

Deliberative Research for Deliberative Policy Making: Creating and Recreating Evidence in Transport Policy

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Despite promotion of evidence-based policy responses, there remains a knowledge gap between policy-makers and academia particularly in transport policy making, which is steeped in positivist traditions. A number of social policy academics have conceptualised research utilisation in relation to particular elements of social policy, but less attention has been paid to the integration of deliberative and interpretative research into transport policy. This article explores this through a study of the journey to school that used mobile and visual methods in an in-depth exploration of this element of everyday life.

Introduction

At all levels, transport policy has been slow to react in acknowledging the role of transport in the wider social policy arena and in particular to calls for more deliberative practices (Vigar, 2006). Incremental shifts in national transport policy since ‘new realism’ (Goodwin *et al.*, 1991) have been well documented (Doherty and Shaw, 2008; Glaister *et al.*, 2006; Terry, 2004; Vigar, 2002), however there has been a failure to fully embrace policies that are based on mobility needs rather than system needs. Moreover, consideration of transport issues within wider social policy debate is relatively new (Cahill, 2004), despite extensive evidence to suggest that transport and travel outlooks are intrinsically linked to issues of welfare and inclusion (Hine and Mitchell, 2003; Lucas, 2004). This is recognised in the Social Exclusion Unit’s report *Making Connections* (2003), in which transport is considered a key barrier to social inclusion. For children and young people in particular, recognition of travel issues specific to them is an issue raised in more deliberative studies of their social needs, including research carried out as part of the ‘Every child matters’ policy agenda (Kirby *et al.*, 2003).

On a national level, transport policy in the UK has been dominated by technocratic ideologies, which, since the 1960s, have led to this emphasis on the transport system rather than the cultures, practices and systems of mobility that are integral to society. The culture of transport planning in the UK is one that is dominated by the traditions of engineering and economics (Banister, 2002). Whilst there has been a shift in policy thinking, evidence-based policy retains the legacy of the era of ‘predict and provide’ with a continuing reliance on mathematical modelling and forecasting. This instrumental rationality is evident in the transport sector, where the effectiveness of policy is often based on operational success, measured on a ‘micro level on the basis of technical achievement’ (Shaoul *et al.*, 2007: 159). In addition, there is a focus on, evaluation of policy (Shaoul

et al., 2007), for example, of health (Health Scotland, 2007) and equality (Transport for London, 2004) impacts.

The dominant transport policy discourse has broadened to include notions of sustainability and equality. The recognition of the links between transport and social exclusion (Lyons, 2004) has led to the emergence of alternative discourses. In particular, there are calls for more rigorous research into the travel needs of groups considered to be mobility excluded (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003), such as older people (Metz, 2003) and young people (DfT, 2006). At the same time, transport research at national, regional and local levels has incorporated social research techniques, particularly in addressing issues of mobility exclusion (see, for example, Transport for London, 2004). Nevertheless, such studies do not often engage with the complexities of the mobile world and the cultures and practices within it. This article engages with theories of deliberative policy (Fischer, 2003) and models of research utilisation (Weiss, 1979) to explore the possibilities for the use of research based on interpretative and deliberative methodologies that seek to explore such complexities.

Evidence-based policy making featured strongly in New Labour's modernisation strategy (Cabinet Office, 1999) and with it came an increasingly instrumental view of research, as it became a means of legitimising social policy (Solesbury, 2001). This new approach also brought about a surge in academic writing on the subject (Elliot and Popay, 2000; Lawrence, 2006; Packwood, 2002; Nutley *et al.*, 2002; Wells, 2007) with the literature reflecting both the growth of evidence-based policy making since the late 1990s and the contested nature of the concept in encompassing both a range of ideological approaches to policy-making and different epistemological and ontological approaches to research. This article focuses on the use of a particular methodological approach that is both deliberative and interpretative as well as forms of knowledge that maximise accessibility by both policy makers and citizens in order to most effectively shape deliberative policy. Therefore, whilst drawing from more contemporary evidence-based policy-making literature, this article will also draw from longer established typologies of research utilisation such as that developed by Weiss (1979). The following discussion draws on debates around research utilisation models in exploring the role of interpretative research in informing transport policy at local, regional and national levels. In particular, it draws on the distinctive cultures of both researchers and practitioners in seeking a deeper understanding of the role of research in policy making through dialogue (Fischer, 2003; Locock and Boaz, 2004). Within this context, the article explores the extent to which a small-scale research project, which aimed to explore children and young people's travel experiences, can be effective in influencing local transport policy, relating to this particular social group and beyond.

