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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND MATHEMATICS

School of Geography

**'Best Practice' and Sustainable Mobility:
a critical realist account**

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by

James J. Macmillen

Thesis for the degree of Master of Philosophy

August 2010

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND MATHEMATICS
SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY

Master of Philosophy

'BEST PRACTICE' AND SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY:
A CRITICAL REALIST ACCOUNT

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In the last two decades, the notion of 'best practice' has become accepted into the standard lexicon of policy-making. Transport policy has not been exempt from this trend; 'best practice' approaches to the development, implementation and evaluation of policy interventions are ubiquitous at all scales of governance, appearing to enjoy both explicit and tacit support from a diverse array of political actors. Recently, however, dissenting voices in the planning literature have questioned the core tenets of the 'best practice' notion. Chiefly, these critiques have tended to focus on the apparent naiveté of 'best practice' as it relates to the attendant notion of 'policy transfer', highlighting the salience of institutional heterogeneity as a limitation to spatial policy convergence. Yet, while such analyses are extremely commendable, they have failed to address: (1) how the notion of 'best practice' is understood, encountered and employed by policy actors; (2) why the 'best practice' notion has proven so popular; and (3) the broader implications of 'best practice' policy learning with regard to a future transition to sustainable mobility. Grounded in critical realist ontology, this thesis directly addresses these three concerns through a series of in-depth case studies with policy actors involved in UK walking and cycling policy. Contrary to received wisdom, it argues that the notion of 'best practice' is characterised by significant conceptual ambiguity and diverse functionality, attributing this to the inherent causal powers present in the notion itself and the antagonistic, intractable policy context in which active travel is presently mired. Recognising the limits to 'best practice' thinking, the thesis concludes with a plea for a modest 'rebalancing' of contemporary policy learning approaches.

Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>Illustrations</i> | <i>v</i> |
| <i>Author's declaration</i> | <i>vi</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| 1 A portrait of 'best practice' | 1 |
| 1.1 Aim and rationale | 3 |
| 1.2 A brief history of 'best practice' | 10 |
| 1.3 Institutional saliency and the 'pragmatic' critique | 15 |
| 1.4 Research objectives | 19 |
| 2 Theory and method: a critical realist approach | 22 |
| 2.1 Critical realist ontology | 23 |
| 2.2 Epistemological implications | 29 |
| 2.3 Research design | 37 |
| Conclusions | 52 |
| 3 Encountering 'best practice': analytical description | 53 |
| 3.1 Interpreting cognitive maps | 55 |
| 3.2 Local encounters: active travel in Marlsworth | 58 |
| 3.3 National encounters: active travel in the UK | 74 |
| 3.4 Overarching encounters: active travel 'facilitators' | 93 |
| Conclusions | 105 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----|
| 4 | Explaining ‘best practice’: transfactual argumentation | 107 |
| | 4.1 Intractable conflict and advocacy coalitions | 108 |
| | 4.2 Causal powers: heuristics and rhetoric | 117 |
| | 4.3 A realist synthesis | 131 |
| | Conclusions | 135 |
| 5 | Balancing ‘best practice’: contextual implications | 136 |
| | 5.1 Where are we going? | 138 |
| | 5.2 Is this desirable? | 144 |
| | 5.3 What should be done? | 153 |
| | Conclusions | 156 |
| 6 | Conclusions | 157 |
| | 6.1 Core Contribution | 158 |
| | 6.2 Limitations | 160 |
| | 6.3 Future work | 165 |
| | <i>Appendices</i> | 167 |
| | <i>References</i> | 168 |

Illustrations

Figures

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 1.1 | The ubiquity of ‘best practice’ | 1 |
| 2.1 | Two types of generalisation | 32 |
| 2.2 | Objectives, substantive approach and thesis structure | 37 |
| 2.3 | Research participants and case selection criteria | 45 |
| 3.1 | A sample cognitive map | 56 |
| 3.2 | Causal representation of BMI | 57 |
| 3.3 | Causal representation of modal split | 57 |
| 3.4 | Will’s cognitive map (Case A) | 63 |
| 3.5 | Sam’s cognitive map (Case B) | 64 |
| 3.6 | Chris’s cognitive map (Case C) | 65 |
| 3.7 | Martha’s cognitive map (Case D) | 78 |
| 3.8 | Harry’s cognitive map (Case E) | 79 |
| 3.9 | Graham’s cognitive map (Case F) | 80 |
| 3.10 | Lisa’s cognitive map (Case G) | 96 |
| 3.11 | Keith’s cognitive map (Case H) | 97 |
| 3.12 | Dutch ‘best practice’ for the UK | 99 |
| 4.1 | The structures of causal explanation | 134 |
| 5.1 | Participants’ learning foci | 144 |

Tables

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 2.1 | Derivational nature of the research objectives | 39 |
| 2.2 | Research participants and core attributes | 42 |
| 4.1 | Actors’ encounters with the causal powers | 118 |
| 5.1 | Focal variables and associated forms | 140 |

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, JAMES JOSEPH MACMILLEN, declare that the thesis entitled:

‘Best Practice’ and Sustainable Mobility: a critical realist account

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission,

Signed:

Date:.....

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Paul Cullen, who died a few months after its completion in early 2011. He gave up much of his time for this research and was a truly inspirational man who will be greatly missed. Thank you, Paul.

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James J. Macmillen
Old Marston, Oxford
July 2010

Chapter 1

A portrait of 'best practice'

In recent months I have consulted a number of books that offer guidance on the process of writing a postgraduate thesis. Almost without exception, they have cautioned against commencing any chapter with a map, graph or figure. Doubtless, this is sound advice. However, I believe that Figure 1.1 so succinctly encapsulates the central concern of this thesis that I feel its inclusion at the outset is not only excusable, but genuinely valuable.

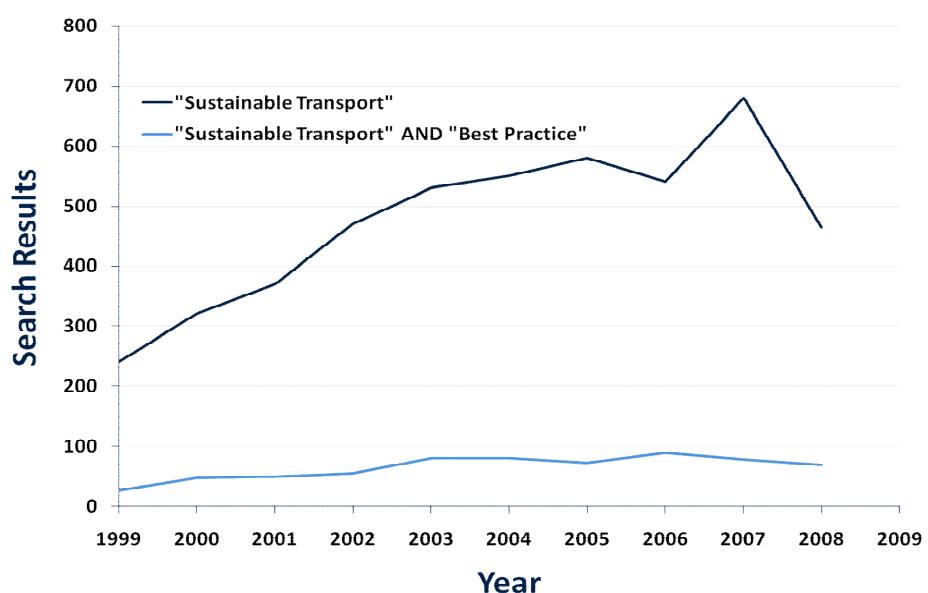


Figure 1.1 *The ubiquity of 'best practice'*

The graph is straightforward to interpret, and its conclusion profound. During the last decade, approximately thirteen percent of all electronically-searchable academic and quasi-academic materials containing the phrase 'sustainable transport' returned by the search engine *Google Scholar* also include at least one mention of the phrase 'best practice'. Of course, the veracity of this claim ought to be tempered by statistical caveats. This headline figure, for example, will

undoubtedly incorporate citations, paraphrases and other passing references, and it would be naive to conclude that all of the sources in question were explicitly concerned with 'best practice' *per se*.¹ Nevertheless, for all such qualification, the sheer ubiquity of the 'best practice' notion in recent literature cannot help but demonstrate the extent to which it has become accepted into the standard lexicon of contemporary transport policy.

