

# Ethnographies of Mobilities and Disruption: Summary report



## Key findings

### 1. Mobility change is embedded in everyday cultures and practices

Opportunities for transitions to lower carbon are revealed through looking at the ways in which mobility is entangled in everyday lives.

### 2. Disruption reveals opportunities for change

Focusing on disruption shows that there is capacity to change but this is dependent on social, cultural and spatial contexts.

### 3. Carbon reductions require social rather than individual change

The ability to translate disruptions into mobility practices that are lower carbon emitting is dependent on social difference – social and material constraints limit opportunities to adopt lower carbon mobility.

### 4. Looking beyond transport policy

It is not possible to significantly change mobility practices through transport policy alone as mobility is deeply embedded and entangled in a range of social practices. Policy needs to go beyond transport interventions.

## Research aims

This research examines everyday mobility and disruptions to mobilities using an ethnographic approach. The research in question is a work package within the larger project 'Disruption: Unlocking Low Carbon Travel' funded by Research Councils UK Energy Programme.

The objective of this work package is to understand the opportunities for changes in everyday mobility practices through the lens of disruption. The overarching aims of the research conducted therefore were to:

- Understand the ways mobilities are situated in temporal, social and geographical spaces and how are they constituted relationally;
- Explore the role of disruption within everyday mobile lives; and
- Examine how experiences of disruption help us identify ways that everyday mobilities can be disrupted to reduce carbon emissions.

## Methodology and methods

Between Spring 2012 and Summer 2014, 23 families and 36 individuals in Brighton, and 16 families and 25 individuals in Lancaster participated in the study. Working with families was particularly useful in understanding networks of support and interdependencies. The methodology was based on approaches developed in the 'mobilities turn' (Sheller and Urry 2006) and involved in-depth qualitative study of everyday lives and their context. We used a range of methods: life-history interviews, semi-structured interviews, go-alongs and filmed interviews, in addition to self-generated data collection utilising photography, video, scrap-books, diaries, Facebook posts, and blogs.

In particular participants were allowed to choose from the 'toolkit' of methods, which were used over an extended period of time. This 'toolkit' was particularly valuable in exploring everyday mobilities and their meanings in depth. It helped reveal the multiple ways that mobility is embedded in everyday life, and how the relationship between mobility and other activities changes over time. Life-history elements of interviews have highlighted the effects of past experiences of mobility on the present.

Discourse analysis also allowed us to make sense of interrelations between policy and practice: There are a number of dominant institutional discourses of mobility including: Technocratic, Rights to Mobility, Risk Minimisation, Sustainable Mobility. These can be played out interdependently between policy and everyday embodied mobilities through discourses of morality, modernity and freedom.

Analysis of practices (commuting, shopping, leisure etc.) rather than focusing on transport modes highlighted opportunities for policy to influence these practices beyond traditional transport policy. Attention to where and when people fit mobility practices into the other practices of everyday life highlights the potentials and limits of changes in response to disruptions, and in respond to the low carbon agenda more broadly.

## Implications for policy

The concepts of 'normality', 'routine' and 'habit' should be discarded as the baselines for understanding mobility. People are constantly negotiating disruptions to their everyday mobility, and this suggests there is capacity for change that needs to be unlocked. Viewing mobility practice through 'averages' obscures our view of this capacity.

But policy makers also need to recognise that the ability to change mobility is dependent on social and spatial context. Policies need to be targeted at those groups who have the capacity and resources to adopt mobilities that emit less carbon, and at the places where change is possible. They also need to operate at the societal level, rather than at the level of individuals, to ensure the emergence of a context in which low carbon mobility is possible, and to unlock the capacity for change that disruptions draw our attention to.

Policy-makers should be facilitated in engaging with a range of social groups to demonstrate the need for targeted policies that consider the needs of people in a more sophisticated way than segment analysis. Specific issues in people's everyday lives communicated to policy-makers through a film based on the findings of this work package could help initiate this dialogue.

It is not possible to significantly change mobility practices through transport policy alone as mobility is deeply embedded and entangled in a range of social practices Policy needs to go beyond transport interventions and address the factors that make mobility so essential in everyday life, and in particular the factors that make car driving so embedded in everyday lives.

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