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“More Than Paint on Concrete”: The Winding Path toward Bike Equity

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Abstract

Bike equity refers to the notion that traditionally marginalized populations face disproportionate barriers to being able to bicycle safely in the communities in which they live. Notably, low-income US residents comprise the majority of bike commuters, and yet have less access to adequate bicycling infrastructure than their middle- and high-income peers. This has resulted in disparate health, employment, and education outcomes and created an additional impediment to achieving neighborhood wellness. Through a literature review and participant observation this article argues that bike equity should become a central tenet of urban sustainability, and discusses the limited empirical evidence of the best practices for promoting bicycling within marginalized communities. This review also suggests that bike equity is an area for future community psychology practice and research.

In academic literature, three broad categories of bicycling scholarship seem to have emerged. The first category evidences the conflict between cyclists and motorists, and exposes the vulnerability of cyclists in car-dependent metropolitan areas. Articles belonging to this category focus on the bike-phobia of many cities, and the lack of institutional support to keep cyclists safe (Blickstein, 2010; Willis, Manaugh, & El-Geneidy, 2015). They capture a vision that bleeds directly into a second form of bike scholarship, highlighting the convergence of cycling and activism during the large group bike rides known as critical mass. In critical mass, cyclists flood into city streets to reclaim public-serving space, and protest the aggression and inanity of automobile culture (Blickstein, 2010; Strauss, 2014). Finally, a third branch of cycling literature within the field of public health, where cycling is touted as form of active transportation with clear salutary benefits (Götschi, Tainio, Maizlish, Schwanen, Goodman, & Woodcock, 2015).

Regrettably, the people who comprise the majority of cyclist commuters are invisible in this literature. These cyclist commuters do not ride on two wheels as a political statement; nor are they necessarily riding purely for the health benefits. And while they may bemoan the lack of cycling

infrastructure, they also face myriad other obstacles to being able to use the bicycle as a safe method of commuting. Most bicycle riders are actually transit takers who use cycling and walking as means to get to transit (Kramer, Lieberman, Sadler, & Zimmerman, 2015). Recent joint reports funded by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Public Health Association show that people with low incomes actually “have the highest rates of bicycling and walking,” with the largest percentage being concentrated in populations where individuals make less than \$10,000 per year (Kramer, et al., 2015, p. 7). Moreover, cyclists are also concentrated in immigrant communities and communities of color. A report published by the Sierra Club and the League of American Bicyclists cites data indicating that twice as many immigrants commute by bicycle than U.S.-born individuals (League of American Bicyclists, Sierra Club, 2015). Similarly, African-Americans and Asian-Americans are the fastest growing population of cyclists: from 2001 to 2009, the number of bike trips doubled in the African-American community, and increased by 80% for Asian Americans (League of American Bicyclists, Sierra Club, 2015). These statistics remind us that, though the bicycle can be a tool for sustainability,

public health, and political action, it is first and foremost a low-cost mode of transportation. The CDC estimates that the yearly operating cost for a bicycle is \$308, compared with \$8,220 for a car. Additionally, because riding does not require a license in many jurisdictions, it remains accessible to wider range of people (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015). Consequently, teenagers, immigrants, day laborers, low-income, and homeless populations actually comprise the cycling (and walking) majority (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

Given the composition of the cycling and walking majority, public-serving space and biking/walking infrastructure is most severely needed in low-income communities, and, paradoxically, they are least likely to exist in these communities. The lack of sidewalks, stop signs, stop lights, bike lanes, bike routes, and bike parking in low-income neighborhoods creates additional barriers for the people who have no choice but to use human powered modes of transportation (Kramer, et al., 2015). Prompted by both climate change and perpetually congested traffic, cities across the country have begun to reinvest in cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, but such investment has been selective and concentrated in areas away from the actual cycling and walking majority. This majority remains as invisible in public planning and policy as it is in academic literature.