Yet, if one delves beneath such coarse, high-level statistics, it becomes the *nature* of this acceptance—rather than its magnitude—which proves to be most fascinating. Significantly, the notion of 'best practice' appears to have gained international recognition across an extraordinarily heterogeneous assemblage of transport professionals. Consider, for example, the diverse provenance of the publications returned by *Google Scholar*: we see peer-reviewed articles by academic researchers advocating 'best practice' approaches to the design of travel surveys (Ampt and Ortúzar, 2004); conference papers outlining 'best practice' guidance for the design of pedestrian signals (Barlow *et al.*, 2003); non-governmental organisations publishing 'best practice' guidelines on cycling policy and the reduction of transport-derived CO₂ emissions (CTC, 2002; C40 Cities, 2008); national governments sponsoring 'best practice' schemes for achieving sustainable freight distribution (Welsh Assembly, 2008; Department for Transport, 2010a) and even supranational bodies, such as the EC Directorate General for Mobility and Transport, commissioning research on international 'best practice' in policy package design (OPTIC, 2009).

In parallel with this diverse patronage, the nature of the 'best practice' phenomenon in contemporary transport policy has also come to be characterised by an astonishing dearth of conceptual clarity. It is an extremely rare event when a reader of such publications encounters a considered and cogently-articulated definition of 'best practice', either formulated by the author(s) themselves or cited from a secondary source. Perhaps, given the structural ubiquity of the 'best practice' discourse, this is understandable at the level of individual authorship. Nevertheless, it is slightly disconcerting to learn that the central tenets of the 'best practice' notion—whatever they may transpire to be—appear to be tacitly

¹ Furthermore, legitimate questions may be poised as to the representativeness and accuracy of the database underpinning *Google Scholar*, as some academics have duly noted (e.g. Jacsó, 2005).

accepted as self-evident, somehow existing below the theoretical radar and thus rendered immune from scholarly critique.

This introductory chapter is comprised of four sections. First, I set out the aims and central justifications for this research. Second, I provide a brief history of 'best practice', charting the manner in which the notion has been employed and variously appropriated since its inception. Third, I review existing critiques of 'best practice' in the broadly-defined planning literature. Finally, I outline the specific objectives of the research.

1.1 Aim and rationale

The overarching aim of this thesis can be stated as follows:

I intend to critically assess the present ubiquity of 'best practice' usage in the UK transport policy community, and evaluate the extent to which the notion of 'best practice' represents a desirable organising principle for policy learning processes.

In the following paragraphs, I shall outline the supporting rationale that underpins this aim. Broadly, my intention here is to convey the significance and urgency of this research in the context of the transport policy community's response to pressing socio-environmental concerns.

It is logical to start with a sobering overview of the socio-environmental context within which this research is situated. In recent decades, the prevailing mobility paradigm in the advanced capitalist economies—which, for land-based transport, we might reasonably characterise as 'hydrocarbon-dependent automobility' (HDA)²—has come to pose a significant challenge to the project of 'sustainable development', a now-familiar tripartite concept that seeks to harmonize the competing priorities of the economy, society and the environment (Banister, 2005; Sperling and Gordon, 2009). In other words, while the growth of hydrocarbon-fuelled transport systems clearly confers significant benefits to

² 'Hydrocarbon-dependent' as its continuity is almost entirely contingent on the discovery, extraction, refinement, freightage and combustion of petrochemicals; and 'automobility', following Urry (2004), as it is largely predicated on quasi-autonomous travel practices afforded by the private automobile.

certain individuals, firms and national economies, it simultaneously engenders myriad adverse economic, social and environmental consequences; including, but by no means limited to: vehicle emissions, social exclusion, congestion, obesity, noise pollution and road traffic accidents (for an overview, see Banister, 2005).

Undertaking an exhaustive discussion of these externalities in turn would be tangential to the specific aims and objectives of this thesis. Nevertheless, in order to contextualise later debates as to the merits of 'best practice' approaches to policy design, it is important to convey a sense of the magnitude and complexity of the challenge facing transport professionals. In light of this, let us briefly consider the particularly illustrative example of vehicle emissions. The environmental and health implications of vehicle emissions have risen to the fore in recent policy debates on sustainable transport (Gilbert and Perl, 2008). At the local scale, gases such as sulphur dioxide, nitrogen monoxide and carbon monoxide, as well as suspended particle matter (SPM), are all harmful to humans upon inhalation (Yelda *et al.*, 2005). More pertinently, and over broader spatial and temporal scales, concern over anthropogenic climate change, with regard to escalating emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), has engendered a new sensitivity toward the relationship between transportation and global environmental change (IPCC, 2007).

The scale of the emissions challenge facing the transport sector in the European Union can be starkly illustrated. Between 1990 and 2005, for example, while net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from EU-27 nations *decreased* by 7.9%—from 5621 to 5177 Mt CO₂e³—GHG emissions from the EU-27 transport sector *increased* by 27% (European Environment Agency, 2008). Given the fact that the EU-27 transport sector is responsible for 22% of net EU-27 GHG emissions, it follows that had the sector matched the emissions reductions made elsewhere in the EU-27 economy, net EU-27 greenhouse gas emissions from 1990-2005 would have decreased by 14% instead of the 7.9% actually realised (*ibid.*). Road transport is responsible for the overwhelming majority of these domestic transport emissions. In 2008, for example, road transport accounted for 90% of all transport-derived CO₂ emissions in the United Kingdom (Department for Transport, 2010b).

³ These data include Romania and Bulgaria, despite the fact that their official accession to the EU took place on 01 January 2007. MtCO₂e stands for Metric Tonne Carbon Dioxide Equivalent.

How, then, has the transport policy community responded to the enormity of the challenges posed by the seemingly-entrenched mobility paradigm of HDA? The first observation to make here is that contemporary processes of policy design, policy implementation and policy evaluation operate across extremely fragmented organisational and institutional milieu (Ney, 2009; Docherty and Shaw, 2009). As evidenced by the introductory remarks to this chapter, we see a heterogeneous assemblage of governmental and non-governmental actors performing a diverse array of activities variously related to the overarching project of mobility governance. As a direct consequence of such a 'networked polity' (Ansell, 2000), the ease with which one might be able to definitively evaluate the policy 'response' to such challenges is significantly diminished. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace the emergence of a particular normative logic of transport planning—dubbed 'new realism'—which, over the last two decades, has attempted to engender both a philosophical and practical shift toward a more holistic appreciation of UK transport policy in terms of its relationship to broader social, economic and environmental concerns.

