Incompetent, or too competent? Negotiating everyday cycling identities in a motor dominated society

Abstract

This paper uses the concept of stigma to explore cycling identities in the UK. Drawing on interview data, it argues that people who cycle are caught between two threats: appearing too competent as a cyclist (a 'proper cyclist'), and appearing not competent enough (a 'bad cyclist'). Strategies of identity management are discussed, which can include elements of negotiation, disavowal, and challenge. The paper aims to show that transport modes can produce disadvantaged and stigmatised social identities: like other forms of stigma these are mediated both by social environments and by other social identities. Implications for policy and advocacy are suggested.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

This paper draws from work on deviance and identity to analyse how it is that after twenty years of pro-cycling policy discourse cycling is *still* not 'normal' in the UK. At practitioner forums for the Cycling Cultures project[1], on the blogosphere, in workshops, people ask: How can we increase the level of cycling, and why is it still so low? This is a pressing policy problem, given the need (a) to reduce CO_2 emissions from transport and (b) to encourage physical activity among sedentary populations (Davis et al 2007). This paper analyses one contributory factor to the ongoing policy impasse: despite twenty years of pro-cycling policy discourse, the 'cyclist' identity remains problematic and, in Goffman's terms, stigmatised.

Why use the concept of stigma, which has been criticised as a poorly theorised 'catch-all' concept conflating different processes? I follow Deacon (2006: 418) in limiting its use to 'othering, blaming and shaming (often called symbolic stigma)' and so generally focus upon perceptions of cyclists and cycling identities. While touching on issues of discrimination, the paper concentrates on how symbolic stigma is associated with 'being a cyclist' (and acted out on the streets) through the voices of cyclists themselves. I argue that there are two conflicting stigmatised images of 'the cyclist'; one cast as incompetent and one as too competent, leaving cyclists struggling to negotiate a path between two problematic representations.

Implications for sociology include the use of concepts of stigma and othering to theorise conflicts associated with broader transport-related identities, such as the shame that may be attached both to *not* being a car owner and to *being* a car owner. Sociological work linking stigma and identity to changing and contested social contexts could complement and/or challenge work on the psychology of transport using market-research categories (e.g. Anable 2004). Finally, given evidence presented here of internalisation of stigma among *existing cyclists*, policy-makers should think carefully about potential unintended consequences of policy initiatives.

Cycling, identity, and stigma

People have a variety of social identities, which are more or less salient in different political and social situations. To understand how transport is related to identity, we need to see transport-related identities as existing in a dynamic relationship with other social identities (Skinner and Rosen 2007). The latter do not pre-determine whether a person will cycle in a given social context, although they may shape its likelihood. Conversely, while cyclists do not all share a static social identity by virtue of cycling, there are commonalities at diverse levels of action. Transport identities are contested and performative: appeals to 'cyclists' or 'motorists' seek to shape such identities.

Within any one context the label of 'cyclist' will differ in salience and meaning, depending on the context and on the individual and their other social identities. Not all 'cyclists' are the same: male and female cyclists may experience different types of abuse on the roads, and while women may experience abuse aimed specifically at them as women, they may not experience similar abuse as pedestrians (see comments following Foster's 2010 blog post). Age is another mediator. Still seen as a positive childhood activity, cycling is simultaneously in the UK associated with negative moral discourses of youth crime (Daily Mail 2010) and parental irresponsibility (Kingsley 2010).

Limited generalisations may be made, however. Within a mass motorised context, cycling as a mode of transport exists by comparison with, and in competition with, motorised modes (and walking). Like all modes cycling is never just cycling; it represents various prescribed or proscribed behaviours (Horton 2007). The motorised street is not just a place of transit but also an arena of identity formation, where transport modes have complex, differentiated implications for social identities. Those societies socially and spatially dominated by motor vehicles to the detriment of other road users are likely to generate essentialised and stigmatised 'cyclist' identities. Where cyclists are treated more equitably, a 'cyclist' identity may be constructed differently and perhaps be less salient (Green et al 2010).

In the UK, cycling became increasingly prominent in policy circles from the mid-1990s onwards (Golbuff and Aldred 2011), but on a national level strong words have not translated into modal shift away from the car and/or towards the bicycle (Shaw et al 2006; Jones 2005). Negative stereotypes of cyclists persist. In 1997 the UK Transport Research Laboratory found cyclists 'were the subjects of rather negative imagery [by drivers]' (Basford et al. 2002: 7). In 2010, a report for Transport for London demonstrated that the political repositioning of cycling has not fundamentally challenged the popular construction of cyclists as deviant. It concludes (page 9):

'[A] stereotype of cyclists in general does appear to exist among ORUs [other road users]. This stereotype is characterised by:

- serious failures of attitude, including a generalised disregard for the law and a more specific lack of concern for the needs of other drivers; and

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- serious failures of competence and knowledge of the rules of the road.

This stereotype of cyclists is also linked to the fact that cyclists do not need to undertake training, are unlicensed and uninsured, and do not pay road taxes (at least not by virtue of the fact that they cycle).'[2]

This indicates it may be useful to analyse UK cycling identities as potentially associated with stigma (Goffman 1963). As Jensen (2006) argues, Goffman's work provides useful resources for studying contemporary mobilities. Jensen suggests using the concept of stigma to understand interactions in street space or on public transport (for example, the passenger on the bus who is left sitting alone because of her stigmatised identity), while I take the complementary approach of analysing stigma in narratives relating to a particular transport identity (that of the cyclist). This then can be linked to cyclists' behaviour in transport interactions; for example, in terms of road positioning and what it says about the attitude of the cyclist towards other road users (and how she interprets their attitudes towards her).