Inequity and Bike Equity

To understand the notion of bike equity means to actively unpack what the neglect of the true cycling population has entailed. It also requires unravelling the layers of other systemic inequities that have become so entangled within the fabric of urban life that only truly ecological approaches can loosen the knots. This article begins this task of unpacking and unraveling, and seeks to increase visibility for the concept of bike equity. Most of the findings discussed in this article are based on secondary sources, and

extrapolated from reports generated by the CDC, the American Public Health Association (APHA), the Sierra Club, and the League of American Cyclists. However, the evidence presented in these reports was also complemented by participant observation in the bike movement in Los Angeles.

Inequities in Safety and Public Health

To begin, it is important to elucidate the ways in which poor public planning and differential investment have rendered the roads less safe for cyclists, pedestrians, and motorists in low-income communities. The CDC and APHA found that large artery roads with speed limits well above 25 mph were usually designed to slice through low-income neighborhoods, and only 9% of streets in these areas had sidewalks. This rate nearly doubled in affluent areas (as cited in Kramer et al., 2015). Another report revealed:

... low-income neighborhoods had twice as many intersections with major thoroughfares, requiring residents on foot to navigate high-speed, high-traffic zones. In addition, poorer neighborhoods had more four-way intersections, which lead to more injuries of people walking and driving due to the greater number of points of conflict. (as cited in Kramer, et al., 2015, p. 17)

The consequences of this planning have been fatal: a study of the 10 deadliest intersections in New York City showed that 9 of the 10 were near public housing. Additionally, pedestrians in low-income communities were more than twice as likely to be hit in collisions with automobiles than their higher income peers (Kramer et al., 2015). Compounding inequities in built environments, racial bias is also a consideration. A recent study cited by the CDC suggested that drivers may have different reactions to pedestrians based on race; in this research, twice as many cars stopped for whites pedestrians in crosswalks

as stopped for African-American pedestrians (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

The public health implications of lack of bikeability and walkability are tremendous. First, when infrastructure planning privileges automobiles, the air quality worsens. Multiple studies have shown a correlation between poor air quality and both income as well as ethnicity. Asthma, the most common respiratory disease resulting from pollution, was shown to negatively impact mental health and cause anxiety and depression (Tibbets, 2015). Second, a lack of public-serving infrastructure discourages active transportation, and, coincidentally, the obesity and diabetes crises have worsened. The most deleterious effects occurred, unsurprisingly, in low-income communities and communities of color (as cited in Kramer et al., 2015). The rates of obesity reached almost 40% for both Latino and African-American youth, and were actually 50% for Latina and African-American girls (Kramer et al., 2015).

Inequities also arise in terms of safety and the risk of community violence. Though twice as many low-income children walk to school as middle-income children, the risk that low-income children will be exposed to violence is much higher. The CDC/ APHA report:

A 2010 study showed that African American youth were more than twice as likely to be victims of serious violence as were white or Latino youth and were at least 30 percent more likely to be victims of assault. The homicide rate for African-American youth was 14 times higher than the rate for white youth. (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015, pg. 7)

Though research has often focused on gangs as the source of community violence, police harassment remains a problem as well. In Los Angeles, day laborers report being stopped and ticketed for violations that do not actually

exist in the law, such as not having registered their bikes or riding without a tail light (statute only requires a front light; A. Mannos, personal communication, July 28, 2015). Also in Los Angeles, the law regarding riding on the sidewalk is phrased vaguely, allowing police to ticket cyclists both for riding and not riding on the sidewalk (A. Mannos, personal communication, July 28, 2015). Finally, bike theft plagues cyclists in every city, and can morph into violent crime. A history of gang robberies on bikeways once left large segments of trails unused in Los Angeles (Moilanen, 2000). These kinds of statistics help reinforce many parents' fears of allowing their children to walk or bike to school, or to spend significant time outdoors. In one study, the apprehension (perceived or real) of community violence was one of ten determining factors that deterred outdoor physical activity (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

