Do sports cyclists also cycle for their daily trips? The permeability between recreational and utility cycling

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CONTEXT: POTENTIAL OF RECREATIONAL/SPORTS CYCLING

- Over 40% of the Swiss population engages in recreational/sports cycling – mountain biking, road biking, family strolls ; It is the 2nd most popular sport in the country (OFSPO, 2020).

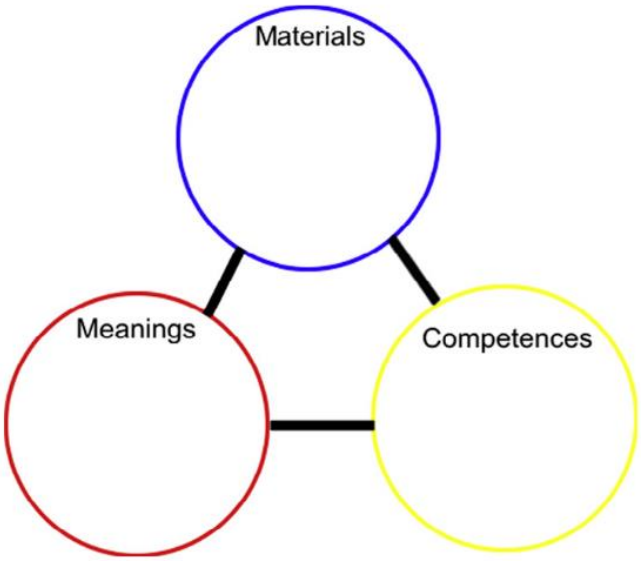
- Cycling promotion often aims to recruit new users, but could existing recreational/sports cyclists instead hold an untapped potential for expanding utility cycling ?

- **What is the "permeability" between recreational and utility cycling ?**
- Recreational and utility cycling influence each other, but the mechanism linking them remain unclear:
  - Gateway effect from recreational cycling to utility cycling (Boyer, 2018)
  - Behavioural spillover: (Piras et al. 2021) of recreational cycling to utility cycling
  - Reciprocal self-reinforcing effect through experience, pleasure, habit (Kroesen et al. 2014)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY

Nexus of «doings» and «sayings, », models of activity performed or carried by participants (Schatzki, 2002, Shove & Walker, 2014, In Klitkou et al., 2022).

Practices as an assemblage of three interconnected elements (Shove et al, 2012)



Materials: things, technologies, physical entities, stuff making up objects.

Meanings: symbolic, ideas and aspirations.

Competences: skill, know-how, technique.

(Spotswood et al. 2015)

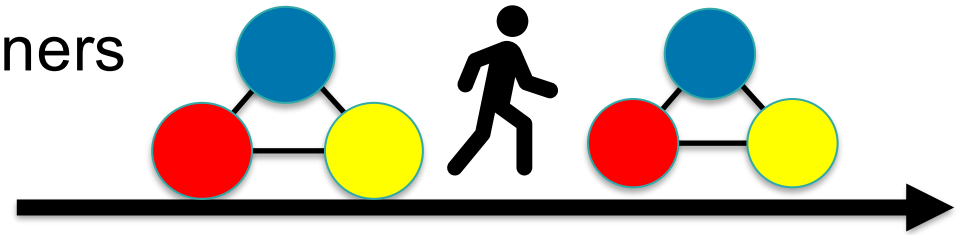
Bicycles, equipment, cycling infrastructure

Image of cycling (sports, leisure, danger), motivations (fun, health, efficiency, etc.)

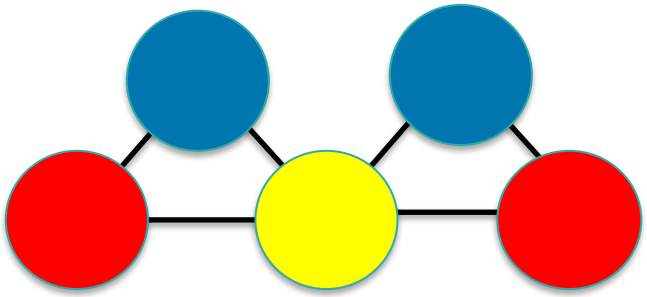
Fitness, handling, route planning, mechanical, repair