As is often the case with social movements, the essence of the 'new realism' agenda can perhaps best be understood as a critical rejection of the mentality which preceded it: the so-called era of 'predict and provide' (Goodwin *et al.*, 1991; Owens, 1995). As an entrenched set of principles, the logic of 'predict and provide' formed the theoretical bedrock of UK transport policy during the latter half of the 20th Century. According to Phil Goodwin (2001)—one of the central figures in the emergence of the new realism movement—this 'predict and provide' mentality revolved around three strongly misguided assumptions. First, came the belief that road traffic should be wholly conceptualised as a derived demand. That is to say, the transport policy community exhibited a strong tendency to assume that none of the principal drivers of traffic growth were to be found within their jurisdictional sphere. Specifically, growth in demand was assumed to result from broader socioeconomic variables such as rising levels of disposable income. This conviction, in turn, underpinned the second assumption, that the *raison d'être* of transport policy was principally one of subservience to

overriding economic imperatives.⁴ In essence, the role of the transport planner was considered to be twofold: first, they were to accurately forecast the growth in travel demand over a specified future timeframe (i.e. 'predict'); and second, they were to decide upon the most cost-effective means by which the supply of transport infrastructure should be increased so as to accommodate said demand (i.e. 'provide'). Third, was the tacit and not-so-tacit assumption that the presence of alternative road transport modes (i.e. public transport, walking and cycling), would decline in real terms, but that the costs of this decline would be more than compensated for by the net economic benefits of increased automobility.

In their seminal report to the Rees Jefferys Road Fund, titled *Transport: the new realism*, Goodwin *et al.* (1991) exposed the fallacious nature of this 'predict and provide' mentality. Over the medium to long-term, it was argued, balancing the forces of (finite) supply and (infinite) demand in the transport system necessitated a fundamental qualitative shift in the nature transport policy away from supply-led interventions toward a practice founded upon the principals of demand management (see also Bulkeley and Rayner, 2003; Banister, 2005).

While few actors would now disagree with the theoretical validity of 'new realist' logic, however, the academic literature is replete with evidence that genuine demand management has been extraordinarily difficult to achieve (Vigar, 2002; Bulkeley and Rayner, 2003; Docherty and Shaw, 2003). As Nykvist and Whitmarsh (2008, p. 1374) emphatically note:

'To date, policy measures to foster more sustainable mobility by influencing individual travel decisions (e.g., congestion charging, vehicle taxation) have had little effect relative to the underlying growth in demand. The benefit of technical measures to reduce vehicle emissions and noise has often been outstripped by the increase in vehicle numbers, engine size, travel frequency and trip length.'

Although the apparent failure of demand management measures is clearly disappointing, it should not be altogether surprising. For while specific instances

⁴ This subservience is neatly illustrated in the title of the Conservative Government's 1989 white paper *Roads for Prosperity*, which ministers billed as 'the largest road-building programme since the Romans' (see Docherty, 2003).

of policy failure are heavily determined by local contextual factors, they have a tendency to be united by a recurring—and often implicit—theme which we might broadly conceptualise as ‘complexity’. As Urry (2004) contends, our contemporary mobility paradigm bears many of the hallmarks of a so-called ‘complex system’, insofar as it is characterised by the ubiquitous presence of opaque and highly unpredictable ‘non-linear’ relationships. Of course, it would be naïve to imagine that the nature of mobility in the Western world has only recently exhibited such complexity. Ever since its invention in the late nineteenth century, for example, the motorcar has been enmeshed in myriad sociocultural processes that extend far beyond its sheer utility value as a means of transportation (see Pettifer and Turner, 1984).⁵ Yet arguably, whilst the ‘predict and provide’ approach merely catered to the output of this complexity, the ‘new realist’ emphasis on demand management very much entails that the transport policy community proactively engages with it. The essence of the problem hence lies in the fact that it is one thing to intervene in a complex system *per se*, but quite another to intervene in such a manner that the system responds in a desirable fashion.

Absolutely central to this engagement with complexity has been the notion of policy learning (Vigar, 2002; Gudmundsson *et al.*, 2005). The pressure for far-reaching policy change, coupled with the fact that the problems of the contemporary mobility paradigm are manifest in all advanced capitalist economies with limited historical precedent, mean that policy learning, in its broadest sense, represents a particularly logical and attractive form of educative practice (Rose, 2005). In essence, learning from the experiences of one’s national and international peers may allow policy actors to draw conclusions as to what to do, what not to do, and hence aid their ability to formulate an optimal/rational course of action within their own jurisdictional sphere of influence. In this sense, evidence-based policy learning offers something that *ex-ante* modelling of a potential policy measure cannot; even the most refined econometric models are

⁵ Culturally, for example, the car has come to represent far more than just a mode of personal transportation. As the ‘epitome of modernity’ (Wachs, 2008), it offers a unique blend of ‘mobile privacy’, providing an extension of the private home while supporting novel forms of sociality (Miller, 2001; Latham *et al.*, 2009).

founded upon abstract models of human behaviour with a limited capacity to include pertinent situational and contextual variables. Thus, learning from elsewhere is attractive as it allows one to see how things have worked in practice, albeit within a different sociocultural context (*ibid.*).

Yet while learning as a political response is as old as governance itself (Rose, 2005), less attention has been paid to the manner in which this learning takes place. This is less true of debate in the political science literature, but is certainly the case for transport studies and its related disciplines of land use and environmental management. In short, it appears that there is little concern for what we might think of as 'learning how to learn'. Given the centrality of policy learning to the contemporary transport policy profession, this omission is at once intriguing and concerning. Unless critical attention is paid to the manner in which such learning is taking place, we risk being unable to collectively gauge whether the techniques and practices guiding our learning are as effective and efficient as possible.

Indeed, in the absence of any systematic analysis or definitive criteria with which to evaluate the merits of a particular approach to policy learning in the transport policy community, it would appear that the notion of 'best practice' has become the *de facto* synonym for policy learning. Consider, for example, TfL's (2007) *Sustainable Freight Distribution: a plan for London* which contains ten references to 'best practice' in the executive summary alone—occurring, on average, once every three hundred words. Not once, however, is the term defined, nor a reference provided to a secondary source where an interested reader might find such a definition.

We are now homing in on the crux of the professional rationale that underpins this thesis. Specifically, that there is an urgent need to examine: first, the manner in which the 'best practice' notion is used and understood in the contemporary transport policy community; and second, whether 'best practice' is a genuinely valuable organising principle for our collective policy learning processes. Of course, if the notion of 'best practice' possessed no intellectual or communicative merit whatsoever, it is unlikely that it would have attained such prominence, whether in transport policy or elsewhere. Yet, as Martin and Sunley (2003) rightfully point out, the mere popularity of a term can never fully guarantee its validity as a theoretical construct.

Thankfully, although disciplinary space for critical and reflexive debate remains decidedly limited in comparison to mainstream human geography, recent contributions to the academic literature appear to have fostered a growing acceptance amongst transport scholars for the questioning of supposedly self-evident ontological truths. In part, this reflects the major influence of the so-called 'new mobilities paradigm' over the past decade, which has rakishly exposed the deficiencies of the prevailing nomological-deductive approach to transport studies (see, for example, Urry, 2004; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller, 2007; Merriman, 2007). More recently, however, such sociological critiques have also been accompanied by concerned voices within the deductive tradition *per se*. Consider, for example, the debate in *Transport Reviews* on the theory of travel time (see Metz, 2008; Schwanen, 2008; Givoni, 2008), or longer-standing epistemological reflections on the philosophy of transport planning (Talvitie, 1997; Goetz and Szyliowicz, 1997; Timms, 2008).

Inspired by such contributions, this thesis also attempts to question an accepted norm: that 'best practice' thinking is inherently beneficial to the development, implementation and evaluation of effective transport policies. Consider again the curious and heterogeneous coalition of actors using the term mentioned in the introductory remarks to this chapter. Surely this merits inspection, understanding and explanation? There is a pressing need to understand just how this collective fixation with 'best practice' has arisen, how it is used, why it is used, and what implications this usage has for the viability of future decision-making in the transport policy community.