Funding Inequities

As mentioned earlier, cycling has enjoyed a kind of resurgence in recent years, and many programs have developed curricula to increase mobility in U.S. cities (League of American Bicyclists, Sierra Club, 2015). However, funding for organizations working to increase the bikeability and walkability of cities is hardly equitable. This was a glaring issue to a community organizer in Boyle Heights, a low-income, predominantly Latino neighborhood east of Los Angeles, who notes that, though natives of her city have organized the only all-women of color cycling group in Greater Los Angeles, none of them received funding to do so. (R. Contreras, personal communication, July 24, 2015). Similarly, though Los Angeles is home to three institutionalized bike repair cooperatives, all are located in more affluent parts of the city. In contrast, two bike mechanics native to the low-income, African-American neighborhoods of Leimert Park and Watts, respectively, are currently struggling to finance cooperatives in their

neighborhoods (A. Neff, personal communication, July 24, 2015; Sulaiman, 2015). One of them points out that his struggles are not rooted in a lack of interest; he frequently sets up shop at local parks in the open air, and regularly has 30 customers before he has finished installing his repair stand (A. Neff, personal communication, July 24, 2015). Unfortunately, this demonstration of need does not guarantee that the cooperative can be self-sustaining because the population he serves may not consistently have disposable income for bike repair, even at a very reduced fee. Additionally, his neighborhood is so isolated from the rest of the city it is unlikely that he can count on a reliable flow of middle-income customers. Without additional outside investment or subsidies, it is a gamble to invest in a lease for a permanent space (A. Neff, personal communication, July 24, 2015).

The most serious inequities in funding for mobility work stem from the disconnect between mainstream cycling advocacy groups and marginalized populations. Mainstream cycling advocacy initially defined itself as a subculture grounded in both a love of bikes and a misguided belief that bicycling is primarily a recreational activity for upper and middle class populations (A. Mannos, R. Contreras, S. Sulaiman, personal communication, July 24, 2015). The cycling advocacy movement, which is young and increasingly powerful, somewhat myopically advocated for bike lanes, bike shares, motorist education, and proper bike gear (e.g. helmets, reflectors, lights) as the pathway to change and safety (A. Mannos, R. Contreras, S. Sulaiman, personal communication, July 24, 2015). While there is no discounting the importance of any of these measures, alone they are not sufficient or comprehensive enough to redress existing inequities. The current debate in Los Angeles over the institution of a helmet law, which would require all adults on bikes to wear helmets, captures the disconnect well. Grassroots

activists acknowledge that the powerful bike advocates promoting this law have good intentions, but they are failing to take into account its potentially oppressive effects. The law would legitimize over-policing cyclists who do not have helmets, that is to say, over-policing those who cannot afford helmets (Newton, 2015). After the law was proposed but not enacted, day laborers reported being ticketed for not wearing helmets even though the law did not yet exist (A. Mannos, personal communication, July 24, 2015). The executive director of the Los Angeles Bicycle Coalition, Tamika Butler, was quoted in the Los Angeles Streetsblog attempting to explain her reticence about the measure: "one of my fears with this particular proposed law is how will it be enforced? And who will it truly impact? And what are the stories are we going to hear?" (Newton, 2015). Her opposition is not to bike safety, but to the discriminatory law enforcement practices that have been perpetuated under the guise of bike safety.

The people who have established themselves as stewards of the bike movement are not necessarily representative of the majority of cyclists, and this has caused some questionable public planning decisions. For example, long-time bike activists in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights (mentioned previously) note that the community was never consulted in the decision-making processes for increasing mobility in the neighborhood (E. Huerta, personal communication, July 25, 2015). As a result, though more bike lanes were created, they were also placed on a 45 mph road that intersects with freeway exits; even skilled cyclists do not dare use this pathway. To celebrate the local Latino culture, the city also designed what it called culturally-relevant bike parking infrastructure, but cyclists report that the odd shape of the rack makes properly locking up their bikes impossible (E. Huerta, personal communication, July 25, 2015). Even in a city like Portland, which is consistently ranked as one of the most bike-

friendly cities in the U.S., similar inequities manifest for similar reasons. The city's bike plan was adopted in 1996, and favored connecting affluent commercial areas of the metropolis to each other, thus further isolating low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. The city is now looking to adopt a new transit plan in 2015 with the hope that bike equity can be retrofitted into the built landscape and reconnect marginalized neighborhoods (Kramer, et al., 2015). Whether such retrofitting is effective remains to be seen. The reality is that large bike advocacy organizations have tended to focus little, if at all, on the concerns of low-income communities. Recently, and only in select cities, some bike organizations are trying to compensate for this omission, but the notion of bike equity is new and still met with much resistance and little understanding.