PERMEABILITY IN SPT

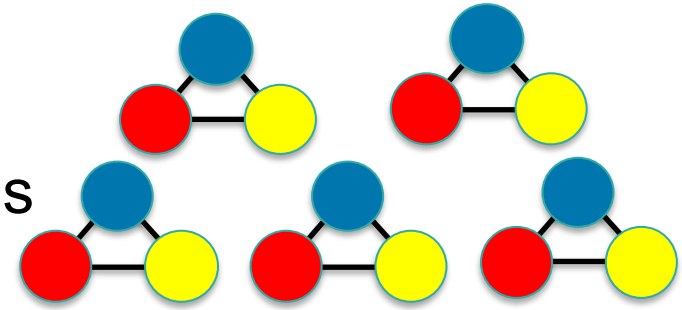
Practitioners



Elements



Constellations



Three mechanisms of permeability (i.e. behavioral spillover) in SPT (Nash et al. 2017) :

- Through **practitioners** (career-in-a-practice, continuum of practices)
- Through common **elements** between practices (e.g. shared materials, competences)
- Through **practice-arrangements** (same time or space or objective, e.g. daily life practices)

PERMEABILITY BETWEEN RECREATIONAL AND UTILITY CYCLING

Can social practice theory help us understand the permeability between these two sub-practices of cycling ?

- **Permeability through practitioners' careers** :
  - Most cyclists are not purely utilitarian or recreational but have a **mixed practice typology** of use (Félix et al., 2017);
  - Sport and utility are not separated but rather a **continuum** which the individual occupies at different times or moments (Cox, 2019)
  - Within the life course, cyclists engage in recreational and utility cycling at different moments of their '**cycling trajectory**' (Jones et al., 2015) and position within a '**career-in-a-practice**' (Greene & Rau, 2018)

- **Permeability through common elements:**
  - **Shared meanings**: motivation to cycle for physical activity, competitiveness is also present in utility cycling (Rérat, 2019), whereas pleasure/disconnection, but also danger/empathy, cyclist identity are also present for sports cycling (Jordi-Sánchez et al., 2022)
  - **Shared materials and competences** : there is a basic level of equipment and cycling skills common to all cycling practices (Ledsham et al., 2023)

- **Permeability through constellations of practices:**
  - E-cargo biking as a way to **bundle parenting, shopping, working** practices (Cass et al., 2025), long-distance commuting as a way to **combine sports and work practices** (Larsen, 2018).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the links between the elements of the practices of recreational and utility cycling ?

- What are the obstacles to recruiting practitioners from recreational cycling to utility cycling ?

DATA & METHODS

- Survey distributed to past participants to **Triathlon of Yverdon-les-Bains**, Switzerland (swim, bike, run) – competitive event but also leisure categories, diffused between 12 June and 3rd August 2025 in French / German

- Respondents: n= 306 (low response rate due to other concurrent surveys, specific theme, focus on event)
  - 71% male, average age 44.8 years, 64% full-time employees, few student retired or unemployed, 58% university-educated

- Analysis:
  1. **Permeability among practitioners**: frequency of utility cycling ;
  2. **Permeability between practice-elements**: materials, meanings, competences ;
  3. **Permeability between practice-arrangements**: obstacles to integrating utility cycling within daily mobility practices.

RESULTS

PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTITIONERS

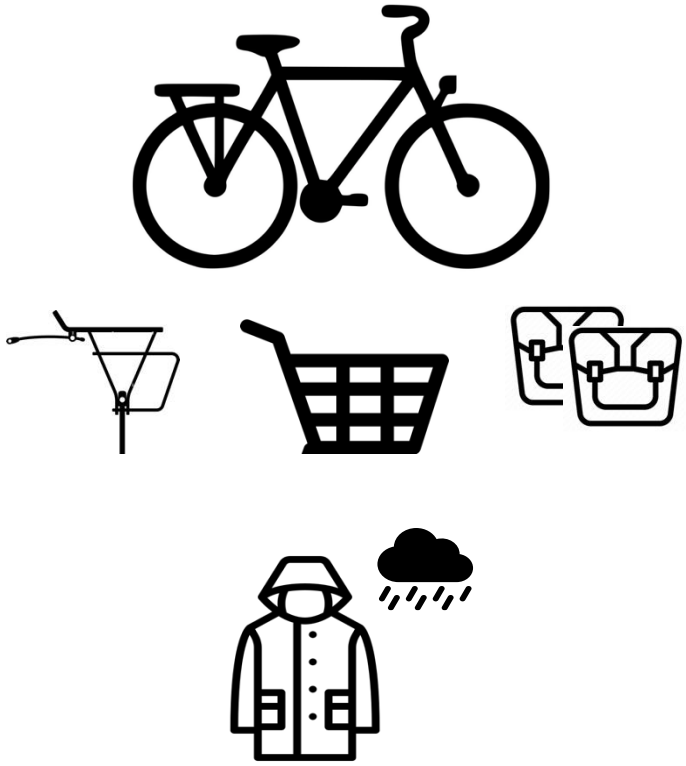
- **Utility cycling** is already widely practiced among respondents: 41% cycle to work at least weekly, 32% for leisure, 31% for shopping, 14% to take the train, 8% to take children to activities.

