

## **The importance of suits**

### **Transport planners co-constructions of gender, technology and sustainable mobility**

Malin Henriksson,

Linköping University, The Department of Thematic Studies – Technology and Social Change

581 83, Linköping, Sweden

#### **Introduction**

What do planners find interesting when they look at photographs depicting users of different modes of transport? For example, how do planners understand a photograph of a man in a suit, riding a bike? In this paper, I will discuss how planners construct gender in relation to transport artifacts. The discussion takes place in a sustainable mobility context.

Last spring I interviewed municipal officials responsible for traffic planning and/or reducing car use<sup>1</sup>. With me, I brought a number of photographs of both women and men, of different colors and age, using cars, bicycles, and public transport<sup>2</sup>. I wanted to know how the officials interpreted sustainable mobility in relation to users. In the interviews, we discussed if different users are more or less likely to make sustainable travel choices. What I found was that a lot of attention was given to discussing, understanding, and negotiating men's relationship to sustainable mobility. In this paper, I will briefly touch upon how planners argue when they want to attract men the bicycle, a mode of transport regarded as sustainable by planners in this study<sup>3</sup>.

From a theoretical point, the paper takes its departure from Landström's (2007) critique of feminist technology studies as responsible for reproducing gender as a stable category while at the same time resisting technological determinism. According to Landström, feminist technology studies depart from an understanding of both gender and technology as socially constructed (a double constructivist approach).

Landström's alternative is to view gender as produced in processes where people and technology meet (Ibid, p. 10). According to Landström, gender is not synonymous with identity and cannot be described in terms of being. Regarding gender as belongings that emerges in "different points of contact" (Ibid, p. 20) enables empirical questions and critical analyses that move beyond gender determinism and can thus deliver the promise of co-production, made by feminist technology scholars.

Mellström (2009) is inspired by what he calls "recent critical interventions and new analytical openings in gender and technology studies" (Ibid, p. 885). He therefore highlights the importance of making context sensitive analysis with intersectional understandings that includes race, class, age, and sexuality.

In relation to my material, I will investigate which "belongings" that are produced at different

points of contacts. In this paper, “belongings” will be interpreted as if and how gender is tied to transport technology. What photographs do the planners want to discuss? What meaning is attributed to the pictures? In relation to gender, are some “belongings” more frequently produced than others are? Which belongings are intersected with gender? In what way?

Now, a discussion of how the planners interviewed in this study talked about one photograph especially, the man that rides a bicycle, will follow. The bicycle is in the interviews understood as a sustainable mode of transport. The same goes for public transport. I use this very brief example in order to highlight recent theoretical developments in feminist STS studies.

### **Constructing bicycles, constructing masculinity**

One of the planners directs her attention towards the image of the man that rides a bicycle. She perceives it as a photograph promoting sustainable mobility in a desirable manner. I ask her why.

This one, with the suit that bikes. It's the kind of picture we usually choose when we talk about lifestyle issues. It is because we want to highlight the bicycle as a cool alternative and not as a low status alternative. I think it could be dangerous to talk about that the advantage of the bike is that it is so amazingly cheap. It is [cheap] of course, and sometimes that can be highlighted. But I think it's hard to sell it with just that argument. Because then it becomes a little less valued. It can't be compared with “I drive my car because I can afford it,” and that's what we wanted. We would like to say that the bike is a good and convenient option for people on the go, and for people who care about their health. (Helena)

Here, Helena interprets the image as desirable in a sustainability context since the man is bicycling, not because he cannot afford to drive a car, but rather because he is a person “on the go.” The terms “status” and “low status” is intriguing since they clearly is of great importance for Helena. However, what do the words mean? If you take a careful look at the picture, in order to understand why Helena draws this conclusion, this is what you see: the man on the bike is wearing a helmet and a suit. He is of color. He has a black bag over his shoulder. The bike is black or blue and of standard men model. These features are “the point of contacts” that Helena needs in order to promote the bike as “cool.” The suit is the most distinguishing feature, it signals that the man can afford to drive a car but chooses to bicycle. When Helena is talking about status, she is therefore actually referring to social class. Helena also seems to assume that the bike, in order to become a more popular mode of transport, needs support from the right kind of user. This can be read in line with Summerton (2004) that in an analysis of Swedish energy planning shows that the studied electrical companies aim at privileged customers when branding.

Planner Harry believes that it is easier for men to drive a car to work instead of riding a

bicycle. The following quote points to that the car, for a man, automatically corresponds to “status,” something that the bike initially is missing:

Yes, to dare to ride a bike to a company then you lose [something]. At first, it will go uphill.

Some would think that you would have to work a bit extra. It is easier if you just show up in a successful cab. (Harry)

In terms of status, the car enhances the status of a man instead of the inverted relationship between men and bicycles. Thus, here the car performs “status work,” so that the man can appear as “cool”. To ride a bike to work is interpreted as risky, an activity that potentially can harm you (your position and status). Following Helena’s argument above, if the man who cycle to work is wearing a suit, the suit will prevent him from potential harm. It also seems as status work operates in two ways. Both transport artifacts and humans can perform status work. Which status work is needed to be done, and by whom, is depending on the context. In both cases status (i.e. social class) decides who/what will need help from who/what. Artifacts can enhance the status of the people using it, and if the “right” person is using an artifact, he (sic) is able to enhance the status of the artifact. Here we can see that the artifact and the person using it are mutually shaped.