1.2 A brief history of 'best practice'

‘Among the various methods and implements used in each element of each trade there is always one method and one implement which is quicker and better than any of the rest’

—*Frederick W. Taylor ([1911] 2004, p. 17)*

While the current prevalence of the term ‘best practice’ in contemporary professional life is significant, its overarching sentiment—as it relates to the identification and spatial/temporal diffusion of ‘superior’ customs—is almost certainly as old as human history itself (Rogers, 2009). Indeed, as Overman and Boyd (1994) note, approaches to the same effect have been enacted throughout the ages, albeit under different, or non-existent, nomenclature. One might consider, for example, the spread of prehistoric tool-making or particular fire-starting practices as broad instances of ‘best practice’ dissemination in action. Furthermore, given that this sentiment is so intertwined with the associated, if conceptually distinct, themes of ‘imitation’ (Tarde, [1903] 1962), ‘diffusion’ (Rogers, 1962), ‘innovation’ (Schumpeter, 1934), ‘transferability’ (Evans, 2004) and ‘knowledge dissemination’ (Castells, 1996; Maskell and Malmberg, 1999), detailing a comprehensive genealogy of ‘best practice’ *per se* as it has materialised in twentieth and twenty-first century discourses, would be a major undertaking. Nevertheless, it is possible—and, indeed, worthwhile—to trace the emergence of ‘best practice’ thinking and terminology, illustrating its powerful and contested nature.

Of those commentators that have pondered the emergence of ‘best practice’—and its sister term ‘benchmarking’—several trace its conceptual origins to the nascent profession of management consultancy in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Overman and Boyd (1994), Katarobo (1998) and King (2007) all point to the renowned American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor as a major figure in the emergence of ‘best practice’ philosophy in the organisation of industrial processes. While Taylor’s (1911 [2004]) seminal work, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, actually preceded the first recorded use of the term ‘best practice’ by 73 years, his zealous pursuit of industrial

efficiency—as manifested in his famous ‘time studies’—was such that he remained convinced of the existence of a singular optimal solution for any given industrial problem, as evidenced by the quotation above.

Writing well after the industrial revolution, Taylor clearly was not the first person to believe that some methods of industrial production might be superior to others. Yet, as Kanigel’s (1997) pertinently-titled biography *The One Best Way* demonstrates, Taylor was a vociferous and tenacious character who had great influence amongst the industrial elite in the early twentieth century. The profound changes to industrial production that he enacted, along with those of his peers such as Henry Gantt and Morris Cooke, were instrumental in the developing the nascent ‘science’ of efficiency studies into the *bona fide* profession of management consultancy—the core competency of which, to this day, remains trading in commercially-applicable knowledge of optimal business practices (Cody, 1986). Correspondingly, it is in the professional fields of accounting, business and management consultancy that ‘best practice’ ethos is, and always has been, most prevalent. Although it was not until the publication of Hitching and Stone’s (1984) *Understanding Accounting* that the actual term first appeared in print (OED, 1989).⁶

Consistent with this heritage, ‘best practice’ has been defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a mass noun, chiefly used in business: the practice which is accepted by consensus or prescribed by regulation as correct; the preferred or most appropriate style’ (*ibid.*, p. n/a). In the business studies and management science literature, the use of the term ‘best practice’ appears to have followed a relatively consistent, if not wholly uniform, pattern. Although explicit definitions are relatively rare in proportion to the volume of literature published, those that are offered—as well as those implied—tend to adhere to the key elements outlined in the OED (1989) definition above. Specifically, they tend to emphasise the fact that the adoption of particular routines present in the *modus operandi* of other firms (or indeed, other areas of the same firm), may yield effective and desirable outcomes for one’s own firm, and avoid the risks and

⁶ It should be noted, however, that Hitching and Stone’s (1984, p. 314) reference to the term ‘best practice’ was not neological, but rather they use it in reference to the ideas of their accounting peers—strongly indicating that the term ‘best practice’, like most phrases, enjoyed a period of use prior to its first appearance in written form.

inefficiencies incurred through unnecessary duplication. Parnaby *et al.* (2003, p. 265), for example, consider a ‘best practice’ to be ‘a practice that will lead to superior performance’; for Hillson (2004, p. 2) it is a ‘routine activity that leads to excellence’; and, perhaps most simply, in *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Knowledge Management* (Clemons Rumizen, 2002, p. 102), ‘best practice’ pertains to ‘something that has been shown to be effective in one place that could be effective in another.’

Literature that can be loosely grouped under the umbrella-term ‘business improvement’ appears to be particularly replete with ‘best practice’ thinking. Notable examples include books by Codling (1995), Gattorna (1998) and Zairi (1999); academic papers by Kumar *et al.*, (2004) and Reijers and Mansar (2005), as well as countless items of so-called ‘grey literature’, often published by organisations or individuals on the internet (e.g. Business Best Practice, 2007; Business Link, 2010). In such materials, the notion of ‘best practice’ is almost always discussed in conjunction with the closely-related concept of ‘benchmarking’, which, according to the OED (1989, p. n/a), can be defined as ‘a process in which a business evaluates its own operations (often specific procedures) by detailed comparison with those of another business, in order to establish best practice and improve performance; the examination and emulation of other organizations’ strengths.’

As we have seen in the previous section, while the use of ‘best practice’ terminology is still most prevalent in business management, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of the notion in the public sector. Clearly, given the aims of this thesis, a truly comprehensive explanation for this emergence and an appraisal of its implications has yet to be made. Yet, at a macro-level, it would appear from the literature that the ‘best practice’ approach gained particular legitimacy through its near-synonymous relationship to the attendant notion of ‘policy transfer’, which, for Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 5) corresponds to:

“the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system”.

As several commentators point out, policy transfer is not a new phenomenon (Davis, 2009; Fraser, 2003; Stone, 1999). There is clear evidence, for example, that social reformists in nineteenth century Britain keenly followed the course of socio-political developments in Australia, Canada and New Zealand in the belief that these colonial outposts, sharing Britain's cultural and institutional traditions, represented 'laboratories' for domestic learning (Rogers, 2009; Burton, 2006). Dolowitz (2000) too, notes the case of constitution-building as a historic example of policy transfer, with Hungarian bureaucrats modelling their nation's constitution on that of Spain, which in turn had been modelled on that of Germany, which in turn had been modelled on that of the United States (see Agh, 1998). Nevertheless, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, the widespread adoption of the market-orientated New Public Management (NPM) philosophy during the 1980s and 1990s increasingly led to policy transfer becoming commonplace in a 'modernising' public sector (Overman and Boyd, 1994; Verchick, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, the rise of NPM particularly asserted the validity of policy transfer and, *ergo*, 'best practice' in the formalised structures of governance following the election of the 1997 New Labour government. As Duncan (2009) notes, for example, the UK Cabinet Office (1999, p. 16) affirmed in the white paper *Modernising Government* that there was a genuine need to 'look beyond what government is doing now... learning lessons from other countries; and integrating the European Union and international dimensions into our policy-making.' Supported in this endeavour by like-minded think tanks such as Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research, the New Labour government devoted significant resources to the transference of policy measures from the United States; especially in the context of welfare and employment reform (Hulme, 2005; Duncan, 2009).

Given this 'outward looking' policy agenda (Page and Mark-Lawson, 2007), the growth of 'best practice' thinking at the level of policy formulation and implementation is unsurprising. However, the identification and promulgation of 'best practices' in the public sector is similarly prevalent at the organisational tier—particularly in healthcare and education (Kennedy, 2008; Coffield and Edward, 2008). The BMJ Group, for example, has developed a major evidence-based decision-support tool for medical professionals called 'Best Practice',

which couples empirical evidence with expert opinion and guidelines on diagnosis, prognosis, treatment and prevention (see BMJ, 2009). Formal and informal procedural guidance in the UK National Health Service, too, is replete with 'best practice' thinking—prevalent, for example, in decision-support (DH, 2007), pharmaceutical procurement (DH, 2008) and even 'whistle-blowing' protocol (DH, 2010). In the UK education sector, Coffield and Edward (2008) frame the emergence of 'best practice' as symptomatic of centralised decision-making by the New Labour government, citing the purported ambitions of the Department for Education and Skills to put 'teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do by establishing a new Standards Unit to identify and disseminate best practice' (DfES, 2002, p. 5).

