

The walking commute – gendered and generationed

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Introduction

People are travelling between home and a workplace less often and are more often ‘trip-chaining’ where people combine two or more trips for differing purposes, such as dropping-off children at school on the way to work’ (UK National Travel Survey, Department for Transport 2018, 22)

The walking commute, as journey between home and employment or education, is changing significantly. As well the recognition of ‘trip-chaining’ the UK’s National Travel Survey also ascribes the decline of the ‘traditional’ commute to the increase in workers without a fixed place of work and the growing levels of home-working. The survey also found an overall decrease in commuting, but in particular in the walking (as well as car) commute, with more people in England commuting by public transport. The walking commute is also unevenly spread across urban areas. It is, understandably given the varying density of the urban form, most common in inner urban areas and least common in outer urban (Ibid). Intersecting with his spatial variation, the walking commute is also socially uneven – particular social groups are more and less likely to commute on foot and the experiences of this mobility practice are highly differentiated. This chapter is concerned with the way in which the walking commute is both gendered and generationed. The commute has most often referred to as the journey between home and a place of work as discrete social spaces that have particular and distinctive functions. But for the majority of the population, it is not this, but rather a complex and interconnected set of social, temporal and spatial mobile practices.

The walking commute is produced through the intersections of gender and generation. It is also gendered and generationed as the mobilities of particular social groups, most notably women, children and older people experience this form of commuting in particular ways and are consequently disadvantaged. The focus on gender and generation here is not disregarding of race, disability, ethnicity, sexuality and class etc. Indeed, it is recognised that gender and generation intersect with these. But it is nevertheless necessary to focus on particular social groups in order to understand their particular needs, as mobilities scholarship has done so with regard to gender (Priya Uteng and Cresswell 2008), generation (Murray and Robertson 2016a), disability (Parent 2016) and race (Nicolson 2016). The key argument in this chapter is that although walking is encouraged as a ‘sustainable’ and ‘active’ form of travel, and despite efforts to revitalise walking in cities, there remains persistent barriers to unproblematic walking and this creates injustice as those with no option are required to traverse the city using pavements that are invariably obstacle-laden, polluted, poorly lit; and are forced to take circuitous routes around cities that prioritise the radial travel of cars and heavy vehicles. This chapter looks at the ways in which through attending to gender and generation, we can challenge established thinking on the walking commute that invisibilises particular experiences. The walking commute is illustrated as an interdependent and intersected urban mobility practice.

The gendering and generationing of the walking commute

As mentioned, like all aspects of urban mobilities, the walking commute is bound up in gender and generation in that it is differentially ‘staged’ (Jensen 2013) and experienced in ways that exclude and marginalise according to gender and generation. Gender and generation are determined through spatial, social and cultural contexts and practices. The urban walking commute is a mobility practice that is determined by gender and generation (and their intersectionality) and at the same time gender and generation are created through a range of mobilities including the walking commute, albeit that this requires a redefining of this practice, as I will discuss later. Firstly, however, it is useful to consider the concepts of gender and generation in mobility terms, not to review the work being carried out in relation to these

concepts (see for example Murray and Robertson 2016a and Priya Uteng and Cresswell 2008), but rather to think about the ways in which they help us understand the changes in the urban walking commute.

There has been some focus in mobilities on the gendering of mobilities (Grieco and McQuaid 2012; Priya Uteng and Cresswell 2008), most recently in relation to mobility justice (Sheller 2018). This work has been mindful of the concept of gender as non-binary so that there is a range of complex relationships that make mobilities. With this in mind, and following on from my previous work, this chapter focuses mainly on one aspect of gender and that is the particular mobilities of women, which are often constrained by the positioning of women in social and mobile space (Law 1999). This is rooted in the historical associations and current practices of childcare and domestic labour, but also the control of women in public spaces (McDowell 1999; Massey 1994). In general, women still tend to do the majority of childcare and domestic labour and so they experience particular 'fixity constraints' (Kwan 2015) that are premised on the relationship between home and work, where work includes domestic labour. Gendered travel is a product of urban form, as low-density developments and urban sprawl means that those with temporal constraints or fixities are less able to access employment opportunities. Numerous studies have found that women experience temporal and spatial constraints due to caring roles, predominantly for children, but also for other people who are dependent on them, including older people. On the other hand, it is argued that the persistence of a gendered division of domestic labour means that compact developments are more likely to promote gender equality in relation to access to employment (Lo and Houston 2018).

