Understanding walking and cycling with a life course perspective

The challenges for the health and transport sectors overlap in the promotion of walking and cycling. Understanding individual life course patterns of walking and cycling will help to achieve this, but is difficult with current data and approaches. This research is exploring the potential of life history interviews to construct walking and cycling biographies and understand the continuities and turning points involved.

It is a public policy objective to increase lifelong levels of walking and cycling in the general population given the benefits this will have on reducing the disease burden from physical inactivity and reducing congestion and carbon emissions in the transport sector. However, fulfilling this objective requires knowledge of the life course patterns of walking and cycling and this cannot be gained from cross-sectional data from population surveys. This project is adopting longitudinal research methods to seek to understand life course patterns of walking and cycling.

Longitudinal research of human behaviour is necessary to understand how current behaviour is influenced by past circumstances and experiences. Some studies have looked at health and travel behaviour in relation to major life events. Taking a longer term view, the life course perspective looks at behaviour development in the social and temporal context of the life course. Pertinent behaviour and experiences are organised into life course trajectories to facilitate understanding of change and continuity in behaviour in relation to life course events and transitions.

The project applies this perspective using life history interviews to understand life course patterns of walking and cycling from retrospective accounts. Interviews are being conducted with members of the baby-boom generation (born 1946-1950) and their children. Individual accounts are compared with those of contemporaries and family members. The interviews generate a personal walking and cycling timeline together with a narrative account.

Apparent from the first interviews is that the gendered responsibility for caring resonates within walking and cycling trajectories such that the walking and cycling patterns of females of the baby boomer generation were more frequently interrupted by role changes than males of their age group. Further, the historical separation between baby-boomer parent and child seems to have had significant implications. The children of baby-boomers were born into a more auto-dominated world, where acquisition of a driving licence was commonplace. The children of the baby boomers are having a different experience of parenthood and career than their parents which could have implications for their practice of walking and cycling.

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