Unlike the private sector incarnation of 'best practice', however, it would appear that in the more diffuse and heterogeneous environment of the public sector, subsequent interpretations of the notion have become more diffuse. Some authors do offer relatively 'Taylorist' definitions of 'best practice', such as: 'the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of [public] management' (Overman and Boyd, 1994, p. 69); or, 'the most efficient and effective way of accomplishing a task, based on repeatable procedures that have proven themselves over time' (McInerney and Liem, 2009, p. 3). However, other adopters of the notion in the public sector are rarely explicit about their understanding of 'best practice', seemingly using the phrase in reference to a variety of tangential and conceptually distinct issues. Hence, rather than alluding to 'best practice' as an approach for generating inductive claims, we are told that the term variously refers to: 'policies and programmes that [are] evaluated by external international agencies and considered to be successful in terms of outcomes and costs' (Lana and Evans, 2004, p. 208); or, 'the ways in which a teacher works within constraints of his or her environment to design appropriate learning contexts for his or her students' (Stewart, 2002, p. 102).

1.3 Institutional saliency and the 'pragmatic' critique

One of the most lauded examples of 'best practice' in the business management field was the Japanese business philosophy of 'kaizen'. Roughly translated into English as 'continuous improvement', kaizen, like Taylorism, placed considerable emphasis on the need for manufacturing firms to simultaneously improve quality in the production process whilst eliminating inefficiencies. Unlike Taylorism, however, kaizen involved the devolution of power and responsibility throughout firm hierarchies, entailing the 'up-skilling' and intellectual involvement of assembly line workers (Imai, 1986). Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the extent to which major Japanese manufacturing firms, such as Toyota, were able to improve their business performance by adopting kaizen—as well as related 'just-in-time' (JIT) delivery processes—gained considerable attention from manufacturing firms in the West (*ibid.*; Womack *et al.*, 1990). As a result—particularly in the global electronics and automotive industries—the kaizen philosophy was heralded as a self-evident 'best practice', with North American and European manufacturing firms investing considerable resources in attempts to generate similarly successful outcomes.

In reality, however, attempts to implement kaizen in the West were broadly unsuccessful (Gertler, 2004). The explanation for this wholesale failure embodies what is almost certainly the major critique of the 'best practice' notion existing in the academic literature to date; which, for the sake of argument, we shall term the 'pragmatic critique'.⁷ The cornerstone of the pragmatic critique is that actors who attempt the spatial transfer of favoured 'best practices' often grossly overlook the salience of institutional heterogeneity (*ibid.*). In other words, the success of specific systems, processes or conventions that are thought to constitute 'best practices' remain heavily contingent upon myriad socio-cultural, economic and political forces, which, by their very nature, are spatially constituted (Amin and Thrift, 1992; Martin, 1994; Gertler, 2004; Tacconelli and Wrigley, 2009). Thus, despite the much lauded shift toward a global 'space of flows' (Castells, 1996;

⁷ Following the OED (1989, p. n/a), whereby pragmatic pertains to: 'dealing with matters in accordance with practical rather than theoretical considerations or general principles; aiming at what is achievable rather than ideal; matter-of-fact, practical, down-to-earth.'

see also O'Brien, 1992), 'place' remains an inherent determinant of any practice—'best' or otherwise.

For the economic geographer Meric Gertler (2004), these forces—manifested in local/regional/national 'cultures of production'—represent a set of complex and interrelated, yet crucially definite, 'institutional' arrangements, variously acting to enhance/constrain efficient and profitable economic activity in different locales (Gertler, 1995, 2004; see also Coe, 2005). Importantly, such institutions are not, as some have suggested, analogous to operational and behavioural practices (see, for example, Hall, 1986), and neither are they akin to material organisations. Rather, they represent both formal regulations/legislations/systems and informal societal norms within and upon which all economic activity takes place, such as labour markets, education and training regimes, industrial relations, corporate governance, capital markets and competition (Gertler, 2004; see also Gertler *et al.*, 2000).

For Gertler (2004), the institutionally contingent nature of both production and consumption thus curtails the extent to which the spatial dissemination of 'best practice' can be effectively realised. Yet importantly, he demonstrates that it is not so much the issue of geographic proximity (i.e. distance) *per se* that is of significance. Rather, such physical distance is representative of a *relational* distance, insofar as institutional frameworks (such as labour market regulations and training regimes) are often constituted at the national scale. Other commentators, too, have contributed to this pragmatic critique of 'best practice' in the private sector. Hope (2004), for example, describes the problems encountered in the transfer of 'best practice' in the international hotel industry (see also Tayeb, 2001); Martin and Beaumont (1998) turn their attention to internal 'best practice' transfer within multinational firms operating across different cultural contexts, as does Szulanski (1996) in his exploration of 'internal stickiness'; and Purcell (1999) illustrates the challenges faced in the spatial transfer of 'best practices' in human resource management.

Importantly for our analysis, however, the core tenets of this pragmatic critique also represent the principle focus for detracting expositions of 'best practice' in the field of comparative politics. Most evident here are the countless contributions to the literature that stress the inherent intellectual and political obstacles to successful international policy transfer (Rose, 1991, 2005; Dolowitz

and Marsh, 1996, 2000; Evans and Davis, 1999; Radaelli, 2000; Page and Mark-Lawson, 2007). Jones and Newburn's (2007) *Policy Transfer and Criminal Justice*, for example, is particularly illustrative of the pragmatic critique, insofar as it traces the efforts of the New Labour government to transfer a series of policing reforms from the United States that had proven to be particularly successful in reducing New York City's crime rates during the early 1990s. As the authors explain, the extent to which the core elements of the US reforms—particularly the notion of 'zero tolerance' policing—were adopted in the UK remained heavily contingent upon the institutional inertia present in UK policing. Indeed, the limited extent of the eventual transfer was attributed to the fact that senior police chiefs in the UK exhibited a reluctance to devote significant resources to relatively minor crimes—a cornerstone of the US 'broken windows' approach (see also Page and Mark-Lawson, 2007). Focussing on the extension of the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Gorton *et al.* (2009), too, offer a similarly compelling analysis of policy transfer that epitomises the pragmatic critique. In essence, their argument points to the disjuncture between the totalising assumptions underpinning the rationale and practical application of the CAP, and new member states' extraordinarily diverse socioeconomic characteristics, largely rooted in the institutional legacy of socialist agriculture.

Seemingly influenced by such wider debate amongst scholars of public policy, the pragmatic critique has also come to represent the natural point of departure for those authors who have questioned the 'best practice' mantra from the interrelated domains of transport policy, land use management and spatial planning (Scottish Executive, 2003; De Jong *et al.*, 2002; Geerlings and Stead, 2005; Gudmundsson *et al.*, 2005; De Jong and Geerlings, 2005; De Jong, 2007). One of the key figures in this area, Martin de Jong (2007), offers a comprehensive account of institutional structures' effects on the viability of transport policy transplantation across national boundaries. Pointing out the significant differences that exist between nations' specific policy issues and the ability of governments to ably finance, legislate for and implement transport interventions, he largely attributes instances of policy failure to a 'lack of congruence' between formal and informal institutional structures. For de Jong (2007, p. 307), formal institutional structures correspond to institutions with a 'visible legal or organisational form', such as legislative frameworks, property

rights, environmental regulations and the nature of public private partnerships. Yet while such formal institutions are almost invariably the focus for policy transfer initiatives, informal institutions—such as shared cultural conventions, moral codes, societal norms and attitudes to policy compliance—remain strong determinants of policy success. Hence, where the nature and characteristics of formal institutions are altered under the auspices of implementing one or more foreign ‘best practices’, a ‘lack of congruence’ between these novel structures and the underlying informal institutions may well result, as the latter are often endemic and temporally enduring. For example, in response to high levels of urban smog, Scandinavian policy-makers may introduce a policy measure that restricts motor vehicle usage according to vehicles’ registration plates (i.e. vehicles with even-numbered and odd-numbered plates are authorised to travel at different times of the day, respectively) (*ibid.*). Typically, this measure may meet with a relatively benign response from policy actors and citizens—given historically high rates of compliance with formal regulation. However, transferring such a policy to nations where citizens have a culturally-entrenched distrust of public authority, argues de Jong (2007), may well result in citizens attempting to circumvent the measure through undesirable means (for example, by purchasing an additional vehicle belonging to a different plate category).