Goffman (1963: 3) defines stigmatised people as possessing 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting *within a particular social interaction*' (my emphasis). Here the social interactions in question occur within motorised street space, structured by legal, infrastructural, cultural and policy environments. According to the TfL report (2010), interactions with cyclists tend to involve assumptions by 'other road users' that cyclists are incompetent, ignorant, illegal, and unconcerned for their own or others' safety. This represents a process of 'othering' as 'the cyclist' is categorised as by definition suspect. The TfL report did not find an equivalent 'motorist' stereotype, with bad driving seen as an individual attribute not attached to drivers in general.

Identities are relational, so a stigmatised cycling identity should be seen in relation to a dominant 'driver' identity that is both invisible and universalised (Paterson 2006). As with other privileged identities, in times of conflict or challenge the driver identity can emerge as a powerful mobilising force for aggrieved reaction as in the Sunday Times article describing an (abandoned) 'cycling plan' to 'blame drivers for all crashes' (Leake 2009). Cyclists may be held responsible for experiences of disadvantage, even violence (see Foster 2010) while driving offences are viewed as not 'really' criminal (Cunningham 2007; Voelcker 2007). 'Half of us say we speed on motorways and a third of us admit to 'driving significantly above the speed limit' in built up areas.' (RAC 2008).

Managing stigma

While Goffman's work on stigma focused on the management of 'spoiled identity' within a relatively stable social environment, other authors now focus on competing values, resistance to stigma, and change (Campbell and Deacon 2006). This literature may prove relevant to cycling studies (and vice versa) given ongoing debate over modal shift and conflict both over the meanings of cycling and the portrayal of cyclists. There is relatively little material either on cycling identities (the section on identity in Green et al's 2010 report is a recent exception, as is Skinner and Rosen 2007) or on stigma in relation to transport and transport identities. For this reason I draw here upon work on other ascribed stigmas, to suggest three themes that might be relevant to cycling identities.

Firstly, the stigma literature provides ways to understand and interpret tactics of identity negotiation. Low (1996: 244) describes such tactics as including 'speaking out and increasing visibility, reasoning with others, using humour, adopting aggressive or assertive attitudes, avoiding

confrontations with others and distancing themselves from other [group members]'. Moral claims can help to re-define a stigmatised identity – constructing oneself as innocent or deserving and so not like 'those' others (Ronai and Cross 1998). Resistance takes many forms, some collective, but perhaps most frequently on an individual level (e.g. Riessman 2000). Ronai and Cross (1998: 105) use the concept of 'narrative resistance', 'a response to discursive constraint which dialectically emerges from and constitutes an alternative stock of knowledge within a stigmatized group' to examine deviance as 'socially constructed narrative resource'. Through narrative resistance, social actors generate alternative evaluations of behaviour and identity, seeking to 'produce themselves as competent' while negotiating competing values and interpretive schemes (Rosenfeld 1999:139).

Secondly, the (in)visibility of stigmatised identities is relevant to cycling. Although cycling is performed in public spaces (Aldred 2010; Green et al 2010), cyclists without bicycles may or may not be identifiable as cyclists. Here an analysis of stigma might again draw upon work discussing the display or hiding of other stigmatised identities. Low highlights the importance of material objects or 'props' (Low 1996:243), which people may display, leave behind, or conceal. For cyclists as for other groups, such props (e.g. the bicycle, specialised clothing, dress signs, even aspects of the body) may be seen as appropriate or inappropriate, as negative or positive, depending upon social context. Some props may be invisible to wider society, only apparent to those 'in the know'. Often there are different types of the same prop, some designed to stand out and some to blend in; choice of clothing or adornment may be politicised.

Finally, stigma research reminds us that stigmatisation is always combined with other identity-making processes; and reactions to stigma may be very different in different communities

(Riessman 2000). Negatively valued identities are managed within the context of other social identities, which moderate, aggravate, or transform stigmatised identities, or provide a resource from which to resist stigma (Stanley 1999:107). People may consider themselves similar or different to others possessing the stigmatised identity, depending upon other social identities and the social values attached to those (Riesmann 2000). A stigmatised identity could be compensated by other high status identity markers; but conversely it might have the power to 'spoil' the higher status identity as well.

Stigma and sport

Cycling is unusual being a stigmatised activity also constructed as 'healthy'. It is not just a means of transport but also of *sport*, with the organisers of the mass participation Sky Ride events describing it as 'one of the fastest growing sports in the UK' (Sky Ride 2010). Many discussions of stigma refer to 'unhealthy behaviours' as attracting stigma (e.g. Peretti-Watel 2003); yet cycling seems to be a counter-example, categorised as simultaneously risky *and* healthy (Golbuff and Aldred 2011). This presents an intriguing sociological problem: how do people who cycle negotiate perceptions of cycling as deviant and yet healthy? How do such apparently conflicting perceptions combine within cycling identities?

From the 1990s onwards cycling itself has been viewed in terms of health promotion and public health (BMA 1992). This has increasingly also become associated with solving environmental problems. As contemporary societies have become more carbon-dependent and increasingly mechanised, physical activity has been designed out of everyday life (Davis et al 2007). In response, policy-makers have encouraged individuals to bring physical activity back into their lives. This can be seen in the environmentally-focused Act on CO_2 campaign (2010), which

includes health arguments targeted at individuals – 'Cycling is a great way to exercise… Walking briskly on a regular basis is good for your heart and lungs.'

The boundaries between 'sport' and everyday physical activity have become blurred under the heading of 'exercise'. Participating in 'physical activity' may be understood as practising 'sport' and hence competing against an implicit bodily norm (Petersen and Bunton 1997). Sociologists of sporting practices have identified sporting identities, in particular masculinities, as exclusionary, within a generally critical focus on sport as reproducing power relations (Guilianotti 2005). The 'sporty' or 'fit' body is viewed as cultural capital, providing social status or social mobility; so participation in physical activity may be perceived as a badge of status (Green et al 2010). '[C]ontemporary society continues to ascribe greater cultural capital to those who display evidence of [competitiveness, aggression and elements of traditional understandings of the sporting male] in their bodily practices.' (Wellard 2006: 235). Conversely, a failed sporting performance can reinforce an otherwise subordinate position.