Deliberation and research utilisation

In calling for 'approaches that emphasise deliberative interaction between citizens, analysts and decision makers, Fischer (2003: 14) advocates a 'bringing together' of politicians' and people's interests through participatory policy making. The research process can facilitate this by using deliberative approaches that both allow a rigorous exploration of elements of everyday life and create knowledge in an accessible form to be incorporated into the deliberative policy framework. It is useful to begin a discussion of the usefulness of particular approaches to researching everyday mobilities through

considering the different ways that research can be incorporated into the policy process – a task that has been underway since the 1950s – with Lindblom's (1959) analysis of the research utilisation process as a 'muddling through'. Weiss (1979) then set out to conceptualise research utilisation more comprehensively, providing a typology based on seven 'meanings' of research utilisation that ranged from linear models to more deliberative models, where social scientists and policy makers interact within a wider intellectual discourse. This model has been honed by social scientists and applied to a range of policy settings, particularly in health and education (Elliot and Popay, 2000; Lawrence, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2002). A number of key groupings of models emerge that can be applied to policy-making arenas, such as transport.

Firstly, there are models that illustrate a scenario where research is used to fill a gap in knowledge in the policy process. They assume a clearly defined space for research, with a customer/client relationship between the researcher and policy maker. Research is commissioned on the basis of clearly defined research problems, such as through the Department for Transport's Evidence and Research Strategy (DfT, 2008). The problems associated with these models, identified by both Elliot and Popay (2000) and Lawrence (2006) are based on the complexity of both the research and policy processes where policy problems are often difficult to define and research is not necessarily easily transferable between researchers and policy makers (Elliot and Popay, 2000; Lawrence, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2002).

Secondly, there are models that involve some level of interaction between researchers and policy makers in a context where roles may be overlapping or where intermediaries are required to translate research outcomes. Young *et al.*, (2002) illustrate such interactive models with the coming together of research and policy through the acceptance of certain academics and consultants such as Colin Buchannan, whose influential report *Traffic in Towns* (Ministry of Transport, 1963) continues to shape urban transport systems. Although these models may better reflect the 'circuitous and tangled' interface between research and policy (Elliot and Popay, 2000), they remain technocratic in nature, value neutral and undemocratic (Fischer, 2003) and therefore do not encompass deliberative processes predicated on citizen involvement. A more deliberative process of communication between policy makers and knowledge producers suggests a renewed openness to interpretative and deliberative research, engaging discursively with expert-driven professional disciplines, such as transport planning, where power is maintained through legitimating of expert knowledge. Such dominant discourses need to be challenged by a 'continuous interchange of ideas, interpretations and criticisms among social scientists and other political actors' Fischer (2003: 36).

The third type of research utilisation model is based on this more deliberative approach that recognises the nature of the research and policy processes. Here social knowledge is contestable, created through interaction and dialogue, which become an integral part of the research to policy process. The subject can therefore be transformed through the study where 'knowledge is absorbed into everyday life, appropriated and transformed by lay people to be fed back to those studying the social world' (Elliot and Popay, 2000: 462). There is a joint construction of social knowledge based on dialogue between social science and the social world, so that the process should include two-way communication between researchers, policy makers and citizens; examine the contexts in which research is to be implemented; and continue to interpret and re-contextualise the research within the implementation context. These models recognise

the nature of the research process in maintaining its political impartiality and creativity, whilst acknowledging the messiness (Shulock, 1999) of policy making, with research becoming 'an instrument of the democratic process' (Young *et al.*, 2002: 218) and narrow instrumentalism replaced with more deliberative processes. The question of how research can be democratised in this way, however, remains. Exploring the ways in which research is both carried out and the way the research outcomes are produced and reproduced in a process of ongoing deliberation may provide the answer. The context for this exploration is an interpretative research study of an element of everyday mobility, the journey to school.

