

Reading cycling through the lens of trauma studies

Peter Cox, Professor in Sociology

peter.cox@chester.ac.uk

Andrew Reeves, Professor in Counselling Professions and Mental Health

a.reeves@chester.ac.uk

Narratives favourable to cycling advocacy frequently celebrate its capacity to articulate visions of freedom and highlight the positive benefits and co-benefits arising from increased levels of cycling activity, both at individual level and collectively in a wider social context. Social realities of cycling in situations where cycle travel is a minority and atypical travel mode (whether for leisure or utility purposes) can reveal very different stories. Frequently, the experience is one of background disquiet and perceived threat from other travellers. Cycling is often promoted on the basis of utilitarian functionality, whether for its potential for decarbonisation or as a means to cope with mental health difficulties. Both reveal a rather reductionist understanding that places it as an ideal tool for neoliberal models of dealing with structural problems in which individual actions can save on mental health or transport budgets.

Much dominant thinking about trauma is also currently pinned down in diagnostic frames and tied to expensive, expert, hierarchical forms of treatment: a curious parallel to the expert implementation of infrastructural provisions for cycling only weakly provisioning day to day cycling

Trauma studies as an academic and professional discipline extends beyond this framework and holds a critical and pluralist lens to this hierarchical approach to coping and recovery. Reading cycling as a mundane activity through the lens of trauma studies reveals a critique of uncritical presentations of cycling, and potentially will suggest paths and means toward more inclusive and transformative policy and action.

Our presentation/ paper elaborates three dimensions of interaction drawn from interpretative frames of trauma studies. The social-political context, the interpersonal context and the intrapersonal context each provide (interlocking and overlapping) means through which to mount a critical analysis of the ways in which cycling is constructed as an activity. Having described and explored these, our study it looks at the potential for the relationship to be read another way and towards understanding cycling as resistance: a potential means to actively challenge the control mechanisms inherent in current dominant modes of thinking about both the therapeutic relationship and a coping strategies for a high carbon world.