This theme of congruence resonates strongly with Gudmundsson *et al.*’s (2005) report on the experience of the ‘Benchmarking European Sustainable Transport’ (BEST) thematic network, which was tasked by the European Commission to explore the potential of benchmarking at the European policy level in order to support the dissemination of best practices in the promotion of sustainable transport. Pointing, like those discussed above, to the institutional constraints on best practice dissemination, the paper again serves to exemplify the pragmatic critique. For example, one constraint outlined relates to the heterogeneous array of policy-making style apparent in the EU. Hence, while some modes of governance may be characterised as relatively ‘reactive’, others are more ‘anticipatory’; while some exhibit adversarial tendencies, others offer a more consensual approach. Indeed, while the notion of benchmarking is viewed as a potentially useful tool for policy learning, measurability and comparability limitations led the authors to conclude that as ‘policies are not directly

comparable across contexts...attempting to benchmark sustainable transport policies against one another...is not advised' (*ibid.*, p. 669).

1.4 Research objectives

Like Gudmundsson *et al.* (2005), Stead's (2009) arguments are also focused at the European Union level, where he launches a particularly vociferous attack on the notion of 'best practice' as manifest in the European Commission's approach to spatial planning. Identifying twelve Commission-funded projects on spatial planning that demonstrate a profound infatuation with 'best practice' thinking, Stead (2009, p. 1) firstly charts the inherent limitations of the approach as it relates to the international transferability of policies between EU member states, noting that the primary vehicles for such transfer—European Territorial Cooperation programmes—are:

'...founded upon the assumption that best practices are equally applicable and effective in another setting and that the development and dissemination of best practice will help to lead improvements in policy and practice in other countries, regions or cities...such a belief is too simplistic.'

Given that a significant portion of Stead's (2009) work echoes that of Gorton *et al.* (2009; see also Radaelli, 2000)—insofar as it discusses the limitations of 'best practice' transfer from Western Europe to Eastern Europe—it is tempting to treat his contribution as another example of the pragmatic critique. Yet, as the second part of the paper testifies, to do so would be to overlook its broader significance as an earnest bridging point between the quasi-utilitarian overtones of the pragmatic critique and the more nuanced, investigative flavour of what we might term the emergent 'actor critique'.

Typified by the contributions of Wolman and Page (2002) and Bulkeley (2006), the actor critique represents an embryonic, but long overdue, extension of the literature on 'best practice' and policy transfer. Essentially, these authors acknowledge that while exponents of the pragmatic critique—in recognising and

disclosing the institutional limitations of 'best practice'—have served to enlighten mainstream discourse in the transport and land use policy community, the pragmatic critique alone is insufficient as a lens through which to capture the complexities of the 'best practice' notion in its entirety. In order to *understand* 'best practice', they argue, it is necessary to complement the outputs of the pragmatic critique with an analytical focus that pierces right to the heart of the notion *per se*—entailing a critical examination of the manner in which it is performed, routinised and habitualised by relevant actors.

Recall once again the twofold aim of this thesis: first, to critically assess the ubiquity of best practice usage in the transport policy community; and second, to examine the validity of the notion with respect to the broader project of policy learning. Clearly, given the net contribution of the pragmatic critique, a good deal of progress has already been made with respect to the latter; clarifications on the reasons for failure in policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), and the establishment of key institutional requirements for the successful dissemination of 'best practices' (Scottish Executive, 2003; de Jong, 2007), for example, are highly valuable. Fundamentally, however, in order to develop a thorough understanding of the present ubiquity of best practice, it is within the precepts of the actor critique that this research must be situated.

Specifically, there is an urgent need to pose searching and incisive questions to relevant actors, examining how and why they make use of the term 'best practice'. This thesis is therefore structured around the following three research objectives:

- (A) How is the notion of 'best practice' *encountered* and *understood* within the UK sustainable transport community?
- (B) What are the *generative mechanisms and structures* that explain the present ubiquity of 'best practice' in the UK sustainable transport community?
- (C) What are the *broader implications* of 'best practice' thinking with regard to policy learning and policy development?

Chapter 2 will outline the theoretical and methodological approach by which these objectives are to be fulfilled, while Chapters 3, 4 and 5 will discuss the research findings in terms of A, B and C, respectively. Conclusions are offered in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2

Theory and method: a critical realist approach

‘The more usual, or at least currently fashionable, practice is to devote at least a chapter of your book or PhD thesis to a tortured, self-flagellating disquisition on the ethical and methodological difficulties of participant observation...you must spend a good three pages explaining that your unconscious ethnocentric prejudices, and various other cultural barriers, probably make this [undertaking] impossible. It is then customary to...express grave reservations about the validity of modern ‘Western’ science as a means of understanding anything at all.’

—Kate Fox (2005, p. 4)

Given the introspective character of much theoretical and methodological debate in the social sciences, it is probable that the frustrations expressed in the above epigraph from Fox’s (2005) *Watching the English* will resonate with many contemporary human geographers. Strikingly, Fox’s irritation does not appear to be overly directed at a real or perceived hostile readership—the overarching principles of ethnography require little defence in anthropological circles. Rather, she appears to be exasperated with the academic conventions that explicitly or tacitly demand such ‘self-flagellating disquisitions’. In her best-seller *Watching the English*, therefore, Fox revels in the intellectual and argumentative freedom afforded by what Mills (2008) dubs the ‘pop anthropology’ format. Absolved of the tiresome academic requirement to incessantly justify the validity of her professional work, she is at liberty to simply ‘get on with’ her research without rehearsing what she implies to be staid and repetitive platitudes.

In this chapter I take an opposing view. Whilst I empathise with Fox, I see genuine value in discussing the theoretical and methodological frameworks that underpin this research and it is my intention here to maximise the potential

contribution of this chapter to the overall strength of this thesis. Specifically, I seek to avoid superficial discussions of methodology, such as the misguided and unhelpful ‘qualitative versus quantitative’ debate and instead attempt to ground this research in the philosophy of critical realism. While this is primarily for intellectual reasons, the ‘place’ of this research in the sub-discipline of transport geography entails that there is a corresponding pragmatic rationale for a detailed defence of its post-positivist spirit.

This chapter is thus comprised of three sections. First, I introduce and outline the fundamentals of critical realist ontology. Second, I discuss the epistemological implications of this ontology for the project of social science and note how this is reflected in the thesis structure. Finally, I outline and reflect upon the chosen research design, justifying the use of an in-depth case study approach as the optimal means by which to reveal the generative causal mechanisms accounting for the current prevalence of ‘best practice’ thinking in the contemporary transport policy community.