However, the privileged status of sportiness is not secure or uncontested, given widespread resistance to health promotion discourses and practices (for example, through attacks on the 'Nanny State'). Alongside other negative connotations of cycling (e.g. as a sign of poverty), there may be a tension in the portrayal of cycling as 'healthy' or 'sporty'; it offers potential access to a privileged yet also contested identity alongside the risk of failure. The paper argues that the ambivalent status of 'healthy behaviour', and its interaction with stigma, produces particular narratives about cycling expressed by our study participants.

Methodology

Context

The paper reports upon fifty-five narrative interviews with people who cycle in Cambridge and Hull, two English cities with historically high cycling levels. The data is part of the larger *Cycling Cultures* project, which incorporates other methods informing this paper, including stakeholder interviews, documentary analysis, practitioner engagement, and participant and non-participant observation. I carried out the Cambridge interviews discussed here in the pilot phase of the project, while the Hull interviews were carried out either by me or by my colleague on the Cycling Cultures project, Katrina Jungnickel.

All interviewees had recent experience of cycling within Cambridge or Hull, and most lived within city boundaries. The data contain views about cycling and cyclists expressed by people who for the most part cycle mainly as part of their everyday lives. Negative feelings do not represent an outsider's fear but rather attempts to manage a cycling identity within a relatively normalised context. In focusing on (mostly) individual interviews with such cyclists the paper complements existing qualitative research that examines *non-cyclists'* perceptions of cycling. Two exceptions are DfT 2010, which uses workshops for data gathering rather than individual interviews[3], and Green et al 2010, which is more similar methodologically but focused on several London boroughs and using semi-structured rather than narrative interviews.

Our data comes from two cities outside London: firstly, Cambridge, frequently spoken of as one of the few places in the UK to have a 'cycling culture'. However, due to historical and geographical specificity and very high cycling rates[4], it can appear remote from the rest of the UK.

Hull, by contrast, is *not* seen as having a 'cycling culture', despite high cycling levels. In Cambridge car ownership is widespread and cycle commuting weakly associated with lack of car ownership; the opposite is true in Hull which has high deprivation and low car ownership.[5] UK cycle commuters are disproportionately male but in Hull and to a greater extent Cambridge, the gender balance is more equal.

Both Hull and Cambridge display social and spatial factors that might support cycling. They are on the dry East side of England with compact, flat city centres. Cambridge has very limited city centre parking and very narrow streets; both have imposed city centre restrictions on cars and students at Cambridge University are barred from bringing cars. Both have relatively high numbers of bicycle shops; in Hull most of these are long established family businesses. Finally, cycling has had political support in both cities. Cambridge City Council is seen as a current leader for cycling policies (e.g. it runs a free indoor city centre cycle park) while Hull City Council has implemented various innovative schemes including widespread 20 mph zones.

Methods

Narrative interviews were used to gather perceptions and experiences in a relatively unstructured format (see e.g. Riessman 2008). This began with the question 'Can you tell me about cycling in relation to your life', querying aspects of the reply and bringing in identified key topics including maintenance and preferred cycling places, if not spontaneously mentioned. Most did spontaneously mention their or others' cycling identities (frequently through negative statements such as 'I'm not a bike nut'). For this paper interviews were analysed using thematic coding, focusing on descriptions of identity including evaluations of behaviour, competing identities, and (self)-presentation.

Twenty-five people were interviewed in Cambridge of which six were recruited at the CTC/Cycle Campaign Network conference in May 2008, while nineteen responded to leaflets given to them or placed on their bicycles in the city centre that weekend. Among leaflet recruits, the gender split was virtually equal – 10/9, but five out of six conference recruits were male (roughly reflecting the gender balance of attendees). Around a quarter were in their twenties or early to mid thirties, and another quarter were over 60; the remaining half were in between these age groups. Roughly half were in middle-class and half in working-class jobs, predominantly white-collar. Around two-thirds owned at least one car per household (several owned two) and almost all could drive.

In Hull, most interviewees were recruited either through a stall on the May 2010 Lord Mayor's Parade, or through city centre bike tagging. Several were accessed through networks e.g. a Police and Community Support Officer met through our participation in cycling events. On several occasions we conducted joint interviews, so the number interviewed was 34 for 30 interviews. Just under half were female. Occupations included manual and shift workers, administrators, teachers, and unemployed people. Again ages varied, from late teens to eighties with a slight spike in the thirties and, especially, fifties. Around half had no household car and a substantial minority did not drive. While the Cambridge group contained a minority of activists, the Hull group did not, reflecting current cycling contexts.[6] Several Hull interviewees were involved in cycle sport, which is relatively dominant in Hull.

Interviewees do not 'represent' Cambridge and Hull cyclists in a statistical sense. However, connections exist between interviewee characteristics and cities. In Cambridge interviewees more commonly compared cycling with car use, while for around half of our Hull interviewees the bus (alongside walking) was seen as a key local alternative. In Hull, a significant minority were aged between 40 and 65 with limited car access; this cohort may be the last of its kind as car ownership in Hull approaches the national average[7]. Lives in Hull were historically based around the city and region, with Cambridge interviewees less strongly rooted in this way.

Finally, interviewer positionality informs the discussion. Both interviewers endeavoured to remain non-judgemental when listening to interviewees, while anticipating participants would make assumptions about *our* cycling identities. Sometimes signs such as my colleague's cleats or my pannier clearly identified us as 'cyclists' to participants; at other times participants assumed that we were regular cyclists because of the research topic (although some did not; we were sometimes asked if we cycled at all, and on more than one occasion it was assumed we would drive to the interview). During ethnographic excursions, we were asked about our own cycling identities and challenged: ranging from being asked 'so you're a hard-core cyclist?' to being asked whether we were capable of completing a day ride (when we did not look enough like 'hard-core cyclists'!) Our own ambiguous responses to these categorisations encouraged the development of the concepts I discuss here.

