

## **Presentation 1: Rachel on “Good cycling, bad cyclists?”**

***Transcript of a talk given at the Cycling Cultures stakeholder forum on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2010. Please do not quote without permission.***

Okay so I am just going to talk for about fifteen minutes about some of the findings that are starting to come out of the cycling culture project. It's still very provisional this is kind of like the first glimpse really, this is something that we really value the discussion and your comments on these ideas. So as I am sure we are aware in this room over the past fifteen years cycling has more and more become part of what we might call official policy discourse. So if you type cycling strategy into Google then you will come up with millions of documents I believe from local authorities, regional documents, national documents and so on, cycling has made it's way into a whole range of policy areas, people know that in the nineties public health professionals started talking about cycling in terms of public health as being a public health solution, cycling is talked about within environmental policy, it's talked about within transport policy more and more so cycling officially is something that everybody is in favour of.

And yet cyclists often still continue to be portrayed in rather negative ways and I don't know if people have seen there is a recent report produced by Transport for London, which has come out and it's about attitudes towards cyclists both among cyclists and non cyclists. It came up with quite a lot of negative stuff that we may be familiar with and I also put this up as an example of newspaper stories that deal with cyclists rather negatively as well so lycra louts that cycle on pavement and I've got another lovely one from the Daily Mail that shows 'Police have BMX bikes to bond with Hoodies'. So there is quite a lot of stuff we can put up and just a few associations, in many areas cyclists are seen as people that don't have enough money to travel any other way but in other areas cyclists are potentially seen as mean because they won't pay for travel or free riders – you will have seen all the road tax discussions. Personally by the way I think that smugness is an underrated emotion but some people feel it's negative!

So really... and here is a shy and retiring cyclist for you... the question I suppose is how does this affect the self image of people who cycle and this is something that is coming up in our research part of which involves in depth interviews. How do people who cycle talk about being a cyclist? So this picks up on some of the things we have already been talking about and is it difficult for people to identify themselves as being a cyclist and what ways have people come up with as talking about a cyclist's identity as a positive thing or maybe there is also discussions that go on about do people need to have a cyclists identity and so on. So I will talk about this a little bit more in the paper but you might want to talk about it afterwards too.

The data we are going to use in the presentation comes from Cambridge and from Hull and I will just talk about what data it is that the presentation is based on. So Cambridge was where I did some pilot research for project that Katrina and I are now working on. In summer 2008 I went to Cambridge and did twenty five narrative interviews with people who cycled and on the leaflets that I used to recruit people I did say 'people who cycled' because of this whole cyclist identity thing. Most of these people were what I would call 'everyday cyclists' so they sort of cycled as part of their everyday lives they are not cycling activists mostly although a handful were. There was a mix of genders, ages and occupations and Katrina and I will be returning to Cambridge next year to do a lot more research so this is just a pilot. The research from Hull we've been doing in summer this

year we've done thirty narrative interviews with thirty four interviewees. A few of the interviews were with either couples or mother daughter pairs, which is actually really interesting to interview people together and again these are everyday cyclists and a mix of genders, age and occupation.

The research project you probably know different amounts about I guess, the research project is more than just these interviews it's also interviews with stakeholders, ethnography, visual data and so on which we will probably be talking about in the next meeting but this presentation is just about the narrative interviews. To give you a quick sense of the contexts because some of you might not know that much about Cambridge or Hull... Cambridge is often spoken of as having a cycling culture, being a place in the UK that has the highest levels of cycling culture. It's compact and flat and driving around the centre of Cambridge is very difficult which is probably another positive factor, there have been a number of policy interventions in Cambridge so here is a picture of the bike park that is run in the centre of Cambridge by the Council. It's got a mobile white collar workforce in terms of jobs and the knowledge economy, private industry and tourism.

Hull is portrayed quite differently we found people would say to us about Hull 'but Hull doesn't have a cycling culture' which we found kind of weird because 14% cycle to work in Hull so there is an awful lot of cycling Hull. It's similar to Cambridge in a number of ways; it's also compact and flat and there are some restrictions on driving in the centre and there has also been a number of policy interventions in Hull. Perhaps most famously in the nineties the twenty mile hour zones that were introduced the cities. Hull's workforce is very different from the Cambridge workforce, it's very locally rooted. People talk about having been in the city for generations and there has been a decline of traditional industry and there is a large public sector. This talk actually focuses on similarities but there are some differences that we think are linked to those different contexts that you get which again might be something for the discussion.

The first thing we found in terms of cyclists' identities is that it's quite hard to be a good cyclist. People have quite a few anxieties that came out in interviews. I should point out there is a lot of positive stuff too in terms of cycling experiences, but in terms of being a cyclist it seems that it's quite hard to be a good cyclist, so people would say for example 'I don't maintain my bike, I'm not very good at it' and that woman in particular had a lovely story about her husband nagging her but she just couldn't do it, she wished she could but she just couldn't. Somebody else commented that she was worried about her road skills and this was something else that people felt anxious that their road skills were not up to scratch and they had difficulty doing things that they should have been able to do. And finally there was quite a bit anxiety about clothing and dress that people will probably be familiar with, and people would say 'I feel like I should wear illuminated clothing', 'I should wear a helmet', 'I tell my son to wear a helmet but I don't wear one myself' so a lot of anxiety about what the correct dress is for a cyclist.