One reason the planners produce belongings between the bicycle and men in suits, has to do with the particular context. When talking about sustainable mobility, specific belongings arise. To gender the bicycle as masculine, following the planners’ arguments, would make the bicycle more passable as a sustainable mode of transport. It is of importance to note that the right kind of masculinity is associated with the bicycle. The fact that the bicycling man is wearing a suit signals that he is not “low status,” but rather expresses some kind of middle class masculinity. When the planners discuss “status,” they are actually discussing social class. The use of “status” might be considered to denote social class in terms that are more neutral. Another example of this way of neutralizing class is when Hanna is talking about the suited man in relation to “lifestyle”:

I think that he is a rather modern man in his carrier. [He is] conscious, of course. But [I] think that it is an expensive bicycle and that he has chosen this. Not just for today, but that’s probably a part of his lifestyle to be active. (Hannah)

Hannah makes the same connections between the man’s bicycle and his appearance as the other planners do. Keywords are “modern”, “career”, “expensive”, “lifestyle”, and “active”. Using these concepts is a way of promoting sustainable mobility that the planners find appealing. They argue that it will attract more people to sustainable travel.

## Conclusions

When the planners in this study construct sustainable transport artifacts they do this in relation to notions of gender, and equally important, to class. In this specific context, where

planners negotiate sustainable mobility in relation to users, men in suits are proven significant. This interpretation suggests that what the planners are doing when they talk about how to successfully promote sustainable mobility, is producing belongings between masculinity and transport artifacts regarded to be sustainable. Arguments, like if the bicycle is associated with men in suits, seem appropriate because of the production of belongings that in turn is related to the sustainable mobility context. This point to the conclusion that planners do gender in a stereotypical conduct – they draw on an already established link between masculinity and technology. However, it is not only the male body that needs to be on the bus or on a bicycle. When planners promote sustainable mobility, they make use of male bodies but also other artifacts such as the suit. The suit is proven a powerful symbol in order to ensure that users are from certain societal positions.

It is possible to regard how the planners produce belongings between masculinity and technology as a reflection of how the planners view the world and thus construct gender. However, one must ask why the planners produce these belongings in this actual setting. I argue that the photographs that I brought to the interviews are active in the production of belongings. Some of the photographs were more popular than others. In a photograph portraying a man in a suit on a bicycle, certain belongings have already been produced. When the planners acknowledged this belonging, they found it attractive and made use of it, i.e. they gave the photograph meaning. If I had not brought a picture of a man in a suit, it is possible that this actual belonging had not been deemed as attractive. In relation to the sustainable mobility context, masculinity and sustainable transport artifacts make sense.

This paper points towards following analytical conclusions: First, I note the immense importance of context. The sustainable mobility context has made it possible for planners to produce belongings between men and sustainable transport artifacts. Secondly, by highlighting that transport artifacts, suits, and male users all are active in the production of belongings, I have proven that it is possible to apply a double-constructivist approach. Finally, the importance of an intersectional framework is by my analysis once again stressed. The connection between masculinity and sustainable mobility cannot be understood without giving class the same analytical attention as gender. In this paper, suits are used as a class signifier.

## Notes

1. The material consists of 13 qualitative interviews with seven women and five men between the age 30 and 60 years, carried out in 2010. The interviews were semi-constructed and thematic. The informants will from now on be referred to as planners. The municipality in which the informants work, is medium sized and is located in

southwestern Sweden.

2. Influenced by Törrönen (2002) I regard the photographs as cultural products chosen to represent discourses on mobility. When using photographs (or other stimuli) in interviews, the informants are able to identify meaning and position themselves in relation to these meanings.
3. The study is part of a bigger PhD project researching the construction of users in relation to municipal planning for sustainable mobility. A point of departure is that when planners negotiate sustainable mobility, they also construct user identities. Theoretically, I make use of the notion of “user scripts” (Akrich 1992) and “gender scripts” (Oudshoorn et al. 2004). The reader might therefore note the influence of this strand of thoughts. Due to the scope of this paper, the influence will not be made explicit.

## References

Akrich, Madeleine (1992) “The de-scription of technical objects” in Bijker, Wiebe & Law, John (Eds.), *Shaping Technology/Building Society Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 205-224

Landström, Catharina (2007) “Queering feminist technology studies” in *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no 1, 7-26

Mellström, Ulf (2009) “The Intersection of gender, race and culture boundaries, or why is computer science in Malaysia dominated by women?” in *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 39, no 6, 885-907

Oudshoorn, Nellie, Rommes, Els, Stienstra, Marcelle (2004) “Configuring the gendered user as everybody: gender and design cultures in information and communication technologies” in *Science, Technology & Human Values*, vol. 29, no 1, 30-63

Summerton, Jane (2004) “Do electrons have politics? Constructing user identities in Swedish electricity” in *Science, Technology and Human Values*, vol. 24, no 4, 486-511

Törrönen, Jukka (2002) “Semiotic theory on qualitative interviewing using stimulus texts” in *Qualitative Research*, vol. 2, no 3, 343-362