

Transition to a more sustainable mode of operation in urban transportation: studying institutionalized mobility profiles

December 2014

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Abstract

In our work-in-progress seminar, I am going to present first ideas for a research proposal on, what I like to call, institutionalized mobility profiles (of young people). The presentation is not based on a research agenda that has been developing for several years. It is about a research process in a very early stage.

Background: Societal and environmental problems, such as climate change, call for some sort of radical social and often also technological change. Especially utility sectors like water, energy or transportation are increasingly pressured to transition to a more sustainable mode of operation. CO₂ emissions continue to rise in the transport sector. Reducing carbon emissions by 80% can only be realized by deep structural changes in transport systems. Transport studies typically put a strong emphasis on mitigation via technology, economic instruments and infrastructure provision and to a lesser degree on reconfigurations of travellers' psyche through information campaigns. Insights from engineering, (neo-classical) economics and psychology prevail, assuming that behavior change is caused by changes in attitudes. Most research is predicated on the use of quantitative methods (embedded in positivist epistemological frameworks).

We want to go beyond approaches that view the establishment of mobility patterns as a result of individual preferences and resources etc. Our research principally aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of sustainability transition studies. The socio-technical approach to transitions conceptualizes transport systems as a configuration of elements that include technology, policy, markets, consumer practices, infrastructure, cultural meaning and scientific knowledge. We are interested in extending the current perspectives on transitions in mobility by paying more attention to institutional theory. The latter emphasizes the influence of institutional structures like norms, values or cultural-cognitive frames on the behavior of actors and the development of practices. We intend to view mobility profiles through an institutional lense and to utilize qualitative methods like travel diaries and interviews (like geographers mostly do).