Trauma or Recovery? Exploring the fragility of older cycling biographies

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Why is this important?
Cycling cessation

Why is this important?

In contrast to driving cessation, we know little about volatility in cycling biographies or eventual cessation in later life:

• Cycling cessation in later life can be a highly distressing experience, leading to a loss of participation in desired activities (Ryan et al., 2016)

• People develop strategies to overcome fears or problems and to cycle for longer, including temporal negotiations

• Perceptions of cycle safety rely on social features (behaviour of other road users, fear of crime) next to spatial features

• Cycling may be able to sustain mobility for longer than walking (Jones et al., 2016)
What do we know?

- Fear of falling mainly prompts older people to quit cycling, especially among very old age groups (Anders et al., 2007; Prins et al., 2014)

- Cessation may be caused by cognitive abilities (reaction, memory, balance), more than by physical conditions (Ryan et al., 2016)

- Other reasons to stop cycling are perceived incompatibility with other modes or when having to carry children or groceries (Nijhuis, 2013)
Older cycling trajectories

**Reluctant**

**Resilient**

**Re-engaged**

Source: Breeze Network Newcastle & Gateshead

Source: Jones et al., 2016
Trauma and cycling

Elaine, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

“I cannot believe how I can move my legs now. At one time I used to have to lift this leg into the car, it was really bad. Now I can lift it up, I can lift my leg up. And I still cannot get on the bike right, I can’t lift my leg right onto the bike. I have to put the bike down and get over with one leg, because I don’t have much strength in my other. But I can still pedal, that’s the main thing. And I can go on the bike, I never thought I would.”

“Oh, I could do it for years, and go further. We hope to do it more because at the minute we haven’t done that much, we’re just coming here and we rode around for three days over the weekend when we went out on the bike. But hopefully when [sister’s] granddaughter goes back to school we can visit all the places, we park our bike and do our exercise and come back, go take it to the swimming baths, don’t we?”

“Elaine saw [fellow rider] come off her bike. She fell off and broke her hip and wrist, and it pulled her off. Elaine’s never been on a bike since. I mean I wanted to take her out loads of times, to just go around where she lives, but she’s lost her nerve.”

(Daisy, early-60s, Newcastle)
Karin, Rotterdam

“I couldn't make it to the shopping centre by foot. I started training, in my own way. 15 minutes walking a day, then 30, just to get some fitness back.

(…)

I couldn’t cycle at first. I had a hand injury and I couldn’t brake or even hold the handlebars, I couldn’t accelerate. On one moment I started driving again and at another point I could cycle again. (…) I can’t be happy sitting on my chair all the time, you have to be the type for that. One step further every day, I just had to deal with it.”
The fragility of cycling biographies

• Cycling as a competence: when and for whom?
• Cycling can be precarious, not just because of physical infrastructure or ‘soft features’

The relationality of cycling group dynamics

• Shared trauma, creating new mental barriers to cycling
• Shared recovery through recreation and accessing local activities
• Cycling as therapeutical aid, underlying the socio-spatial constellations that enable cycling
Are cases like Elaine’s “outliers”? 

- Analysis focusing on the continuity of cycling – or, for that matter, on uptake, infrastructural experience, health and wellbeing benefits – went at the expense of the ruptures, delays and returns of the mobile biography (Berg et al., 2014)

- Implications for cycling policies, cycling education and social/exercise on prescription: how to embed and sustain cycling in everyday mobility?

- Both cessation and recovery are bound up with the ageing experience
Where next?

• New study on older adults’ experiences of active mobility transformations and cycling in tourist cities

• Analysis of age-inclusiveness of new urban mobility policies and cycling promotion initiatives

• Continuing analysis of qualities and barriers to cycling over the lifecourse

References