These data represent only a minute portion of the total evidence available, but underscore the necessity making bike equity known. Simply stated, the myriad inequities low-income communities and communities of color currently face in terms of access to safe routes, transit, livable communities, adequate housing, food, good schools, and hospitals are deeply interdependent and have inevitably resulted in inequities in terms of health. A recent Harvard article posits that the risks of lack of physical mobility extend beyond health, to actual social mobility. Of all the possible factors that impede upward social mobility, including crime, quality of public schools, and prevalence of two-parent households, lengthy commute times to work proved to be the most significant (Chetty & Hendren, 2015). Bike equity recognizes the interconnectedness of the issues cited above, as well as of intersectionality of race, gender, income, ability, and sexuality; it does not want to homogenize the experience of cyclists, but does aim to equalize opportunities for mobility and active transportation. Bike equity is rooted in an

understanding of injustice and a vision that will not and cannot be realized without systemic transformation.

Working with Bike Equity

Drawbacks of Bike Equity Work

This vision is not easy to reconcile with the fact that "bikeability" and the creation of bike lanes has become a tell-tale sign of gentrification. In low-income neighborhoods with traditionally little public investment in infrastructure, drawing plans to build bike paths and bike parking can raise suspicions. Will long-time residents of the neighborhood be able to afford to remain there long enough to enjoy the new designs? Will making neighborhoods more walkable and bikeable increase the value of property in those areas and displace long-time inhabitants? Studies have shown that the advent of light-rail trains in low-income neighborhoods usually coincides with drastic increases in rent, and, as a result, displacement of the very people who rely on light-rail trains (Johnson & Triplett, 2011). There is good reason to believe that bikeability can have the same effect, and, for this reason, it is important to develop comprehensive mobility plans that include the preservation and development of affordable housing. A community land trust in Los Angeles, called TRUST South L.A. has successfully drawn links to between the two issues, and worked through broad coalitions to tackle the problems in conjunction. The key to their success has been prioritizing housing first, and then lobbying the city's large bike advocacy groups second, drawing plans to improve mobility in working class neighborhoods (TRUST, 2015).

Moreover, because of the aforementioned risks associated with biking and walking in low-income communities, launching programs to increase participation in active forms of transportation can also mean asking neighborhood residents to take serious risks. Even when Safe Routes to School Partnerships have been built, and safe

passages to and from schools have been established, accidents can and do occur. Lieberman and Zimmerman (2015) write: “in December 2013, a 15-year old girl was beaten and raped just a half block away from a Safe Passage route” (p.24). Real-life application of these programs must include partnerships with organizations working to prevent community violence and road accidents in ways similar to programs advocating an increase in public-serving space which cannot occur without parallel efforts to prevent displacement. These kinds of efforts feed each other and mutually improve each other’s outcomes. For example, evaluation of a Safe Routes to School project in Chicago showed that there was a 20% reduction in crime around Safe Passage schools (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

Potential Benefits of Bike Equity Work

When conducted from an ecological perspective, programs that advocate for bike equity hold the potential to transform not only neighborhoods but also existing cycling institutions. Seeds for such transformation have already been planted across the country. The League of American Bicyclists and the Sierra Club (2015), two of the largest bike advocacy organizations, recently co-published a report titled “The New Majority: Pedaling Towards Equity.” This report notes the rise in the number of cyclists in communities of color, as well as the obstacles these communities face to riding safely. Allison Mannos, a community organizer, suggests that just a few years ago the term “bike equity” was still foreign to these groups, and the release of this kind of advocacy material marks a profound change (A. Mannos, personal communication, July 24, 2015). However, the executive director of the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition Tamika Butler qualifies this statement substantially by suggesting that a lot of education work still needs to be done to convey what bike equity means and implies. For example, she describes “The New Majority” as a misnomer

since cycling has always been the most accessible mode of transportation in communities of color (T. Butler, personal communication, 2015). The report urgently recommends prioritizing bike equity to avoid the risk of marginalizing the new majority – a conclusion that revises both the long history of cycling and already existing marginalization in communities of color. Nevertheless, years of organizing to draw attention to “invisible bicyclists” (p.7) have translated to a concrete shift, and hopefully to a more culturally responsive bike movement.

