On Behaviour Change: The Potential of Habits

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In a nutshell

My argument is as follows:

a) Habits, understood in a particular way, should be at the heart of the behaviour change agenda with regard to transport – they are the key to success.

b) Travel practices are deeply heterogeneous and generate many different (social) effects. A differentiated view on how different sorts of trips can be decarbonised is in order.
Behaviour change in transport

Policy discourses are mainly based on insights from:

- Civil engineering
- Neo-classical economics
- Behavioural economics
- Social psychology

Consequence:

The lived experience of travelling is neither fully captured nor adequately understood
Example: mobility and social identities

Gender
Car-based school run key to norms w.r.t. ‘good parenting’:
- Selection of best rather than nearest schools (aspirations for future success in life)
- Traffic safety & stranger danger (protection)
- Car journey as time of intimacy (care)

Ageing
Driving key to living up to society’s ideals regarding old age:
- Social connectedness
- Civic participation
- Self-determination
- Self-reliance
Driving often compensates for declining physical functioning

Car has unique affordances
Behavour change raises social equality issues
Habit and (transport) policy

Ambivalence in thinking about habit:

- Habit as obstructing change and reflective thought
- Habit as ‘automatic pilot’ enabling adequate functioning in everyday life

Policy response:

- Defrost habit to open up a space for reflective thought: \( \text{habit } x \Rightarrow \text{deliberation} \Rightarrow \text{habit } y \)
- Reconfigure habit: \( \text{habit } x \Leftrightarrow y \)
**MINDSPACE**

*Influencing behaviour through public policy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Messenger</th>
<th>we are heavily influenced by who communicates information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts such as strongly avoiding losses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>we are strongly influenced by what others do</td>
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<td>Defaults</td>
<td>we ‘go with the flow’ of pre-set options</td>
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<td>Salience</td>
<td>our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priming</td>
<td>our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitments</td>
<td>we seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ego</td>
<td>we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves</td>
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</tbody>
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Dolan et al. (2010: 9)
But … what is a habit?

**Mainstream view**
- Behaviour: more or less automatic response to cues in one’s environment
- Emphasis on automaticity and mechanism
- Related to functioning of the mind: cognitive efficiency
- Contracted by individual

**Social theory**
- Tendency or capacity to act in a particular way
- Stability and subtle alteration from within
- Non-individual: weave together mind, body, artefacts, ideas, humans as full-fledged partners
- Social: emerge from pre-existing customs
- Makes deliberation possible
- Contracted by body-mind-world
Behaviour change

Social theory perspective and the governing of habits

a) Displace undesirable habits
b) Nourish desirable habits
c) Capitalise on potential for ‘change from within’ in undesirable habits in specific circumstances
Displace undesirable habits (i)

Insufficient to:

- Provide information and reconfigure beliefs and values
- Supply material infrastructure and transport institutions at the local level

Even in policy packages

DfT (2011: 36)
Dolan et al. (2010: 9)
Displace undesirable habits (ii)

Systemic change is required to change customs:

a) Intensify and speed up what is already being done:
   ✓ Changes to transport infrastructures & institutions, built environment
   ✓ Education and social marketing
   ✓ Introduce further pricing measures

b) Expand into new domains & target wider range of stakeholders:
   ✓ Revisit temporal ordering of cities/societies
   ✓ Much more pressure on & less support for auto industry, including restrictions/bans on car advertisements
Displace undesirable habits (iii)

- Enhance development of new knowledge practices and evaluation tools in research institutes
- Rework associations of driving with power, control, freedom
- Avoid promotion of consumerist lifestyles in general
- ..................

⇒ Make signals from across government agencies and other stakeholders to citizens coherent
Nourish desirable habits

- Constitute certain habits from young age onwards
  - Build up bodily capacities – informal and formal learning by doing
  - Emphasize independence and self-confidence

- Turn low-carbon mobility into a set of techniques for the creation of socially desirable selves:
  - Piggy-back decarbonisation onto more tangible benefits in the here-and-now (health, wellbeing, local community)
  - Ensure positive reinforcement at the practice level – experimentation with new tools required (e.g. smart metering of carbon consumption in transport via mobile phone app)
Capitalise on ‘change from within’

- To be employed in circumstances where there is no realistic alternative for vehicular travel
- One possibility: focus on vehicle replacement & conventionalise electric vehicles:
  - Cultural framing:
    - Avoid positioning them as novelty & hallmark of progress
  - Practical level:
    - Make them easy, reliable and riskless in use
    - Allow them to sink into background infrastructures of everyday life as quickly as possible
EV culture: Source London

Holism is a plus:
- Material infrastructure
- Monetary costs
- Information provision
- Affective atmosphere: transparency, reliability, everydayness
- Invites bottom-up contribution and active engagement

⇒ Potential to attract users and to instil EV habit in them

Questions and doubts:
- Silence on who is targeted and will benefit – is it socially inclusive and sustainable?
- Transferability to other UK cities – a unique case?
Final remarks

- Behaviour change requires more than *Homo Psychologicus* and a logic of choice
- More become possible when habit is re-imagined in body-mind-world terms, including the mutual reinforcement of technology and behaviour change
- Questions about responsibilities and priorities remain:
  - What should/can the role of public authorities be?
  - How important is transport’s decarbonisation vis-à-vis ‘rival aspirations’?
  - How to decarbonise travel behaviour without intensifying social inequalities?