Hence, the urban commute remains highly gendered in that in the UK, as in other western countries, men commute farther than women due to their child-caring responsibilities (McQuaid and Chen 2012). The gap between women and men in this regard may be narrowing, but this is happening slowly (Crane 2007). At the same time, in a similar vein to the social world as gendered, classes and raced, it is also generationed. As sociologist Leena Alanen (2010, 9) argues, in the 'system of social ordering' certain generational categories are dominated by others; that there is a 'generational ordering', which is reproduced in mobility practices. There has been some attendance to children's and older people's mobilities - both are invariably left behind in a world of acceleration and speed. The differential mobilities of children and older people also highlights the relationality of age and the wider conceptualisations of generation (Murray and Cortés-Morales, forthcoming). For focusing on generation also allows us to understand changes in the walking commute in a historical perspective. Different generations have experienced this mobility practice in different ways and have pulled these experiences through to different temporal frames – thus the practices and processes of generation create particular mobility practices.

It is the intersection of gender and generation that produces the differing patterns of the walking commute between men and women. Evidence shows that women have different commuting patterns to men in most national contexts (Boarnet and Hsu 2015; Roberts et al. 2011; Cristaldi 2005) Sánchez and González 2016) and this has been the case over generations. Women's spatial range is smaller, they are less likely engage in work-only related travel and more likely to make multiple trips in one outing: 'trip chaining'. Women's complex mobilities are compounded through intersections with other social categories and identities and with place. For example, McLafferty and Preston (1991) found that black and Hispanic women commute further than white men and women. Women and children are more likely to commute by walking (Department for Transport 2016), to both employment and school. This is a significant aspect of everyday mobilities; indeed, twenty per cent of all walking trips in England were for educational purposes in 2017 (including escorting). Travels to school and workplace are often linked as mothers drop their children off to school on the way to their workplace. The organisation of the commute often involves a complex set of negotiations and adaptations (Murray 2008; Murray and Doughty 2016). These complex mobilities are often the rationale for travelling by car as it is a faster way of moving between multiple destinations and parents, particularly mothers, are more likely to be time-poor. Of course, as discussed later, not everyone has access to a car and so these journeys become particularly difficult when walking is the only option. When children travel to school, without being accompanied by an adult, they are most likely to walk (DfT 2018). Again, this is not always through choice.

The walking commute in urban time and space

Historically, women and children have always had a turbulent association with walking in urban public spaces, both invisibilised and suppressed (Schmucki 2012). From pre-Enlightenment to post-industrialisation, different social groups are marked out in public space according to their mobility practices. Experiences are always intersectional, for example class and race have throughout history and in different places, determined where and when the gendered and generationed body could walk. In recent history, the walking commute is perhaps not entirely as expected. Pooley et al (1999) found that from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, women's overall commute was around the same distance as men. At that time, many men travelled to work by bike so although they had more flexibility than women, their journey was not necessarily longer. Before 1930, walking had been a more important means of travel for both men and women, but was from then on overtaken by car travel. Women at that time were more dependent on walking and therefore travelled at much slower speeds than men. It is really at this stage, that the differential commuting mobilities of men and women became marked and travelling more slowly impacted negatively on women's experiences and employment opportunities as they had to juggle childcare and household responsibilities.

There have been changes too in children's commuting patterns with an overall decline in walking, albeit with walking remaining the most practiced method of commuting. In their oral history study of mobility trends over time (1940s to 2000s), Pooley et al. (2005) found that the decline in walking to school is partly due to the changes in parental perceptions of harm, the complexities of everyday lives and time poverty. Nevertheless, they found that changes over time were minimal and there is generally continuity in mobility patterns rather than the stark changes that underpin discourse of protectionism. These are in part related to the generational rememberings of childhood that underscore many studies of children's mobilities (Murray and Cortés-Morales, forthcoming). There is often an association of walking with past freedoms in public space. Green (2009, 25) captures this as:

The rather romantic and idealised turn to much of the literature mourning the loss of walking in urban environments, assuming universal health and social benefits of a past golden age in which children walked to school, neighbours greeted each other while walking to local shops and the city was accessible to all.

Although there is also evidence to suggest that the impact of protectionism on children's mobilities is evidence across socio-economic groups, Markovich and Lucas (2011, 24) argue that middle class parents are more likely to exhibit 'behaviour aversion' as 'part of the 'bubble wrap generation' than children living in lower income household'. They argue that 'there is also an important gender and inter-generational component to this type of behaviour aversion, in relation to the adults responsible for chauffeuring children' (Markovich and Lucas 2011, 26).