Rather than seeing interviewer effects as bias, we interpret them as part of the dialogic process of meaning making: particularly in a contested context, it is unlikely that interviewees will perceive an interviewer as 'neutral'[8]. Comparing oneself with one's perceptions of others present or

absent is an inherent part of the continuing process of identity formation. It is of course important to ensure that interviewees feel they can speak freely and frankly, and it was interesting that where participants perhaps perceived us as 'bike nuts', they did not seem inhibited in expressing negative views about this type of cyclist. Of course, to some extent this was a defensive reaction; but my point is that cycling stigma works precisely through these processes – through assuming that other cyclists are more skilful than oneself and in consequence, simultaneously resenting and envying 'competent cyclists'. This is an interesting counterpoint to the much-researched 'optimism bias' among drivers.

Findings

Positivity and pleasure

As this paper focuses on stigma, it is important to stress that interviewees in both areas described 'joy' and 'pleasure' experienced through various forms of cycling. Cambridge narratives expressing positive feelings about cycling are discussed in Aldred (2010); here are two examples from Hull:

'[It]'s restful and it's the closest thing we can do to flying really.' (Hull, male, forties)

'It keeps your legs in good shape. It keeps your lungs in good shape you know, breathing wise' (Hull, female, teens)

The generally very positive portrayal of cycling's virtues went alongside a recognition of road danger. Most interviewees described being knocked off a bike or near misses while a minority

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spoke of deliberate assaults. Some who had experienced crashes or harassment spoke of the failure of agencies and services to assist them; one example being a participant who said that hospital staff failed to carry out a proper examination after a head injury and sent her home with paracetamol.

Yet despite these experiences the positive side of cycling dominated most narratives. Childhood cycling experiences were usually associated with innocence and freedom, with cycling portrayed as a way of recuperating these lost virtues.

'I loved it [cycling as a child] coz it's kind of a sense of a freedom and I feel like that now, it's a sense of freedom coz you can just go somewhere when you want, you're not held back by any time constraints or petrol or cost.' (Hull, female, fifties)

However, in both locations a cycling identity proved problematic. Cyclists struggled with the fear of being labelled a 'bad' or incompetent cyclist while categorising others in this way, simultaneously fearing being *too* associated with cycling as a 'proper' or 'sporty' cyclist.

Managing stigma: being a good cyclist

Returning to stigma, we could characterise one set of responses as defending one's identity as a 'good cyclist', carving out space to be recognised as a legitimate participant in street interactions. However, as with other 'spoiled identities', being a 'good cyclist' remains difficult because the identity itself is seen as problematic. Hence, participants struggled to assert themselves as 'good cyclists', admitting that despite their best attempts, they often failed. As befits a stigmatised group, the norms surrounding cycling in the UK can be onerous, and cyclists are often expected to possess a higher level of knowledge, skills, and stuff than other mobile citizens. For

example, in higher-cycling countries bicycles, like cars, routinely come with integral lights and locks. However, in the UK this is not the case, and most cyclists must remember to carry locks and lights separately (with the risk of legal sanction if they forget their lights). In these respects a higher level of preparation and memory skills are required for cycling trips than for driving trips.

Most participants felt that being a 'good cyclist' involved being able to fix at least basic mechanical problems. However, many felt that they has failed in this and deprecated their abilities to maintain their bicycle.

'I've become a bit lazy about [maintenance]. I mean I fix punctures.' (Cambridge, male, fifties).

'I'm not very good at looking after my bike. I don't. I'm not good at maintaining it, I'm afraid (laughs).' (Hull, female, fifties).

This pressure to be a self-sufficient cyclist is the other side of a 'DIY ethic' associated with cycling and often linked to environmentalism (e.g. Horton 2003). While the bicycle is celebrated for its lack of mechanical complexity and the ease with which a user can maintain or modify it, users unable or unwilling to maintain their bicycle may experience guilt. Failing to repair punctures was perceived as a particular badge of shame with competence in puncture repair a necessary component of the good cyclist. Cycling identities appear relatively hybrid in their connection to bike maintenance, while drivers are seen as more separate from their machines.

This hybridity also relates to powering the machine. Users of motor vehicles are not expected to exert themselves physically, and the power source is separate from the person guiding the vehicle. But cyclists are expected to power their vehicle themselves, with 'getting there under your own steam' defined as an intrinsic part of the practice of cycling. A woman with mobility problems who rides an electric bicycle defined herself as not a 'real cyclist' by definition:

'Not many people have electric bikes and you feel a little bit of a fraud.' (Cambridge, female, fifties)

This was echoed by some non-electric bicycle users who described themselves as 'fair weather' cyclists or said that they did not do much cycling. The association of cycling with high levels of physical effort is connected to discourses of cycling as healthy or sporty, and may act to discourage people who do not feel either 'healthy' or 'sporty'.

Particular anxiety was however reserved for interactions with motor vehicles and, to a lesser extent, with pedestrians and other cyclists. In Goffman's terms, this is where the 'particularly discrediting social interaction' takes place, so this is not surprising. Accordingly, many interviewees described in detail on-road strategies to manage conflict including wearing or appearing to wear a helmet camera, getting off the road when feeling threatened, and cycling in the middle of the road (to claim space) or at the edge of the road (to avoid conflict). These strategies often seemed tenuous or difficult, and some expressed anxiety about their ability to manage cycling in traffic.

