

## **UNDERSTANDING HOW AND WHY WALKING AND CYCLING CHANGES OVER TIME IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS'; LIFE HISTORIES OF WALKING AND CYCLING EXPLORED WITHIN A LIFE COURSE FRAMEWORK**

### **Background**

This research is prompted by the long term decline in levels of W&C that has taken place alongside a dramatic shift towards motorised mobility. These trends have come to be viewed as problematic in the context of present challenges surrounding the contribution of transport carbon emissions to climate change, the dependence of the transport system on a depleting resource and the increasing burden of ill health related to low physical activity.

Understanding the change and continuity of W&C in the life course of individuals is potentially an important contribution to knowledge which could inform efforts to 'recover' levels of W&C. However the limited collection of longitudinal data on W&C renders the life course patterns of these behaviours unclear and unknowable from present sources. Present circumstances are privileged in the explanations of W&C behaviour that emerge from empirical research limited to aggregate time series and disaggregate cross-sectional data, leaving the events and experiences of the individual life unobserved and unconsidered for their influence on W&C.

The research questions for the project are;

**1) How and Why do individuals' walking and cycling change over their life course?**

**How and Why is walking and cycling affected by life course transitions and events?**

**2) What are the similarities and differences in the life course patterns of walking and cycling between parents and children?**

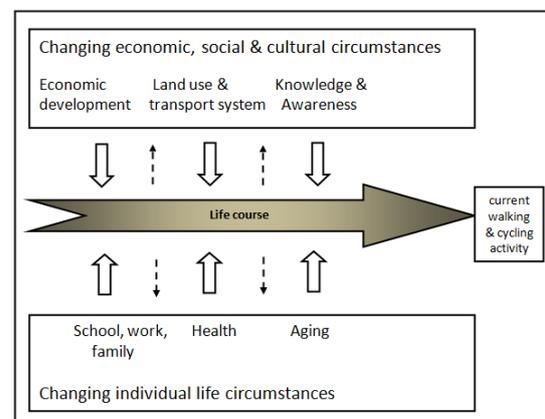
**To what extent are these similarities and differences related to wider social change and intergenerational influence?**

### **Research framework and design**

In an attempt to address the methodological constraints and knowledge gaps this research will employ a life course perspective. This is a broad theoretical framework well established in social sciences and now emerging in health research that is applied in descriptive and explanatory research on human development and aging within a constantly changing society.

In life course research the content of a person's life is conceived of as a set of interwoven age-graded trajectories pertaining to different domains of life e.g. education or health. Trajectories depict stability and change and are punctuated by transitions and turning points. The primary analytic themes of the life course perspective are drawn wider body of scholarship in from life span psychology and life course sociology and emphasises the influence of timing, process and context in the construction of the life course.

This research adapts a conceptual model from life course studies on food choice trajectories, presented below. A W&C trajectory developing in a context of macro and micro level change, adapted from Delaney and McCarthy, 2009. The model reflects the bi-directional but asymmetrical relationship of the trajectory to change in the economic, social and cultural changes as well as changes in individual life circumstances.



An interview methodology is used to construct trajectories from retrospective accounts of W&C experience over the life course. In a two-stage interview process participants complete a life history calendar detailing life history and W&C experience followed by a semi-structured interview focused on the transitions and turning points in W&C. Participant dyads are constructed from individuals born between 1946 and 1951, the leading edge of the so-called 'baby boom generation', and their adult children. The two groups are titled 'Parents' and 'Children'. Biographies, timelines and text and visual depictions of the W&C trajectories are worked up from the interview material for each participant. Taken together these case summaries are the basis for answering research questions;

## Emergent findings

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Analysis observes a simplistic distinction between W&C for transport and recreation. From interviews with 9 Parents and 7 Children across 6 families it is evident that trajectories of walking for transport are malleable, affected both positively and negatively by life course events and transitions. Walking for transport in childhood was a common feature of trajectories though the impact of motorised mobility was more evident in the Childrens' trajectories in childhood. Many of the Childrens' walking trajectories were negatively affected by their mothers returning to work.

Graduation to adult roles and schedules generally meant more complex and dispersed distributions of activity, during which walking could be displaced. Car ownership generally had a negative impact on walking. Those baby-boomers who went straight from school to employment got a car within a couple of years. Those who went to university got a car after graduating and starting work. The majority of the Children went to university and these went having already learnt to drive and having had some access to a car between 16 and 18. In most cases their university years were a return to a car-free state and had a positive impact on their walking. One of the Children got a car at university; the remainder got cars soon after starting work. One has yet to get a car.

Walking trajectories can be positively and negatively affected by residential and occupational relocations. Moves to a more rural and outer urban locations were generally recalled as having had a negative impact on walking and moves to inner urban areas a positive effect.

The walking trajectories of the Parents are more apparently gendered than those of their Children. This differentiation is mediated by parenthood and its impact on employment. The walking trajectories of male Parents were relatively more stable and unaffected by parenthood than female trajectories. Mothers in the Parents generation generally took a career break to raise children during which time their lives became more localised and their walking increased. This was followed by a return to work via part time work fitted around childcare. The transition to motherhood has been different for the two Children (both female) who have become parents. They took maternity leave before returning to work. This phase was still recalled as being a time of increased walking. Both also indicated that their partner's working schedule had been altered to share childcare responsibilities. This suggests that there may turn out to be less gender differentiation in the trajectories of younger cohorts as a consequence of more gender equal participation in employment and childcare.

Cycling trajectories are more readily categorized. Parents experienced cycling for recreation and transport in childhood whereas the Children were largely restricted to cycling for play within definite spatial limits. Participants from both the Parents and

Children recalled 'suspended trajectories' where cycling stopped after childhood. 'Reoccurring trajectories', where cycling was initiated as an adult following a break since childhood, were evident in both groups. Reoccurring trajectories range from several phases of cycling as an adult to just a one-off experience. Cycling in adulthood was either solely recreational or recreational and transport. Cycling for transport in adulthood was less common in the Children. A return to cycling could be facilitated by having an unused bike within the family, being invited by a friend or partner to go cycling, occasions to cycle on holiday, being influenced by a workplace cycle culture. A few Parents referred to their child's involvement in cycling as being a catalyst for their return to cycling. Two of the Children referred to being 'put to shame' by their parents cycling in adulthood. Phases of adulthood cycling could be ended by loss of a bike, moving to a house where bike storage was difficult, becoming a parent and loss of interest.

## Anticipated conclusions

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- Retrospective accounts of W&C indicate that W&C can be changed by life course events and transitions.
- The historical separation of the Parents and Children's life courses has meant for different early experiences of W&C.
- Inter-generational influence of trajectories is evident.
- The modern life course has evolved through social change. Younger cohorts experience a prolonged transition into adulthood and navigate parenthood and career differently to their parents. This appears to be having material effects on their W&C trajectories.
- Policy interventions to support life-long W&C should consider the adaptation of W&C behaviour through life course transitions and how trajectories of different cohorts are shaped by their unique intersection with the historical context.

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