Of course, walking has many advantages as a mode of travel, not least because, along with cycling, it is the least variable and therefore most reliable form of transport in terms of journey time (DfT 2016). As an 'active' form of travel it is considered to be free of the precarities of machinery and technologies. Walking is also considered to demand little in terms of infrastructure. These assumptions, however, as discussed later, are based on limited experiences of particular people. Beyond its value as a mode of transport, there is a wealth of literature that advances walking as a healthy form of travel, associated with a reduced incidence of a number of physical problems such as obesity, diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis, cardiovascular diseases, cholesterol level, and musculoskeletal problems and psychological wellbeing. In addition, walking for commuting is considered to hold therapeutic and spiritual benefits (Gatrell 2013; Guell et al. 2012). Walking as an 'active' form of commuting is considered to have specific health benefits for older people and children (Bopp et al 2014). The therapeutic benefits of the walking commute for children are especially evident when walking is a social activity, a 'walking bus' and this increases the proportion of children commuting (Gatrell 2013). However, this organised and social form of walking is more likely to be available in affluent areas and so the benefits of walking 'in its very slowness' (Gatrell 2013, 102) are limited by class.

Walking the commute is also considered to be beneficial to cities – ‘active’ forms of travel are promoted not only for their health benefits but as sustainable modes that neither disgorge air-polluting emissions nor consume the limited physical space of cities. Promoting walking in cities is seen to make them ‘liveable’, creating cities of bodies rather than cities of machines. Hence, making provisions for walking is central to policies such as ‘New Urbanism’, ‘Healthy-Active City’, ‘Smart Growth’, which have gained much traction in urban policy. There are also global urban policies that are aimed specifically at improving the urban form for older people – ‘Age-friendly cities’ and for children – the ‘children-friendly city initiative’, but their impact has been limited (Murray 2015). There appears to be little joined-up thinking in determining what makes a city friendly for all generations. Such thinking might attend more carefully to the need to slow down. As Moran et al. (2016, 57) suggest: ‘Pedestrians move relatively slow in space, while being open to absorb impressions from the environment. Therefore, they are likely to prefer diverse and complex environments, including multiple buildings of various types and diverse urban design elements (e.g., trees, benches, billboards).’ The slowness of walking creates particular sensory experiences and this varies with both generation (Murray and Järviuoma, forthcoming) and gender. In addition, studies have found that children’s walking is determined by the level of connectivity and accessibility of streets, the quality of walking infrastructure, and the availability of green space for walking. Urban forms that are more compact are unsurprisingly more walkable.

Re-defining the walking commute

As discussed, the traditional definition of the walking commute is changing in response to variations in mobility practices. These are themselves a product of changes in employment patterns and the recognition of interdependent mobility practices, which are both connected to gender and generation. However, what is considered to be a divergence from accepted descriptions of the walking commute remains entangled with normative understandings of walking and of commuting, and these understandings give rise to gendered and generationed mobilities. The walking commute, as an interdependent mobility practice, goes beyond the traditional notions of ‘walking’ and of ‘commuting’. Walking in urban areas is more traditionally associated with being outdoors, walking along a pavement or through an urban park. The commute, as a journey from a place of working or of education to a place of ‘home’ has changed. Looking through a mobilities lens means that both of these concepts have taken on different, more expanded, meanings in contemporary society. In conceptualising the walking commute in a way that is meaningful in understanding its relationship to broader mobility practices, it is useful to look critically at the concepts of walking and of commuting. Attending to gendered and generationed aspects of walking can help highlight some of the ways in which established ways of considering walking can be challenged.

Firstly, walking, as discussed is predominantly considered to be a means of commuting that is healthy for both people and cities. One of the most poignant studies of gender and generational walking was carried out number of years ago, Bostock (2001), who set out to challenge prevailing approaches to carlessness and health, which failed to understand the experiences of walking as a mobility practice that has both positive and negative health impacts. Her study of low-income young mothers found that lack of access to private and public forms of automobilization, which a significant proportion of the population take for granted gave rise to social and psychological distress. Bostock argues that walking can be emotionally draining if it is the only option available. Often compounded by poor physical environments, the young mothers in her study encountered a number of problems while walking. These included fatigue and stress, negative psycho-social effects of looking after fatigued children, and restrictions to limited geographical areas lacking shops, services, and social resources. Access to public transport for all the mothers was limited due to high fares and the prioritisation of other resource demands. As Bostock (Ibid., 16) found: ‘mothers used their bodies as a means to bridge the gap between responsibilities and resources’. There has been little comparable research since this study, and instead the emphasis has remained on walking as a pathway to healthier lifestyles.