Deliberating the journey to school

Policies on school travel

Policy relating to the journey to school performs a relatively minor role in local transport policy. However, it is neither insignificant nor uncontested. School travel plans have been in place in the UK since the mid 1990s when Sustrans developed the Safe Routes to School programme (Sustrans, 2005). There has since been much government activity around school travel, particularly through New Labour policies that aimed to make transport more sustainable. In 1998, the government set up the School Travel Advisory Group (STAG), to develop the government's programme on school travel initiatives. The members of STAG included representatives of parents, teachers and governors, business, experts in child health, road safety and school transport and a range of local authorities from around the country, but notably no children and young people. There was also a significant funding programme, with an initial £9m investment in the form of bursaries to finance travel planners in local authorities (DTLR, 2001). Local authorities are also advised on promoting safe and sustainable travel to school through guidance on the submission of Local Transport Plans (LTPs) (Local Implementation Plans in London), which must adhere to national (and mayoral in London) policy on transport.

The focus of government policy to date, in relation to school travel, has been on minimising environmental impacts of increased school journey traffic and maximising children and young people's safety (see for example DfES and DfT, 2003), without considering the wider implications of changing mobility patterns. The emphasis on environmental and safety aspects contributes to a culture of blame surrounding mothering (see Root *et al.*, 2000 and Furedi, 2001) and ultimately acculturates a climate of risk aversion and dependent mobility. Issues relevant to gender and generation are often sidelined in the policy arena, despite women and children and young people being regarded by government as social groups with particular transport needs (DfT, 2006). In addition, evaluations of the school travel planning programme in relation to these aims have produced mixed results. The Department for Transport's evaluation (DfT, 2005) of the impact of the school travel advisers and the extent of modal shift following the introduction of school travel plans found that overall there was little evidence of modal shift, although there had been significant shift from car to more sustainable modes in a number of schools. In addition, research which studied the impact of site-specific 'expert' guidance from travel planners found no evidence of changes in children and young people's travel patterns, or reductions in 'parental fears' about children's safety (Rowland *et al.*, 2003).

Researching the school journey

My research sought to challenge assumptions about this part of everyday mobility, particularly those relating to parental risk-taking and the passivity of children and young people in the decision-making process in the context of their decreasing independent mobility (Hillman *et al.*, 1990; Joshi and McLean, 1995, O'Brien *et al.*, 2000; Pooley *et al.*, 2005). Policy practices with regard to school travel can be seen to be legitimating an expert-led discourse, which is adultist¹ in approach; children and young people's concerns are often sidelined. The House of Commons Transport Select Committee (2004) found that existing research on school travel (in particular Bradshaw and Jones, 2000, finding that improvement to public transport could significantly change travel behaviour) has not been adequately integrated into the government's strategy around school travel. Current policy making around children and young people's travel falls short in establishing an ongoing interaction and communication that is part of the deliberative policy process advocated in 'Every child matters' (Kirby *et al.*, 2003). The recent research by the Department for Transport (2006), discussed previously, found that young people felt their views were not listened to *because* they were not adults.

More often, transport policy at all levels does not reflect children and young people's agency in determining their mobilities, limiting knowledge of young people's mobility practices. Interpretative research is needed to appreciate that the school journey is about more than transport and risk management, that it is a distinct space in which children can potentially experience childhood on their terms. The research methodology adopted in this my research (Murray, 2009a) aimed to engage with children and young people in a way that illuminated this potential, using an ethnographic approach that allowed an in-depth exploration of mobility experiences over the lifecourse.