- Based on frequency of utility cycling, we distinguish two groups:
  - **Utility cyclists** (54.6%, n=167), at least 1x weekly (already “permeable”)
  - **Recreational cyclists** (45.4%, n=139), less often (still “impermeable”)
    - However, they cycle frequently for **sports** (63% weekly) and for recreation (11% weekly).
    - Differences in **profile** : +4%pt women, -17%pt urban dwellers
    - **Latent demand**: 79% would like to cycle more for their trips

PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTICE-ELEMENTS : MATERIALS

- Compared to utility cyclists, recreational cyclists are much less equipped in terms of:
- **City bicycle** (-26%pt)
- **Transport accessories:** luggage racks (-22%pt), panniers (-25%pt)
- **Rain clothing** (-28%pt)

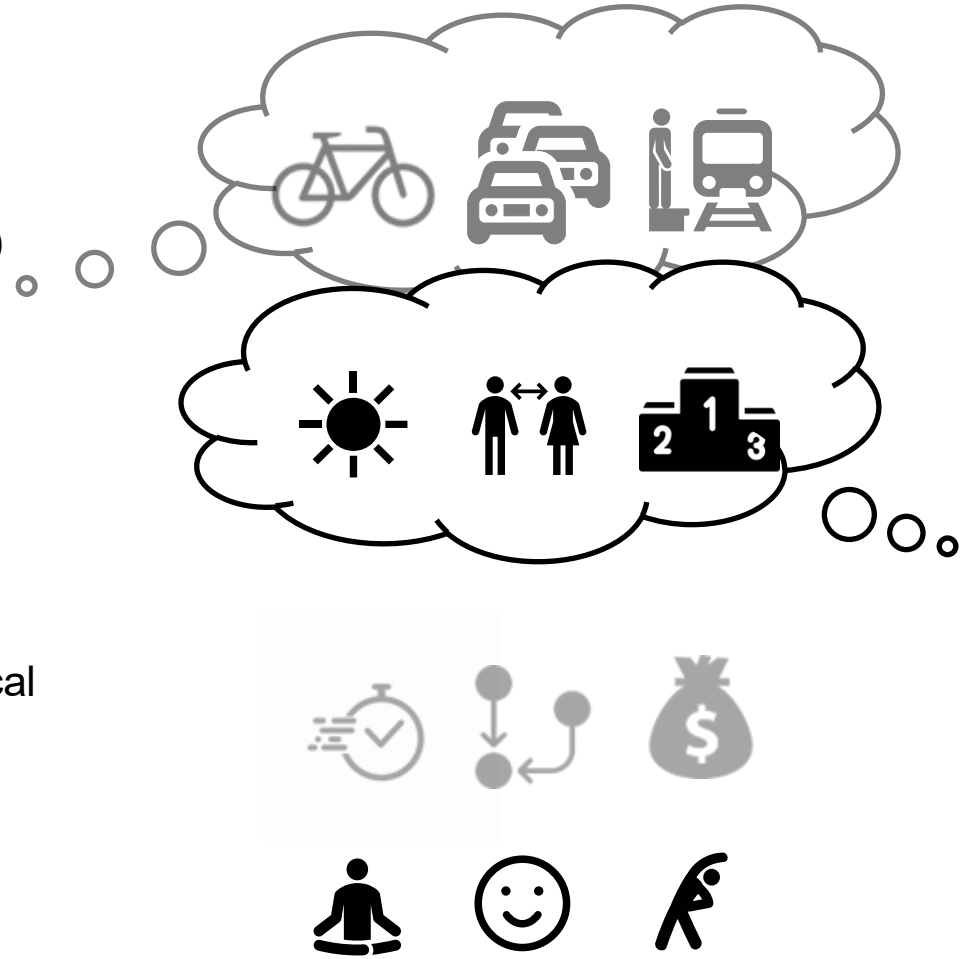
- BUT **causality** : this can be either a consequence of or a cause for not engaging in utility cycling



PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTICE-ELEMENTS : MEANINGS

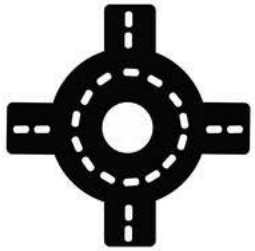
- The **image of cycling** as a means of transport is much less prevalent amongst recreational cyclists (-51%pt)
- BUT **shared image** of cycling as a leisure activity, social activity, competitive sport

- The practical **motivations** for cycling are less important for recreational cyclists: speed, efficiency (-38%pt), freedom, flexibility (-27%pt), economical (-23%pt), environment (-19%pt)
- BUT **shared intrinsic motivations** of pleasure, disconnection, exercise



PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTICE-ELEMENTS : COMPETENCES

- Recreational cyclists show similar levels of **comfort** to utility cyclists in most urban riding situations (cycling with or without lanes, various speeds)
- Except for crossing **intersections** or roundabouts (-7%pt, -7%pt), **route planning** (-11%pt) and **bicycle repair** (-21%pt)
- They consider themselves less **“expert”** (-14%pt)
- > A matter of **experience** or just **confidence** ?



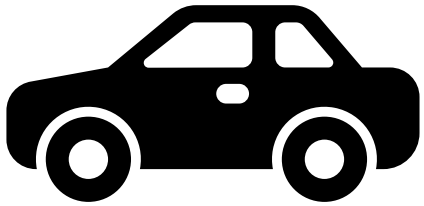






PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTICE-CONSTELLATIONS: DAILY MOBILITY PRACTICES

- More recreational cyclists **own a car** (+12%pt) or **several cars** (+24%pt)
- Many more of them **drive** on a daily basis (+41%pt)



- They also own more **public transport** season passes (+10%pt) and use public transport daily more (+6%pt)



- > Utility cycling **competes** with more established forms of daily mobility

PERMEABILITY AMONG PRACTICE-CONSTELLATIONS : OBSTACLES TO INTEGRATING UTILITY CYCLING

Competition from car:

- Too long distances (+36%pt)
- Preference for the car (+33%pt)
- Lack of time (+31%pt)
- Difficulty of transporting children (+25%pt)
- **> lacking integration into parenting practices**



Unpracticality of cycling:

- Avoiding cycling in bad weather or at night (+34%pt)
- Not wanting to sweat (+29%pt)
- Lack of comfortable bicycle (+28%pt)
- Preference for public transport (+18%pt)
- **> limited year-round use, integration into work practices**



Lack of safety:

- Danger of cycling in traffic (+17%pt), lack of cycle facilities on route (+ 19%pt), fear of theft (+11%pt)
- **> limited destinations, activity chains**



DISCUSSION: PERMEABILITY BETWEEN RECREATIONAL AND UTILITY CYCLING

- **Permeability in practitioners**: Over half of sports cyclists already cycle for utility trips weekly, latent potential for more cycling, few differences in profile.

- **Permeability in practice-elements**: Difficulty of recruiting sports cyclists due to misalignment in meanings of cycling (motivations/images), material (personal equipment and cycling infrastructure), rather than a lack of competences.

- **Permeability in practice-constellations**: Obstacles to integrating cycling within daily life practices (mobility, work, parenting, shopping) due to competition with automobility and public transport as established practices, lacking safety, and spatio-temporal constraints of households.

CONCLUSIONS

- SPT as a useful theoretical framework to understand the links between cycling practices ; **« permeability »** as a new concept to illustrate the quality of these links.

- Policy measures which could improve permeability:
  - **Materials: making utility cycling safer** through infrastructure, parking – precondition for cycling
  - **Meanings: normalising utility cycling** through campaigns to counter negative image, focusing on benefits (e.g. health, pleasure)
  - **Joining sports and utility cycling policies** together as one practice, facilitating transfer of elements between practices through common meanings or equipment

- Further research on permeabilities in cycling:
  - **International differences** : Are sports cyclists in the Netherlands more utility cyclists ? Where is there more permeability between practices and why ?
  - **Qualitative research** needed to better understand the quality of links, biographical approaches to permeability over life course.