2.1 Critical realist ontology

Although the contemporary critical realist movement is characterised by numerous perspectives and contributions, the core philosophy of critical realism stems from the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar’s seminal texts *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979). It is, of course, impossible to convey the complexities of critical realism without extensive discussion; yet, Baert (2005, p. 87) manages to succinctly encapsulate its core sentiment, implicitly defining critical realism as an attempt ‘to salvage the naturalist project while taking on board that knowledge is a social construct.’ In essence, therefore, the philosophy of critical realism offers an ontological platform that simultaneously exposes the fallacious nature of the deductive-nomological approach to social science whilst circumventing the relativistic and nihilistic tendencies of hermeneutic theory and postmodernist deconstructionism. For disenchanted social scientists, critical realism thus holds out the promise of transcending...

‘...the current debate governing the larger reflexive self-understandings of the human and social sciences [which] is...misguided, hopeless, and sterile. Essentially, two failed philosophies of social science [empiricism and postmodernism] are deadlocked in a struggle to control the future of the human and social sciences. Neither, in fact, merits any influence. The inherited debate mis-frames the issues, problems, and possibilities, and so generates useless conflict and, consequently, widespread apathy among social scientists about critical reflection on the larger nature and purposes of their disciplines.’

(Smith, 2006, p. 7)

The ‘realism’ of which Bhaskar (1975) speaks is both ontological and epistemological. It is ontological in the sense that critical realist philosophy maintains that there is an extant metaphysical reality independent of human perception; and it is epistemological in the sense that it maintains that this reality, in principle, is capable of being apprehended through, admittedly fallible, inferential processes of abduction and retrodiction. In *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar (1975) develops his ontological position through successive critiques of empirical realism, the Humean theory of causality and the deductivist assumption that explanation and prediction are one and the same. The core foundations of Bhaskar’s (1975, 1979) argument rest upon his conceptualisation of reality as ‘stratified’. In other words, he makes an ontological distinction between three ‘domains’: the real, the actual and the empirical. As Bhaskar vividly recounts in his series of recent interviews with Mervyn Hartwig, making such a strong case for distinguishing between the ‘real’ and the ‘actual’ can incur ridicule if viewed superficially (Hartwig and Bhaskar, 2010). Yet, for critical realists, recognising the qualitative distinctions between these ontological domains is absolutely fundamental to comprehending the rejuvenated *raison d'être* of both natural and social science. Without grasping the significance of this ‘stratified notion of reality’ (Bhaskar, 1975) we cannot hope to move beyond the ‘misguided, hopeless and sterile’ debates that so needlessly curtail the professional project of social science (Smith, 2006, p. 7; see also Baert, 2005).

Perhaps the most illustrative means of examining this stratification is through Bhaskar's (1975) critique of the Berkeleyan notion of 'the empirical world', in which, to all intents and purposes, the philosophy of science has been entrenched since the Enlightenment. While the natural sciences represent the immediate context for this critique⁸, the implications of Bhaskar's logic resonate with equal measure in the social sciences. Essentially, Bhaskar (1975) argues that classical empiricism—the philosophy characterised by Locke, Hume and Berkeley which asserts that experiential sense-data is the sole means of acquiring warranted knowledge—is undepinned by a metaphysical dogma characteristic of an 'epistemic fallacy', whereby ontological and epistemological concerns are erroneously conflated. As Bhaskar (1975, p. 16, emphasis added) puts it, this is evident in empiricists' implicit conviction that 'statements *about* being [i.e. ontological concerns] can always be transposed into statements about our *knowledge of* being [i.e. epistemological concerns]', which, for Collier (1994, p. 32) 'misrepresent[s] the world of our everyday experience by assimilating it to that discovered by science', and results in the existence of 'a world [solely] defined by its relation to our experience' (*ibid.*, p. 36, original emphasis).

In highlighting this epistemic fallacy, Bhaskar (1975) thus demonstrates the enormous ontological limitations of the empiricist mentality. To reduce 'what is' to 'what we can know' is, for critical realists, extraordinarily problematic as it imposes highly inappropriate constraints on the potential of scientific enquiry. Consider, as Collier (1994) does at length, the salience of the epistemic fallacy as manifested in processes of scientific experimentation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989, np.), the noun 'experiment' can be defined as 'an action or operation undertaken in order to discover something unknown, to test a hypothesis, or establish or illustrate some known truth.' Hence, for empiricists, the explicit goal of experimentation is to isolate a particular mechanism or process with the overarching aim of establishing a causal law which universally governs the relationship between two variables and supports future predictions. In essence, the unique nature of carefully-contrived experimental conditions is

⁸ It is not until *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) that Bhaskar turns his attention to focus explicitly on the social sciences.

such that the mechanism or process in question can be examined ‘free from the interfering flux’ of other mechanisms or processes (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 35).

A precondition of experimentation is thus that the experimental conditions must represent a *closed system*, which can be defined as systems characterised by both internal closure—‘the absence of any changes to the internal workings of the system’—and external closure—‘stability in the relationship between the system and factors that may interfere with its workings’ (Baert, 2005, p. 92). Importantly, within such closed systems, causal laws are determined through a Humean (i.e. empiricist) conceptualisation of causality. In other words, causality is considered to be *successionist* in character, whereby a causal relationship between two entities is said to exist when one type of event (the cause) is regularly succeeded by another (the effect) (Bhaskar, 1975). Thus, where such an empirical regularity is evident, it is both necessary and sufficient to assert a causal relationship between the two events (Baert, 2005). For example, all else being equal, if one is holding a tennis ball and then one allows the ball to escape from one’s grasp (cause), it will fall to the ground (effect). A Humean causal law, in the form of ‘if X, then Y’ ($X \rightarrow Y$) would therefore state: if a ball is released (cause), it will fall to the ground (effect).

Yet while they may hold in closed systems, such causal laws suffer from two major interrelated flaws. First, they are explanatorily impotent; they can describe a succession of events, but cannot account for *why* effects followed causes. Consider the following interchange in the television series *Inspector Morse*:

Morse: “I’m tired, Lewis”

Lewis: “what caused that, Sir?”

Morse: “a lack of sleep”

The reason that this interchange is humorous is precisely because Morse answers Lewis’s question in a Humean fashion. Faithful to the causal law of $X \rightarrow Y$, his ‘explanation’ is so laughably superficial that, quite literally, it becomes a joke. Evidently, in this instance, Lewis can brush off Morse’s flippancy. Yet in situations where enquiring minds seek a genuine explanation for phenomena, the implications of Humean causality run deeper. For example, if a curious child asked why their ball fell to the ground, the response “your ball fell because you

dropped it" would clearly be pedagogically unacceptable. Hence, Humean causal laws are purely descriptive; they pertain to regular correlations in closed systems but they do not offer a *reason* for such regularities.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, Humean causal laws are rarely applicable outside controlled, contrived environments. Whereas closed systems might permit a degree of conflation between correlation and causation, it is almost impossible to identify anything approximating a closed system outside of the laboratory. On the contrary, the world in which we live is almost entirely characterised by emergent systems variously described as 'complex' (Urry, 2004), 'chaotic' (Pecora and Carroll, 1990), 'nonlinear' (Khalil, 2001) or, for Bhaskar (1975, p. 35), 'open'—defined as 'systems in which causal laws are out of phase with patterns of events and experiences'. Indeed, as the mathematician Stanislaw Ulan facetiously pointed out in the 1950s, the omnipresence of these systems is such that 'calling a situation nonlinear is like going to the zoo and talking about all the interesting non-elephants you can see there' (cited in Ramalingam and Jones, 2008, p. 24).

This lack of applicability clearly highlights the fundamental weakness of empiricism as a valid basis for both natural and social science. Simply put, empiricism erroneously presupposes the ubiquity of closed systems and as a result has never sought to extend its conceptualisation of causation beyond that of Hume's successionist notion (Bhaskar, 1975). As Collier (1994, p. 34, emphasis added) illustrates, attempting to employ $X \rightarrow Y$ causal laws in open systems is thus an utterly hopeless endeavour:

'The events that we can ordinarily observe are *not invariably preceded or followed by any other constantly conjoined event*. Red sky at night is not always followed by a fine day, or deflationary budgets by reductions of inflation, or burglars entering by dogs barking, or spots on the sun by war, or sexual intercourse by conception.'