The research took place in a city on the south coast of England. Twenty-five young people from a range of social backgrounds and in different urban contexts filmed their journey to or from school, describing their feelings and responses to mobile space as they travelled. The children and young people then took part in film-elicitation interviews, where the young people's footage acted as a focus of discussion. In addition, eighteen mothers took part in narrative interviews in which they provided an account of their experience of travel through their lives. The young people's films, the film-elicitation interviews and the narrative interviews carried out with their mothers provided an insight into the role of personal biography in mobility decision making; the importance of social networking and local cultures of risk; the impacts of lifestage on risk landscapes and the inextricable links between risk and cultures of mothering (Murray, 2009b). A number of key findings emerged from the research, which demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between mothers, children and young people, risk, mobility and space. One of the main areas of study was of risk and in particular the notion of everyday risk (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003), which for children and young people was found to be dependent on a range of factors that are socio-culturally determined and differed from adult experiences of risk. In recognising the complexity of the interplay between mothers, children and young people and risk on the journey to school, the distinctness of the space created by the school journey, and the importance of children and young people's agency in determining their own mobilities, the research suggested that policy solutions were not only transport based, but related to wider social policy.

Overall, the research proposed that the complexity of the relationship between mothers and their children's risk and mobility should be acknowledged and policies that encompass the gendered nature of this relationship should be pursued. Recommendations included transport planners and policy makers working more closely with schools, using deliberative practices, to facilitate the social and emotional aspects of both walking and travelling by bus. In addition, the need for less-risky spaces, where children and young people can develop skills to negotiate more complex and riskier mobile spaces should be recognised. It was suggested that school travel planning should be critically re-assessed in order to both address problems within its current remit, and that its remit be broadened to better incorporate the needs of both children and young people and mothers. Indeed few of the children and young people in this study were aware of the implementation of School Travel Plans in their schools, despite all the schools involved having attempted engagement. If the model of school travel planning is to remain, this research suggested that it could be extended and re-focused on the welfare and involvement of schoolchildren, rather than adultist notions of safety and sustainability.

As discussed, the current transport policy-making process does not adequately encompass the views of young people, particularly on issues of direct relevance to them, such as the journey to school. Although young people were incorporated in research leading to the Department for Transport report: *Young People and Transport: Their Needs and Requirements* (DfT, 2006), there is a need to both involve young people in research that adopts methods appropriate to them and to directly engage with them at a local level. This research demonstrated that everyday risks identified by children and young people may be overlooked within adultist notions of risk. Therefore, problems that could be relatively simple to tackle, such as cleaning up the areas around school, could have a significant impact on walking for young people. There is a need to incorporate and acknowledge young people's autonomy in shaping their mobility and a good place to start in seeking this is to establish an ongoing dialogue with young people themselves. This is particularly important given the significance of the school journey space for young people's social and emotional wellbeing. In this research, young people identified with space on social and emotional levels, mapping out landmarks of risk and security in relation to this. Given the complexity of the research findings and the implications for transport policy, particularly at a local level, the dissemination of the results to policy makers was considered a particularly crucial stage in deliberating the issues.

Government at national, regional and local levels receives an abundance of written research papers, which cannot be adequately examined (Young *et al.*, 2002). This research used an alternative focus for communication and engagement with policy makers and interested citizens, a short film based entirely on video footage shot by the children and young people in the study.² The film is structured around the four main themes that emerged from the research in relation to young people's experiences of the school journey: taking risks, having fun, exploring and making choices. The key message from the film was 'that children and young people might have different ideas [to government] about what is safe and what is risky and what is sustainable, and that the government needs to understand more about how important this space is for children and young people' (excerpt from the introduction to the film, 'Through our eyes'). This message is accompanied by various images, all filmed by the young people, depicting their experiences of the school journey, from walking along a busy road, getting on the school bus and driving along in a car. The film shows the wide range of different experiences that children and young people have

and the risks they encounter, the space as a context for enjoyment a learning environment and as a space that they mark with landmarks and where they establish identities. The ability to communicate both in writing and visually provided the opportunity to widen the range of engagement, with the film acting as a catalyst for discussion and familiarisation with young people's everyday lives. The ongoing audiencing of the film provides the opportunity to continue developing a dialogue based on these issues.