What we also found conversely is that people had anxieties about themselves being bad cyclists but they thought others were bad cyclists as well. So there is a lot of categorisation and in Cambridge foreign students, language students particularly came in the categorisation of wobbling all over the place and cycling two abreast and generally getting in the way of serious cyclists. In Hull we didn't see so much categorisation of particular groups of people, but it was more behaviours. So people would say there is this bad cycling behaviour going on, so 'dark mornings riding their bikes with dark clothing and no lights and they are just asking for trouble'. A lot of categorisation coming through and others classified as groups of bad cyclists even though people are always anxious about themselves being a good cyclist.

At the same time people were worried about being too much of a cyclist which is also interesting, that's a proper cyclist in the Netherlands actually... a proper cyclist. People would worry about being identified as being too much of a cyclist so somebody from Cambridge was saying when he was cycling home he would see all of these guys with the pointy helmets and he said 'it doesn't appeal to me I'm not fit enough' so people are concerned that they didn't fit into the super sporty image of a cyclist that they were carrying in their heads. Somebody else said a proper cyclist uses more effort, 'a proper cyclist wouldn't have an electric bike so I wouldn't like to cycle in a group because I use an electric bike and I would feel like I wasn't a proper cyclist'. And some lovely narratives as well, a whole range of different descriptions that people would give of this proper cyclist so maybe it was a 'cycling fanatic' or a 'bike nut' or what were the other ones... an 'avid cyclist' is the other one and 'somebody who lives and breathes it' and has been taken over by cycling and who 'you see them when you are driving over a steep hill and all you can see is legs like tree trunks' so loads of really physical descriptions. So lots of descriptions of what a proper cyclist would be like and 'I am not sure I'm really like that'.

Also interestingly people see cyclists from the perspective of a motorist which I found intriguing because a some people didn't actually drive or have a car. But they would perceive themselves as a cyclist or others as a cyclist by how they thought a car driver would see them. So a guy from Cambridge said that now that he drives he now realises that cyclists are really infuriating and cycle without lights and cause all kinds of problems whereas when he was a cyclist he would just cycle around without lights. Also a lot of anxiety, as a cyclist you worry that what you do will affect other cyclists and that you will be taken as a representative of cyclists which doesn't happen with car drivers. So somebody in Hull said 'if a car driver does something nice to you, you don't want to not thank them because they might never stop for another cyclist again' which I thought was quite sad - so you have to wave or that person might never do that again.

The last one is an interesting one because there is a narrative before that, where she talks about where she cycles quite assertively but she doesn't let herself be intimidated. She cycles assertively and she doesn't mind making a driver wait a little bit if she wants to turn right and then she reflected on this and said 'I am probably a very annoying cyclist!'. So she was perceiving this as she thought the driver behind her might see it, so it's an interesting way in which people who cycle see their behaviour as if they were a driver observing it. And sometimes as we all know cycling is often portrayed as dangerous and we would criticise this, but often it can be hard for people perhaps particularly in areas where there isn't that much cycling to sort of survive psychically, to see yourself as a cyclist... because there is often a struggle to find physical and social space.

So the first one is the physical space which I am sure is an issue in a lot of places but a quote from someone in Hull who said she felt she ought to be cycling near the gutter to be keeping out of the way of traffic but 'it's uneven and it's rough and it has pot holes and it's unpleasant' and she feels it's dangerous. But she feels she can't cycle further out because she feels she would be in the way of traffic. And socially though people can feel that being a cyclist is not appropriate particularly in a work context, we had these comments in Cambridge and in Hull. Particularly people who were in professional jobs, there are a few people that were moving from manual employment to white collar employment who felt they had to present themselves differently. And suddenly they had to think about how they turned up at work and cycling might feel like a problem for them. This is somebody actually in Hull who is a lawyer and I said 'do you cycle to client meetings' because he cycled part of the journey to work. And he was sort of a bit taken aback by this and I said why not and he said 'well you don't expect your lawyer to turn up on a bike do you it doesn't ring true.'

Riding on a bike as a lawyer for him that is something that would threaten his professional identity. It's not that everybody said that but there were a minority of people that felt that it was problematic for them to turn up at work or to a meeting obviously having ridden there by bike.

But also people came up with counter-discourses of why cyclists might be doing good for their local area and this is something we will pick up on later in the afternoon with a more positive presentation on cycling citizenship. There were some really interesting comments by people, particularly older people who said that they felt that driving a car meant that they were putting someone at risk or they were damaging their local environment. And therefore for them cycling was something they could feel that as a cyclist they were positively contributing to their local environment. They were not being a threatening presence, they were doing good and not putting other people at risk. So there is different stuff going on there and there are ways in which people can present cycling as positive and having these local benefits which are maybe something that is not talked as much for example as climate change, the global environmental issues. Often the local, social and environmental issues that people feel good about are maybe not talked about quite so much.