminds is obvious (Schalk 2018), such as when I try to catch a bus with my mam who uses a powerchair. This has become such an arduous task not because the bus doesn't have a ramp (buses are required by law to have those kinds of accessibility measures in place), but because my mam is made to feel as though she is a burden when the driver sighs and slams about getting the ramp out for her. Because she feels worried that she will hold others up. Because she is anxious that she will not even get to her destination (usually a hospital appointment which entails two different buses, after our local NHS facilities moved there without the transport policy to match), because there won't be space on the bus for her, nor on the next one (futility trips!). Sometimes this labour is rendered invisible or illegible to others with little experience of navigating structures that are not designed for them, or of how totalising this can be (Price 2024).

Public active travel rhetoric increasingly tells me that I will be fitter, less fat, and less of problem for the planet by making active journeys. That cycling isn't just for the middle-aged in Lycra, and that choosing not to use my car will be better for everyone. I don't drive and never have, though I have dabbled in driving lessons. Driving seems to cause me more pain and is too expensive to even consider having enough lessons to become a driver. The logic of active travel's focus on weight loss privileges thinness and ignores intersectional oppressions like racism, sexism, and classism. My particular ways of using built environments are not anticipated by active travel infrastructures that often promote a societal preference for able-bodied/mindedness (Hamraie 2020). Such infrastructures assume an ease of movement, perception, and familiarity. Judgements on what counts as enough physical exertion to be classed as actively travelling buy into normative and ableist ideals, compounding histories of disabled people's exclusion from transport (Sheller 2018; Kafer 2017).

Live

There's a difference between choosing to walk or cycle and needing to. When I was aged between eight and thirteen, I would walk myself and my two younger brothers over a field at the top of my estate, to my dad's flat in the next estate along. I looked after my siblings a lot as a child and every Sunday morning I had the responsibility of keeping us all safe and moving. As a young person just out of university, I cycled to and from my job, ten miles each way, a twenty-mile round trip on little food and in all weather. I couldn't afford the public transport fares. This was gruelling on a £20 bicycle and after an eight-hour shift on my feet. It was the quickest job I could get at a time when I had no fixed address and was relying on friends (and their families) to put me up. After a couple of months working, I managed to move out of my friend's family home and into a bedsit room above a pub. There was no deposit required so it seemed ideal. Just me and three middle-aged men sharing a bathroom and a windowless kitchen which consisted of a sink, a microwave, and a countertop hob with two rings. I lasted a few months there, until a friend broke up with her partner and I moved into her flat to share the rent, and her bed, until her contract was up, meaning neither of us would be homeless. I left most of my belongings behind at the bedsit as I owed a month's rent, including my laptop, so would spend the next four years without one.

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I used to cycle my son to school. It's mostly downhill on the way there and I'd push my cycle uphill on the way back. He outgrew the third-hand standard child seat I had: he is tall for his age and the cost of seats for bigger kids is extortionate. A cargo bike is beyond my limits entirely. Where I live, options for sustainably hiring something like this are few and far between. And anyway, I have nowhere to put it. It would soon be nicked if I had to lock it up outside somewhere. My son is just beginning to learn to cycle himself. He is eight. He's been cautious and a little unnerved in his attempts but is getting there. As a neurodivergent family, we have taken a little longer to get round to it. Balancing full-time work, limited energy, and intermittent mobility complications have slowed this learning journey up to now. We usually walk to school. It's about a mile, crossing two busy roads (20 miles per hour limits not yet imposed there, and with no crossings installed yet, though I spend a considerable amount of time trying to convince local authorities to do so). The walk back home from school is uphill and arduous, not on all days but most. I often need to rest on my walks and there have been times when walking is nigh on impossible, but cycling in those times feels easy. Freeing.

This sticking point is particularly difficult to explain to the DWP. They also don't like to acknowledge that cycling can be easier on my pain, easier on my energy levels, and faster. Proposed reforms to PIP and Universal Credit mean that an already difficult and arduous process (for some it is mentally and physically debilitating) will become harder, and many disabled people will be locked out of a system of essential support. Claiming PIP does not mean I am not working or avoiding work: I need PIP to allow me to work. If I do not have that minimal extra income, I cannot afford to pay for transport and am further barred from taking part in active travel in its current form. Less money means more stress, more unpaid work, less time with my child, more pain, and more doctors' appointments. I already have no idea how I will afford a season ticket for local travel from September as my finances have become even more strained this past year. I am not entitled to "staff" benefits at my university that would allow me to pay off a season ticket out of my wages each month, because I am not classed as staff.

In a world where accessibility is treated as a technical fix (Shew 2023), we need those doing the planning and policymaking for active travel to do the labour of paying attention to, and understanding, the material realities of disabled people's lives. Not through accessibility standards, but through our diverse complexities, and the hoops through which we already, actively, jump.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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