Conversely, bicycling has been successfully built into community organizing campaigns for livable cities. Perhaps the most salient example of organizing on two wheels is that of Slow Roll Chicago, a program that not only takes residents through safe, slow community rides through the South Side of Chicago, but has also directly lobbied the city government for more cyclist and pedestrian infrastructure in that area of the city (Kramer et al., 2015).

Cycling holds many possibilities as a school-based intervention, with the national Safe Routes to School program serving as the primary model. Many parents allow their children to walk to school out of necessity, but are concerned for their children’s safety on the way to school. The program validates these concerns while offering a blueprint for action and asking parent, students, and school staff volunteers to facilitate using active transportation to school by establishing safer mobility practices (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015). They recommend creating biking and walking trains, which are medium-sized groups of people who walk and cycle to school together, as well as corner captains comprised of adult volunteers who stand on key corners and are available to keep a watchful eye on children walking to school (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015). Different branches of the program have even reached out to small businesses surrounding schools and asked them to serve as safe havens where children can run in and ask for help if they

feel unsafe. The program acknowledges the interconnectedness of community violence, degrading infrastructure, and biking/walking inequity. It advocates for broad coalition building, as well as the grassroots education of cyclists and motorists. In this way, it galvanizes community support for bike equity (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

The benefits of such work are multifold. Safer routes to school can reduce absenteeism, and provide opportunities for natural mentorship. The health benefits are clear, and establishing corner captains and informal crossing guards helps reduce high-speed traffic and unsafe driving (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015). In cities like Los Angeles, where there is little if any training to teach motorists to drive alongside cyclists, the program begins to fill a much-needed instructional role. Because Safe Routes offers participating schools federal funding, the CDC and APHA emphasize that the program can also turn schools into the leaders of broad coalitions that rectify inequities. They can also be a vehicle through which violence prevention activities gain federal funding (Lieberman & Zimmerman, 2015).

The Role of Community Psychologists

Community psychologists can contribute to two primary areas of study where more data are needed. First, there has been little academic exploration of gendered bike inequities. "Only 6% of women . . . feel confident riding on all streets with traffic" notes the League of American Bicyclists Report & Sierra Club (2015, p.6). The bike count conducted by the Los Angeles Bicycle Coalition in 2013 showed that less than one in five cyclists were female despite the fact that most transit takers are female. Since female ridership increases drastically on bike paths, it is likely that lack of safety deters women more than it does men (L.A. County Bicycle Coalition, 2013) although health discrepancies may also be a factor in the gender biking gap. Both micro- and macro-level studies are needed to determine the

causes of this inequity, as well as best practices to rectify it. Second, more research is needed to identify successful organizing practices that have promoted bikeability and walkability while also combatting gentrification.

The field of bike scholarship is ripe for this kind of research: the urgency of climate change lends new urgency to everyday urban practices, and biking has emerged as a kind of archetypal symbol of urban sustainability. Enough evidence has accumulated to make it difficult to refute the need to redesign U.S. cities to become more walkable and bikeable. Yet, the question is whether the familiar white stripes of bike lanes will continue to serve as markers of wealth, serving only a few. "It's about more than slapping paint on concrete and calling it a bike lane" repeated several activists throughout these interviews (R. Contreras, A. Mannos, A. Lugano, personal communication, July 24, 2015). It is about whether the majority of cyclists will be acknowledged and consulted in the cycling boom we seem to be moving toward; it is about whether cycling will exacerbate or redress inequities. The answer has yet to be decided, and community psychologists have a chance to influence the outcome.

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