“We never stop cycling”

how bike schools support disabled people in overcoming barriers to cycling

Dag Balkmar, C&S, 24-25 August, Lund

Background

- Seniors and disabled people experience barriers manifested as inaccessible infrastructure, cost barriers, and safety concerns, including social concerns such as stigma and discrimination that affect their willingness to cycle
- People with disabilities remain underrepresented in cycling and are largely overlooked in policy and research, limiting opportunities for everyday cycling participation
- (Cox & Bartle, 2020; Clayton and Parkin, 2016; Wheels for Wellbeing, 2019).

The role of grassroot initiatives

- Cycling initiatives as a way of commoning mobility to promote more just, inclusive and greener mobilities (Sheller, 2018).
- 3 Swedish bike schools studied: disabled people and seniors; women immigrant background in socially disadvantaged neighbourhood
- 25 interviews collected: 4 disabled women – 21 participants and organisers – mainly women
- Barriers addressed: *Access, Competence, Cognitive appropriation*
- (Flamm and Kaufman, 2006; van der Kloof, 2022).

Grey disabilities – recruitment problems

- Recruitment – lack of recourses – establish trust
- ”Disability” - A barrier for recruitment for bike school targeting seniors
- Recruitment by linking seniors with the disability community, organisations that coordinate seniors did not want to be associated with “disability”
- Organisers refers to age and disability as a “grey zone,” because participants in the senior group would not identify as “disabled,” despite having Parkinson’s, stroke experiences, and severe balance issues.

Building competence: seniors re-learning cycling with trike bikes

- *I cried when I got on the bike. The organisers said, 'It's not dangerous, nothing will happen, I'm holding on to the bike, I am walking with you around the track.' […] He accompanied me the first and second times I was here, then on the third time I cycled by myself, so I am gaining confidence. (Hanna, balance problems)*
- All learned to use trikes –> most remained *potential* independent cyclist
- Lack of confidence, feeling unsafe in traffic, or facing various barriers related to assistance or access to specialised bikes.
- Breaking social isolation



Facilitating access for disabled individuals

- The disabled individuals seek access to bikes and a safe space to practice cycling for ”exercise and fitness”
- Assistance as barrier: participants require an assistant to cycle with them, which limits how often they can train.
- Karin: “For me, it’s the last time today [. . .]. I don’t have many assistant hours.” For Karin, access to cycling depends on the allocation of social services within the Swedish social care system.

Becoming cyclist – negotiating relations of care

- **Sonja**, (visually impaired): cycling is *"at the verge of what I'm capable of, but I'll do it anyway."* – For her, a motivator is how cycling affords independence from her husband: "*I want to be an independent woman who lives my own life; asking for help is a bit complicated. I don't want to be a nuisance; I want to fend for myself.*"
- **Hehna** says: "*When my husband was alive, I used to ride a two-wheeled bicycle, but he didn't want me to because of the risk of injury, and if I got hurt, I couldn't take care of him, he thought.*"

Care related challenges

- Barbro, 48, who has deafblindness, uses a side-by-side bike, which requires two people pedalling.
- Worried “that the other person thinks it's boring, and that affects me, and then my experience is not as fun as I feel that I'm forcing someone to ride a bike or walk with me."
- Sonja, Hehna, and Barbro all illustrate different forms of relationships in which they negotiate care relations as enablers and barriers to their access to cycling.



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The role of caregivers

- Assistants act as both enablers and barriers, and these relationships need to be understood within broader political contexts of social welfare systems.
- This highlights the multidimensional nature of accessibility and cycling competence - emphasising the role that volunteers, caregivers, and relatives can play (or fail to play) as affordances for one another in overcoming mobility barriers (Documasi, 2019).

Outcomes

Bike schools reduced barriers and improved cycling skills, but few seniors and no disabled participants expected to continue cycling independently.

Socialising and exercise were key motivators for seniors and disabled participants, while women with immigrant backgrounds showed the strongest intention to keep cycling.

Women with immigrant backgrounds highlighted multiple benefits of cycling, including access to work, social participation, mobility with children, lower transport costs, improved health, and environmental sustainability.

Their experiences differ from those of disabled cyclists because they can more readily adapt to prevailing norms of mobility -> individualised, solitary, able-bodied mobile subject

Mirror unequal conditions for mobility and the right to the city

Readings

- Balkmar, D., Sandström, L., Esteves, A., Fonseca, M. L., Holman, A., Popusoi, S., & Pugliese, F. (2026). Commoning Cycling: Grassroot Initiatives for Inclusive Mobility Transitions Among People Facing Barriers to Cycling. *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*, *0*(0).pp.1-17.
- Balkmar, D. 2026. Bike Schools' Impact on Disabled People and Cycling Inclusion. *Active Travel Studies*: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 5(2): 1–18. DOI: https:// doi.org/10.16997/ats.1926