Yet policies to promote walking remain at the centre of strategies aimed at transforming our urban spaces and make them more liveable as walking is unproblematically considered to bring benefits to the health of the walker as well as wider sustainability benefits. The concept of ‘walkability’, one of the basic principles of

urban policies 'for people' such as New Urbanism. This is important given the ways in which, for decades, the automobile has shaped the urban form, creating infrastructure that has divided communities and denied access to goods and services for those without a car. So it is not the advent of policies that promote walking per se that is at issue, but rather, as Bostock illuminated, the failure to acknowledge that walking, too, can be excluding. The uncritical advancement of walking (and cycling) as 'active' forms of travel, particularly in times of austerity with piecemeal urban improvement schemes, means that, again, particular interests are privileged over others. For example as Murray and Robertson (2016b) show in their study of 'shared space', a design approach that aims to promote urban streets 'for people', the space is used differentially according to gender and generation. Thus, for those who are not engaged in 'smart' urban development, there many barriers to walking and walking can create experiences of unliveability. The experience of walking in the city for certain groups of people is far from liveable. Levels of walkability has been found to be associated 'high-walkable' areas that are in middle class areas. Older people, children and women can be disadvantaged by infrastructure design (Hine 2011). For example, older people difficulties walking on uneven pavements, hills, ramps, traffic and crossing roads. The urban form creates exclusions and injustice in that many opportunities are simply not accessible by walking alone and public transport can sometimes be prohibitively expensive, especially for children in low income families (Mackett and Thoreau 2015). Levels of walkability are marked by social orderings. As Carpenter (2013, 125) argues we need to think about walking as 'embodied and embedded' socially and culturally and work from broader frame that incorporates prevailing 'professional, ideological and political agendas'.

However, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that walking is experienced in very different ways by different social groups. Mackett and Thoreau (2015) found that although walking is beneficial for health, older people are more likely than others to experience embodied limits to walking, both outdoors and indoors, especially in navigating steps and stairs. Children also, experience walking in divergent ways. In a study of inequalities in transport in the USA, Sanchez et al. (2003) found evidence that children who could not afford to travel on public transport missed school, especially in winter, due to the length of walk to school. In cities where the urban form is particular skewed towards car travel, and where personal safety in public space is a significant issue, particular groups, especially non-whites were particular susceptible due to their lack of access to car travel and the need to walk as the only available option. Similarly, in a study of the health benefits of walking in New Zealand, Baig et al. (2009) found that more girls than boys and white than non-white people walked, and that although walking was associated with health benefits for older people it could also be exhausting for this generation. In cities in the global south walking is often the only option, for children in particular, yet Porter et al. (2011) found that many experienced physical and mental distress on the commute to school. Of course, 'walking' is also often 'wheeling' and studies have demonstrated clearly the limits of the urban form to seamless movement in a wheelchair (Parent 2016) and with a children's pushchair (Cortés-Morales and Christensen 2014)

The second, and under-researched, aspect of the urban 'commute' that is often overlooked relates to the indoor spaces of the urban that are often overlooked in mobilities studies. The commute goes beyond the outdoor space that is between a place of work or education and the home. The indoor spaces of the urban are highly relevant to mobilities as not only are they an integral aspect of cities, but they are spaces in which an increasingly proportion of the commute is carried out and more workers remain at home to work. They commute between the micro spaces of the home and beyond to virtual spaces in which they connect with colleagues who are located all over the world. The commute no longer begins at the front door. The 'work' aspect of the commute is not always another place, and to classify it as such denies the myriad walking trips of carers, for children, older people, disabled people and people who are ill, in their own homes. The commute is not always carried out twice a day, as also demonstrated by these carers, as they move to and fro, from their 'home' to their 'work', which happen to be in the same building. The indoor places of the urban are often overlooked in urban and mobilities studies. The urban is not only the outdoor spaces of walking but also the indoor micro spaces of the home. Looking at the commute through gendered and generational lens means appreciating the significance of these spaces in people's everyday lives. This means looking more closely at home-working, which is more likely to be practiced by women. The commute is also a term applicable to people working outside traditional employment, such as those retired from work who

travel to care, volunteer and 'work' outside of formal employment. These micro mobilities are relational to mobilities at wider scales and their neglect means that we are missing the full picture. The walking commute goes beyond 'traditional' conceptualisations and attending to these will produce understandings that are applicable to all aspects of the urban commute.

Conclusion

As I have discussed, the walking commute is undergoing changes and these are gendered and generational. Some of these changes are acknowledged in contemporary studies of transport and mobilities, but there are significant aspects of the walking commute that are obscured by traditional approaches. A mobilities approach allows us to focus on the varying scales of the walking commute, from the micro to the macro and all that is in between. In doing so, we can appreciate the interdependencies between different groups of people and priorities of urban policies that promote walkability without considering how cities both deter walking for a significant proportion of their populations and induce a range of differential experiences so that the opportunities available in cities are not afforded to many. These micro scales of mobilities and their relationalities, require further study. In addition, the urban form has not kept pace with changes in social, economic and mobility practices. In order to do so, the walking commute should be understood as not only gendered and generationed but intersectional. This means understanding the ways in which intergenerational knowledge is produced and maintains particular mobility discourses and also understanding how approaching aspects of mobilities like the walking commute can help challenge some of the prevailing approaches.

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