Using the research

In applying the models of research utilisation to an evaluation of this research in influencing policy, it is apparent that there are various layers of take-up of the research findings, the boundaries between which are often indistinct and overlapping. These different layers can be mapped to specific models of research utilisation, but in a way that is often difficult to characterise given the political context and pragmatic limitations. On the one hand, the take-up of research can be seen as a 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959) as prevailing political cultures are challenged on an incremental basis. This was to some extent a reflection of the use of contacts and insights gained during my own experience in a particular transport policy making setting, as a transport researcher and planner in London local and regional government. At the beginning of the process, I anticipated that meetings would be held with national, regional and local policy makers and practitioners. However, in practice, although both the Department of Transport and Department for Children, Schools and Families responded to the research findings booklet with interest, the latter replied saying that they did 'not wish to take up [my] kind offer to meet and discuss [my] research findings'. Although my research found that none of the children and young people in the research had been involved with, and had little knowledge of, school travel plans, the DCSF's written response to the research findings illustrates the inherently political nature of the policy process:

Children are heavily involved in the development of School Travel Plans, which go beyond parameters you describe. Work is also being done to encompass the home to school journey into the curriculum. Regional School Travel Curriculum Advisers are piloting this work, with lesson plans being tailored to the necessary elements of sustainability and safety, and being expanded into attracting children to new methods of travel which are interactive, fun and informative. This gives children the opportunity to investigate issues that affect them.

Here the government department seems to have 'taken a stand that research is unlikely to shake' (Weiss, 1979: 429), thus limiting engagement with more critical research and reflective of power differentials between national and local policy-making bodies. The response of both national organisations may reflect the intransigence of national policy-making bodies discussed previously; cultural and structural barriers within organisations; (Fischer, 2003) and formal or informal notions of the value of evidence within a hierarchy (Pawson, 2006). A number of meetings were held with Transport for London, a regional organisation, but did not result in ongoing dialogue, perhaps for similar reasons.

Some of the responses to the film also illustrated the divergent cultures of research and policy. For example, a number of policy makers were concerned about the scripted nature of the film's introduction and felt that they were being deceived into thinking that the message was produced by a child rather than by me. This criticism is acknowledged,

but raises the question of the legitimacy of researchers in interpreting research data and particularly visual data. Interview data is always interpreted and presented in a certain way, with researchers making decisions about how and why particular quotes are included. Although visual presentation of findings is often more compelling, it is also subject to criticisms based on notions of truth and validation associated with the visual image (see for example Sekula, 1982). However, the young participants in the research project felt that this form of presentation of findings best represented their feelings and experiences of the school journey and agreed that these were represented in the key message of the film.

In addition, some of the audience were concerned about the involvement of a filmmaker in the process: the potential 'conflict between her artistic aims' and the need to convey a message. However, the process of editing very disparate footage into a film that is visually appealing and tells a story was considered necessary in engaging a range of audiences as well as remaining representative of, and appealing to, the young people who took part in the research. The problems relating to the communication of the research findings, therefore, could be said to be related to the dominance of established professional discourses and the degree of openness to other discourses.

However, despite drawbacks, the dissemination of the research did result in ongoing dialogue between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, particularly with local transport policy makers. Some of this dialogue lingered on specific areas of interest rather than dealing with broader issues. For example, there was a tendency towards parochialism amongst some of the travel planners, with discussion dwelling on elements of the research that were within their remit. In particular, one of the main findings of the research is that mothers are the ultimate decision makers in terms of mobility independence for their children and that there is a complex set of reasons for these decisions. The message from this is that national, regional and local transport policy needs to encompass children and young people's travel within policy work carried out on gender and mobility, and indeed that gender needs to be given more prominence in these policy settings. However, there was a persistence of the view that 'we can do whatever but ultimately it comes down to the parents' and they need to 'be made to take more risks'. This illustrates that research outcomes can be considered, dismissed and reconsidered in an ongoing dialogical approach.