'I don't feel I'm the most confident and most skilled cyclist and I do occasionally worry about, I can't take my hand off to signal.' (Hull, female, twenties)

Clothing and appearance represented a related area of anxiety and many interviewees commented on their own failure to live up to what they felt cyclists *should* look like, in particular about helmets and 'high viz' jackets:

'I feel I should wear illuminated clothing but I don't (laughs).' (Cambridge, male, seventies)

'I don't really wear anything high viz and I don't wear a helmet even though I know I should.' (Hull, female, teens)

In Cambridge and Hull, helmets and high viz are less common than in places where cycling is rarer. Cyclists without these items were conforming to local norms, while breaching a perceived national norm. While probably most cyclists wear neither, both are promoted by policy-makers with the government-backed *Cycle to Work Guarantee* toolkit (undated) stating that 'Most cyclists use a high visibility jacket or sash and bell so they can be seen and heard' (i.e., cyclists without high visibility clothing may not be seen).

A cyclist's choice of clothing is politicised and wearing the wrong clothing can feel entirely wrong. The cyclist must negotiate conflicting and competing pressures from other cyclists, non-cyclists, governmental agencies, and others. The past few decades have seen pressure to be ever

more 'visible'. Fluorescent and reflective products are available for day and night time: arm & leg bands, rucksack covers, sashes and belts, waistcoats and jackets, safety flags and reflective tapes. Yet despite the pressure to wear such clothing and the blaming that occurs if a non-high viz cyclist is hit (MacMichael 2010), many feel sceptical about its efficacy. One interviewee from Hull, while stressing his credentials as a wearer of high viz clothing and castigating others who did not, still claimed that its widespread use had led to 'high viz blindness'.

Some interviewees stated that they deliberately chose to wear clothing identifying them as a cyclist to stake a claim to respect. UK anti-cycling discourses (see TfL 2010) frequently refer to the 'unregulated' nature of cycling, so looking 'like a cyclist' could be a way of professionalising oneself:

'It also makes a statement to people that you actually are not just somebody who's jumped on a bike. You're actually saying, I've got the uniform of a cyclist here.' (Cambridge, male, fifties)

Assuming 'the uniform of a cyclist' (for this interviewee, helmet and high viz) could be seen as a means of ensuring respect on the roads, within a society where cyclists are frequently stigmatised and seen as unskilled and incompetent. Following interviewees, I refer to this strategy as being a 'proper cyclist'; yet while some found it an attractive option, many found it off-putting and sought to dissociate themselves from it. Arguably, this professionalisation strategy is risky because cyclists face stigmatisation if defined as *too much* of a cyclist.

Limiting identity: not being a proper cyclist

A further form of identity negotiation relates to being what I call a 'proper cyclist'; but with identity denial here a source more of pride than of shame. In other words, while most interviewees wanted to be good cyclists, many sought to distance themselves from the image of a 'hardcore cyclist'. They made comments such as 'I'm not a cycle sort of fanatic you know but I've cycled all the rest of my life pretty much' (Hull, male, forties), distancing themselves from 'these hard core sporting cyclists' (female, Cambridge, twenties). As well as identity threats from not being a 'good cyclist' (competent in dress, riding, and maintenance), interviewees identified threats from being *too much of* a cyclist. Being competent at bicycle maintenance might be a good thing but being a 'bike nut' was not; while wearing a helmet might be a good thing, full-body Lycra was not.

Distancing themselves from 'proper cyclists', participants sought to establish cycling identities that, while competent, were not *too* competent. These 'everyday cyclists' seemed caught between the stigma of the bad (incompetent) cyclist and the stigma of sport (or being too competent). Within the wider project, we have studied club cyclists, who *did* see themselves as 'proper cyclists', distancing themselves from other types of cyclist with comments such as 'I wasn't a cyclist when I was younger' (meaning that the interviewee did not go on club rides but 'only' used his bicycle for transport).

Interviewees who perceived themselves as more 'everyday cyclists' often deprecated the cycling that they did by reference to some standard of 'proper cycling'.

'Well I cycle every day. I can't say I cycle a lot. It's daily trips to the shops and to visit my mother' (Hull, female, fifties).

Even cycling every day is not 'cycling a lot' as to 'cycle a lot' would imply being a 'proper cyclist' with cycling a central part of one's identity. 'Proper cyclists' were described as an exclusive, sporty club; 'serious cyclists with their Lycras and their hats and their gloves' (Cambridge, male, fifties). Distance and speed identified them; another Hull woman laughingly characterised herself as 'a plodder…not a racer'. Interviewees tended to say 'I wouldn't be fit enough' to accompany 'proper' cyclists on a group ride; or 'I couldn't go that far'.

'Every now and again when I'm cycling home I'll go past this big sort of cycling meet and see all of these guys, you know, fully Lycra'd up with the pointy helmets and it just doesn't appeal to me to do. I think I'm not fit enough to do that.' (Cambridge, male, thirties)

Wearing 'cycling gear' on the roads may (or may not) be seen as a mark of responsibility, but off road trouser ties and helmets may merely signify deviance. As Langham (2003: 226) states, '[f]ashion, dress and adornment … locate the actor either inside or outside a particular group'. Some cyclists spoke to us about being made fun of when appearing at work in high viz and carrying cycling-related objects such as helmets and panniers. This relates to the 'visibility' theme in the stigma literature; appearing with cycling props may instantly designate one as a cyclist to others, leading to negative reactions and/or to the voicing of unwelcome assumptions about beliefs, personality, attitudes or practices. As with other stigmatised identities, it can be easiest simply to

avoid such unwanted discussions by appearing not to possess the identity in question, to remain 'invisible' and pass as a non-cyclist in at least some contexts.

The social disapproval of cycling identities does not affect everyone equally, as different social identities can combine differently with a cycling identity. Clothing signifies both subcultural location and class (Twigg 2007), as can cycling itself although not always in predictable ways.[9] A Cambridge participant, a self-employed builder, told me that private clients often assumed when he turned up by bicycle that this meant his business was failing; however, he was then able to turn this around and explain that he was 'green' rather than unsuccessful, offering them additional 'green' building options. Conversely for salaried middle class people looking like a cyclist may be less problematic because the association of cycling with poverty is less of an identity threat.