There were a number of positive exchanges with both policy makers and lay people interested in the issues raised in the research. Dialogue based on the research outcomes has led to the establishment of an ongoing relationship with both research participants and other lay actors involved in school travel, such as schoolchildren, parents and teachers. In particular, a good relationship was established with local transport planners, developed from the beginning of the research process. This has led to further research opportunities, with the transport planners expressing interest in being involved in not only research design but also in carrying out interviews. In addition, a number of issues emerged from the dialogue that developed during dissemination, including the importance of school culture in determining discourses around independent mobility; the role of fathers, who are 'less socially involved', in changing this; and the role of ethnicity in determining cultures of mobility. These 'findings' emerged through the ongoing deliberative process.

Although the importance of effective dissemination has been discussed elsewhere (Nutley *et al.*, 2002), it is this ongoing dialogue and the redefining of research outcomes that is crucial in supporting deliberative policy. As well as ensuring that the research

outputs are accessible and useable in deliberative processes, it is also important that the methodological approach is transparent, clearly stated and explicable. As Nutley, Davies and Walter (2002: 5) argue, there needs to be 'multiple channels of communication'. There also needs to be multiple forms of outputs and these should be relevant to the 'channel' taken. Rather than insist on the assimilation of policy recommendations, projects such as this can contribute more widely to theoretical and methodological debate as in Young *et al.*'s (2002) 'enlightenment' model. Research that does not produce clear 'actions' for policy makers is more likely to require further research and dialogue, in this case both within transport and beyond through the social sciences and to a range of policy arenas. As this dialogue needs to be contextualised within research disciplines³ and constantly evolving policy structures, it requires an extended process of communication between policy makers, researchers and lay actors. In this research, such dialogue began at the planning stage, through contact with the local transport planning authority, and then through ongoing contact and meetings during the research fieldwork. Further ongoing dialogue is likely to raise further issues.

Conclusion

It is evident from the research described above that particular methodological approaches and methods have the potential to encourage deliberative practices. The merits of research need not be limited to recommendations for specific change, but rather produce knowledge that can lead to the production of further knowledge through a process of dialogue. The dialogical model of research utilisation stresses the importance of the co-production of knowledge through ongoing debate. Such dialogue has been facilitated here by the adoption of a methodological approach that is both deliberative and interpretative. In addition, the use of visual methods of dissemination alongside textual methods produced visual narratives that can then be communicated, negotiated and interpreted into policy within social, spatial and economic contexts, as part of an ongoing dialogue. The importance of developing dissemination strategies that set the context for this ongoing dialogue is often overlooked in research projects, even though it is a crucial element of applied research. One of the aims of this research was to familiarise and enhance understanding of children and young people's lives in a way that can lead to positive changes and reduce their transport exclusion. The research dissemination strategy was deliberative in that it incorporated a visual element that has been instrumental in establishing an ongoing dialogue with local transport policy makers, as well as lay actors on a local level.

Using existing research utilisations frameworks, this article has sought to explore how the particular research outputs can aid the process of deliberative transport policy making at national, regional and local levels. Although the dominant professional discourses are being opened out to emerging discourses that incorporate societal need, there remains a gap between social research outcomes and deliberative practices and the transport policy process at all levels. It is apparent that the processes of transport policy making, as well as the ways in which research is assimilated into this process, need to change before it is possible to reduce this gap. In turn, methodological and theoretical outcomes will help inform future research. It is apparent that, although the relationship between research and policy in more powerful national policy-making structures can more easily be characterised by linear models, this oversimplifies the process. Although policy making at

regional and local levels is also highly political, there is more capacity for meaningful and effective dialogue between researchers and policy makers. Here the research utilisation process is less hindered by existing cultural, political and structural barriers within the transport policy-making process. Nevertheless, interpretative approaches to research can produce knowledge that may ultimately challenge existing cultures or develop a context in which this is possible.

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Notes

- 1 Used by James *et al.* (1998) to reflect the imposition of adult norms on children's everyday lives.
- 2 The film, 'Through our eyes', was written and directed by Lesley Murray and edited by Marie Lenclous.
- 3 For example on emerging theory on mobilities (Urry, 2007).

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