However, such associations of cycling with class are contextually specific. While in Cambridge being a middle class cyclist seemed relatively unproblematic, this was less the case in Hull, where cycling is seen as more of a working class practice. In this case white collar employees may feel threatened by appearing as a cyclist because its signs appear more noticeable and strange, compared to manual workers who may wear specialist clothing for work purposes.

'You don't expect your lawyer to turn up on a bike, it just (laughs) you know, it just doesn't seem to ring true really does it? (laughs)' (Hull, male, forties)

This suggests another problem with seeking to be a 'competent' cyclist: the assumption that competent people do not cycle, that cycling is a mark of being a child or somehow deficient, and

certainly (in Hull at least) not associated with being a high status professional. (In the child-unfriendly UK, the association of childhood with cycling can be toxic, as illustrated by a recent advertising campaign on behalf of Transport for London entitled 'Lose your licence and you're just a kid again'.)

While being a 'proper cyclist' was associated with fitness, it was seen as carrying stereotypical and stigmatising markers of this kind of a cycling identity. Such markers seemed particularly threatening to men: the body of a 'proper cyclist' is gendered predominantly as male, immediately generating comparisons for men rather than women.

'Oh I would say an avid cyclist is somebody who like, they live and breathe it really. You know the sort, you'll see them when you're driving somewhere going up a really steep hill and all you can see is these legs like tree trunks (laughter)' (Hull, male, forties)

One of the few Cambridge interviewees who went on regular group rides described a difficult journey towards becoming a 'proper cyclist', marked with anxiety about his body:

'I carried on wearing jeans for cycling for a long time, into the 1980s. I just felt very shy about wearing Lycra and proper cycling shorts. Partly I felt embarrassed by my body and partly because I didn't think I was a proper cyclist and therefore I wasn't entitled to wear things like that.' (Cambridge male, forties)

For most interviewees, being 'too much' of a cyclist carried identity threats. This was not linked to disapproval of cycle campaigning (see Spinney 2010 and Batterbury 2003): while most interviewees were not members of campaign groups, very few referred negatively to cycle campaigners. On several occasions people criticised 'cycling fanatics' and I initially assumed they meant cycling advocates, but they were actually talking about 'proper cyclists'. The threat of being 'too much' of a cyclist seemed more focused around anxieties about body, fitness and appearance than around ideology and politics.

Conflicting identities: views from outside

One way in which cycling identities can contribute to the analysis of stigma is through developing our understanding of how identities are negotiated in relation to related and potentially conflicting identities. Stigmatised identities are frequently constructed as binaries or as exclusive: for example, people are categorised as 'disabled' or as 'non-disabled'. Similarly the stigmatising processes discussed above tend to construct 'cyclists' as a problematic group seen as by definition different to 'non-cyclists'. However, as with other identities, overlapping and multiple, sometimes conflicting identities exist: cyclists may also be drivers, public transport users, and pedestrians and even if not, they may attempt to see their own (and others') behaviour through the eyes of these other identities. Therefore, exploring how cyclists negotiate, assume and/or deny related identities can further develop our knowledge of how stigmatised identities work relationally.

While problems or conflicts with motorists were related by most interviewees, one commonly recurring interview theme was a desire to 'see both sides', particularly expressed by those who both drive and cycle: 'As a motorist I often find cyclists quite difficult to overtake so I see it from both sides.' (Hull, male, fifties). Interviewees attempted to discursively avoid conflict

with motorists; a popular Cambridge narrative spoke of how the view from the wheel transformed the Bad Cyclist into the Good Cyclist.

'If I'm driving at night now and I see a guy [cycling] without his lights that infuriates me. But I did that so many times, I just wouldn't bother with lights. So I think if you've never driven a car, as a bike rider you don't realise, I can see why people get infuriated sometimes with cyclists.' (Cambridge male, twenties).

In Cambridge (with car ownership rates above the national average) interviewees seemed particularly likely to express the 'driver's point of view'. However, this also happened in Hull where people would worry about 'getting in the way' of motor vehicles. Even some non- or infrequent drivers worried about their (or others') behaviour upsetting drivers:

'I feel terrible if I make a mistake and I do cause a car to screech to a halt (laughs). It happens occasionally. Just occasionally I do something really stupid.' (Cambridge, female, fifties)

'[I]f a car driver does something nice to you as a cyclist you don't want to not thank them coz then they might never stop for another cyclist again' (Hull, female, forties)

Some explicitly linked being a 'good cyclist' to getting out of the way of motorists, even though this might place them at risk of hitting potholes (if in the gutter) or (if on the pavement) coming into conflict with pedestrians.

'I always think that when you're cycling, obviously near the gutter, that it's so uneven and so rough and of course you can't move so far coz you're getting in the way of the traffic…you see a lot of cyclists that are blissfully unaware, or they do it on purpose, they're holding the traffic up and I won't hold the traffic up.' (Hull, female, fifties).

Such comments indicate the power of the discourse that it is cars that belong and take precedence on the roads. A minority did express resistance through criticising 'bad motorists'; for example, people in Hull tended to criticise bus drivers. Those interviewees who stressed the rights of cyclists over motorists expressed awareness of how their attitudes could be constructed (by drivers) as deviant. While the UK's National Cycle Training Standard teaches a 'confident' approach (DfT 2010a) this may be seen as deviant by motorists and cyclists themselves.

'I'm well behaved but I don't really expect cars to wait for me. Yeah. So I'm probably a very annoying cyclist.' (Cambridge, female, twenties)

[Talking about not giving way to cars]: 'I'm quite a confident cyclist so I suppose I do, I do tease the cars a little bit, I admit.' (Hull, male, forties).

Challenging stigma: bad cyclists and resisters

The pressure to define a 'good cyclist' may mean others, as well as oneself, are castigated for failing to meet these standards (Skinner and Rosen 2007). This resists stigmatising discourses (see e.g. Ronai and Cross 1998) by mobilising them against others, defined as 'bad cyclists'. In

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Cambridge, interviewees defined 'bad cyclists' either by reference to a specific group or specific behaviours, with foreign and language school students seen as a particular local problem.

> '[T]here are a lot of foreign students here and they don't actually quite understand, you know, they cycle two abreast chatting away, wobbling all over the place.' (Cambridge, male, forties)

Cycling two abreast is not illegal in the UK, but is seen as a sign of bad behaviour due to its perceived profligate sociality within a space where speedy movement is prioritised. Such social cycling reframes the road as street where leisurely behaviour is acceptable, but this is contested by the participant who understands the road as a functional space of fast movement.

While some interviewees focused on particular groups of 'bad cyclists', others described particular behaviours as problematic and risky. One frequently mentioned offence was cycling without lights, and several interviewees made (generally approving) references to enforcement campaigns.

> 'We have a lot of very bad cyclists who essentially ignore the rules of the road, travel without lights, that sort of thing.' (Cambridge male, forties)

Hull interviewees seemed less likely than the Cambridge group to criticise other cyclists or cycling practices, although a minority did criticise particular cycling behaviours or groups:

'[You] still see it now in the morning, people on dark mornings riding their bikes to work in dark clothing with no lights on the main road and they're just asking for trouble.' (Hull, male, fifties)

In Hull, pavement cycling has become a neighbourhood policing priority seen as risking the safety of others[10]. Around half our Hull cyclists had themselves been stopped for pavement cycling with penalties varying from a warning, to a fixed penalty charge, to being sent on a police-run education course. Many said they had been cycling on the pavement because they found the roads intimidating or dangerous. Some said that they would continue doing this and felt that the way the police treated cyclists was illegitimate.

'You get told off for cycling on the pavement and there are notices to say that you will be fined for cycling on the pavement and the obvious thoroughfares for cycles are prohibited for cycles.' (Hull, female, thirties)

Another strategy for countering stigma was the creation of an imagined counter-community. A Cambridge woman in her twenties spoke of 'a very big club that's very open and includes everyone potentially'. Some imagined communities are conditional or based around assumed subcultural identities; a Hull teenager spoke of pleasure in seeing fashionable young people cycling, while an older man felt that by wearing some 'correct' gear he would gain recognition from other cyclists even if he was 'only on the bottom ladder of [the cycling fraternity]'.

An imagined 'cycling community' is not necessarily at odds with criticisms of *particular* cyclists or groups of cyclists (c.f. Gilroy 2000 on policing the boundaries of 'race'). Like other responses expressed by interviewees, it represents a constant process of negotiation in the face of conflicting pressures and changing constraints. An idealisation of cycling as – for example – promoting a greater care for others than motorised modes can itself generate criticisms of cyclists who fail to live up to such high standards (standards which are not applied to car travellers or to public transport users). While cyclists remain a stigmatised group, it is not surprising if responses to this stigma tend to be limited and contradictory.

Discussion: the double stigma of cycling

This article has contributed to the stigma literature by exploring what happens when the 'particular social interaction' referenced by Goffman takes place in a transport context. Of course, different spheres of life are not well insulated from each other, and some of the stigmatising processes discussed here happen when cyclists are not riding their bicycles. However, transport identities are fundamentally rooted in the types of interactions and negotiated practices that happen in street space and the different ways that differently mobile citizens are treated there. The discussion above has demonstrated that stigmatising processes do operate in this context. One contribution has been to highlight the view 'from outside', where members of a stigmatised group explicitly criticise their own group from another group's viewpoint. While this is enabled by the overlapping nature of many transport identities, even some cyclists who did not drive appealed to the 'driver's view' of cyclists.

It would be useful to explore further competing processes of stigmatisation affecting different transport identities. Steinbach et al (2011) have pointed to the positive role the bicycle can

play within the identity narratives of some White middle-class Londoners. This relates to a construction of cycling as 'a morally worthy alternative to crowded underground trains, slow buses or expensive private cars' (Steinbach et al 2011: 1127), which could imply a stigmatisation of those who use motorised modes. What happens when two stigmas clash? Does the attempt to assert one's transport identity as 'morally worthy' always involve the stigmatisation of other identities? How are (stigmatised) transport identities – and other identities – used to inform political projects seeking to unite particular groups of mobile citizens? These are intriguing issues which should be explored elsewhere.[11]

Here, I have focused upon the strategies employed by cyclists to manage identity threats; from self-deprecation to classifying others as 'bad cyclists', to expressing scepticism about specialist clothing, to more explicit resistance to stigma. Frequently these strategies are employed together. This paper has shown that for cyclists in the UK, stigmas attached to the 'cyclist' identity are complex, and one can be too competent as well as not competent enough. Such perceptions are mediated by other social identities such as gender: the body of the 'proper cyclist' is defined as male with problematic repercussions for both men and women. Cyclists face pressure to manage motorists' predominantly negative perceptions of them, and may internalise these perceptions and direct them against others.

Car-dominated environments often represent 'hostile social environment[s]' (Biggs, 1997: 553) for cyclists, in which cycling is constructed as risky both physically and psychically (e.g. on Australia, Bonham and Koch 2010; Rissel et al 2010). Various incidents were reported by interviewees, from hit-and-run incidents to having objects thrown at them. Experiencing such

events without recourse or even, as one Hull interviewee put it, 'recognition' can lead to cyclists

wondering whether they are to blame. Dawn Foster, blogging about harassment and poor driving,

states that people ask her: 'What are you doing to make people so angry?' and replies:

> 'Honestly, nothing. I'm a good cyclist, I wear a helmet, always stop at traffic lights, indicate
>
> and I don't take up much space on the road[12].' (Foster 2010a)

Such defensiveness implies existential danger mirroring the physical danger motor vehicles

pose to cyclists. This is corroborated in the research; interviewees told of their own and others'

reluctance to assume cycling identities, and to wear clothes marking themselves out as a cyclist,

while a minority felt safer precisely when recognised as a 'proper cyclist'. Cyclists felt greater

responsibility for their mode of transport than would be expected of motorists and spoke self-

deprecatingly of failure to maintain bicycles[13]. Talk of learning to 'think like a cyclist' (Cambridge,

female, twenties) and to 'read the road' (Hull, female, fifties) described a combination of mental

and emotional responses that had to be learnt and maintained.

A defensive group identity was demonstrated by concern that bad behaviour by any cyclist

reflected badly upon other cyclists. Cyclists drew boundaries around 'who counts' as a cyclist,

drawing or breaking links with others who cycle, and making moral judgments (e.g. labelling as

'risky') about other cyclists' behaviour. Interviewees seemed accustomed to looking at their own

behaviour 'from outside', drawing upon experiences of driving or imagining themselves as a driver.

Being a cyclist involves not just managing a stigmatised identity but managing *other people's*

identities by seeing oneself from their perspective. Here one might draw from disability theory to

understand this (c.f. Aldred and Woodcock 2008). Cyclists fear being recognised and stigmatised (for example, through the possession of 'props' such as fluorescent jackets and helmets) yet simultaneously fear the consequences of *not being seen*.

The cycling-as-sport trope is problematic for 'everyday cyclists', suggesting attitudes and attributes with which they may not identify. 'Physical activity' has become de-normalised and commodified, understood as a practice requiring choice if not training, information and special equipment. As Welland (2006) points out, a public display of physical activity can 'become a public trial of bodily presentation… it may present a challenge to accepted understandings of age or an open demonstration of sexuality.' It may be met with ridicule or abuse and may carry identity threats by identifying one as 'unfit' or 'out of shape'. Moreover, where streets are defined as predominantly about (motorised) transport, an association of cycling with sport may cast it as an illegitimate use of space, akin for example to skateboarding (Khan 2009).

While access to transport mode mediates between other social identities and social outcomes, do transport modes themselves produce disadvantaged social identities (Trujillo 2010)? How does the fact that people 'choose' transport modes fit with established understandings of inequalities and injustice? In fact, not badly: from a social constructionist perspective, social injustices do not flow from essential properties of subjects (such as 'race') but are structured into a society producing such essentialised constructs. As Skinner and Rosen (2007: 90) argue, while this is shaped by social context and other social identities, transport modes themselves 'come to form part of people's identities'. And in the UK at least, cyclists must negotiate their way out of a

distinctive combined stigma of being both too competent (at 'being a cyclist') and not competent enough.

Finally, what are the policy implications? Firstly, policy-makers in the UK and other low-cycling countries need to be aware of the extent and nature of cycling stigma and its negative impacts on those who cycle. One of the features of cycling stigma (seen also in the interview data here) is a tendency to focus on 'bad cyclists' and to blame cyclists for crashes in which they are injured, despite the relatively low risk posed by cyclists (because of the bicycle's low weight and velocity compared to motor vehicles). Educational and enforcement campaigns need to be sensitively designed so that they do not reinforce this stigma. A 'bad example' from the 1980s involved posters stating baldly 'CYCLISTS: WILL YOUR NEXT LEFT TURN TAKE YOU TO THE HOSPITAL?' and 'BY 5 O'CLOCK IT WILL BE HARD TO SEE THIS POSTER LET ALONE YOU' (see Wall 1984). In promoting cycling the different and contextual associations of cycling with other social identities should be understood: culture (and politics) matters in shaping how cycling is understood and experienced differently by people of different classes, genders, and 'races'.

A second lesson for advocates might be that the popularity of cycle sport events and personalities will not necessarily make everyday utility and leisure cycling more attractive, given the negative associations of being a 'proper cyclist'. 'Everyday cyclists' and potential everyday cyclists do are unlikely to see the accoutrements of sports cycling (helmets, Lycra, bright clothing) as representing an image that they want to portray on their way to the shops, despite a 'toned down' version of this kit being associated with 'good cycling'. However, activists may find cause for

optimism in the fact that 'everyday cyclists' expressed little hostility towards cycle campaigners.

This suggests that perhaps, despite the complex and double stigma associated with being a cyclist,

scope remains for advocacy and activism to grow and in the process challenge the stigmas

associated with cycling.

Notes

[1]See www.cyclingcultures.org.uk/

[2] This in itself perpetuates the perception of deviance in assuming that there is a hypothecated 'road tax' and that cyclists are uninsured.

[3] As the authors of the DfT report point out, the workshop format may shape the data in specific ways; hence our use of a contrasting methodology may illuminate different points, making it potentially more likely that respondents might admit to stigmatised behaviour or challenge stigma.

[4] Around one in four Cambridge residents cycle to work (ten times the England and Wales average).

[5] All information from the UK Census; the most recent data referred to is from 2001.

[6] Cambridge has a large, relatively well resourced, active Cycling Campaign, while Hull currently does not, although several local CTC members are involved in advocacy.

[7] Thanks to a Hull stakeholder for pointing this out.

[8] For example, arriving by bicycle with or without a helmet can both provoke approval or disapproval, depending on the person's views.

[9] Her analysis of the age-ordering of clothes also applies to discussions around Lycra clothing and, for example, pejorative gendered and aged labels such as MAMIL – 'Middle aged man in Lycra'.

[10] Police also target cyclists riding at night without lights, but unlike in Cambridge this offence does not seem to provoke popular anger.

[11] During later fieldwork in Bristol I interviewed a film-maker who is also a hand-cyclist: she spoke eloquently of how disabled cyclists might feel marginalised within two already marginalised communities – and of her joint transport identity, being a driver as well as a hand-cyclist.

[12] Note the pressure to 'get out of the way' of motorists, as expressed by some interviewees.

[13] Here there is a contrast with Skinner and Rosen's research in Cambridge; which suggests different maintenance scripts are given in different situations – perhaps interviewer gender is important here.

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