Given that the Humean notion of causality clearly does not prevail in the natural world, we are thus obliged to revisit the very properties that a causal law must possess for it to be considered as a law in a *bona fide* sense. If we maintain the criteria of universalism then we are faced with the problem implied above; the

only laws possible in natural science will be found in a tiny handful of closed systems (e.g. the solar system) and there would be none in social science. Yet if we abandon the criteria of universalism, then why speak of ‘laws’ at all as the whole purpose of contriving an experiment and producing laws is that these laws will have some value outside of the laboratory (see Baert, 2005)?

It is in the attempt to transcend this impasse where we come full circle in our discussion and return to the stratified notion of reality. Both the natural and social worlds, as open systems, are characterised by innumerable mechanisms that together interact so as to produce events (Collier, 1994). Hence, Bhaskar (1975) demonstrates the need to broaden the ontological horizons of debate in the philosophy of science, arguing that causality ought not to be conceptualised in a successionist sense, but rather in a *normic* sense, compatible with the production of knowledge about open systems. This is to say that causal laws must not be analysed according to empirical regularities, but instead according to the ‘tendencies’ of generative mechanisms—defined as ‘powers or liabilities of a thing which may be exercised without being manifest in any particular outcome’ (*ibid.*, p. 14). It is absolutely vital to appreciate this latter point; in open systems, mechanisms interact in myriad and unpredictable ways. They may, for example, augment, contradict, disguise, or conceal one another. Nevertheless, ontologically-speaking, they remain present in the domain of the real, even when their interactions preclude their materialisation in the domains of the actual and/or empirical.

Appreciating causality in this manner is inordinately useful, and something that we take for granted in everyday life. It is the generative mechanism of the earth’s gravitational pull, for example, which *explains* the fact that when a ball is released from a height it falls to the ground. Ontologically speaking, it is these generative mechanisms which constitute the domain of the ‘real’; it is their complex interplay, tangibly manifested in the events of the world which constitutes the domain of the ‘actual’; and it is our (necessarily limited) experience of these events which constitutes the domain of the ‘empirical’. Refer again to Bhaskar’s (1975, p. 35) definition of an open system: ‘systems in which causal laws are out of phase with patterns of events and experiences’. Here we can see exactly why the Berkeleyan notion of ‘the empirical world’ is an

epistemic fallacy; the ‘empirical’ is but one worldly domain, ontologically distinct from the ‘actual’ and the ‘real’.

2.2 Epistemological implications

Given the profundity of critical realism’s ontological contribution, it is subsequently necessary to consider its implications for the broader project of social science. Here Bhaskar (1975; 1979) sets out, in a normative sense, the *purpose* of social science as the production of valid and useful (i.e. generalizable) explanatory knowledge of phenomena based on comprehensive understandings of the generative mechanisms, events and experiences that collectively constitute reality.

Essentially, this involves making conceptual connections between the three ontological domains set out above (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). As implied in the previous section, it is through the process of experimentation that natural scientists are able to make these connections. Under the contrived conditions of an experimental closed system, generative mechanisms can be isolated and revealed as the domains of the real, actual and empirical are effectively equated (i.e. $D_r = D_a = D_e$) (Bhaskar, 1975; Collier, 1994). Yet, as social scientists, we clearly cannot ‘close’ the open systems which characterise our fields of study in any meaningful sense. The human subjects at the heart of our analysis are conscious, self-aware, deliberative and reactive, and it is thus not possible to contrive an empirical situation where we can isolate one mechanism from the interferences of others (i.e. $D_r \geq D_a \geq D_e$) (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Ostensibly, this poses a problem for social scientists as—according to the purpose above—we are still obliged to produce warranted knowledge about generative mechanisms. In other words, we are tasked with establishing the character of these mechanisms even though they are not reducible to empirical isolation.

For critical realists, it is through processes of *abstraction* that this obstacle can be overcome (Bhaskar, 1975). At this point it is important to clear up potential confusion, as the concept of ‘abstract’ is often discussed in a pejorative sense within social science, where it is ontologically contrasted with

‘concreteness’, ‘tangibility’ or even ‘reality’ *per se* (e.g. Hamnett, 2003) (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). As Markusen (2003, p. 704, emphasis added) observes:

‘The term ‘theorist’ is often applied to those *who deal mainly in abstractions* and abjure empirical verification, rather than to those who take up knotty problems, hypothesize about their nature and causality, and marshal evidence in support of their views. It is common to hear scholars refer to a divide between the quantitative people and the theorists, as if those who use data for evidence have no theory and those who ‘do’ theory have no use for evidence.’

In contrast, abstraction represents something fundamentally different in critical realist philosophy. It is not to be associated with glossing over the complexity of the social realm but rather engaging directly with it. Abstraction, in this sense, can be conceived of as a ‘thought experiment’ designed to reveal the nature of the particular structures and generative mechanisms (the real) that together work to constitute events (the actual). For example, in a sociological account of workplace discrimination (the actual), a critical realist approach may ‘abstract’ a generative mechanism of gender socialisation (the real).

As we might expect, the practical implications of this revised epistemology are significant. In order to genuinely embed processes of abstraction in the practice of social science, critical realists argue that nothing short of a wholesale revision of traditional scientific method is necessary. Variously referred to as the ‘Popper-Hempel’, ‘covering-law’ or ‘deductive-nomological’ (DN) model (Ekström, 1992), traditional scientific method is grounded in empiricism and the Humean notion of causality discussed above. In essence, therefore, the DN model seeks to make generalizable claims to knowledge using deductive inference based upon the premises of universal laws.⁹ In a formal sense, the DN model thus attempts to derive the ‘explanandum’ (i.e. the event) from three forms of ‘explanans’ (i.e. the conditions which explain the occurrence of the event): universal law(s), framework condition(s) and triggering cause(s). For example, in the case of the tennis ball discussed in the previous section, we have:

⁹ Hence, ‘nomological’, from the Greek *nomos* meaning ‘law’.

Explanans: X. All objects fall to the ground when dropped (universal law);

Y. Sam is holding a ball and there is nothing between the ball and the ground (framework conditions);

Z. Sam drops the ball (triggering cause).

Explanandum: The ball falls to the ground.

(adapted from Danermark *et al.*, 2002)

Here we can see that the explanandum is *inferred* by logical deduction from the premises of the explanans. In other words, one can conceptualise the explanans as the answers provided to a question phrased around the explanandum: ‘why did the ball fall to the ground?’ ‘It fell due to X, Y and Z.’ Recognising the form and influence of such inferences, for critical realists, is a precondition for appreciating the power of abstraction and the salience of the generalization objective for social science. Defined as ‘reasoning[s] from something known or assumed, to something else which follows from it’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, np.), inferences hence represent the tools by which we can relate the specific to the universal.

In social science we can identify two distinct ways of conceptualising generalisation: first, the empiricist concept of generality; and second, the realist, abstractive concept of generality, otherwise known as *transfactual argumentation* (Bhaskar, 1975; Danermark *et al.*, 2002).¹⁰ Typically when we encounter generalisation in social science, we encounter it in terms of the former sense, where it refers to the extent to which empirical observations derived from the study of one group of events can be considered a valid means of apprehending the characteristics of a larger group of events (see Figure 2.1, upper level). It is thus analogous to inductive extrapolation and its nuances lie at the heart of statistical debates on representativeness. Yet as we have seen,

¹⁰ The term *transfactual* signifies that the focus for generalisation extends beyond the realm of observable fact (i.e. the empirical domain) (Bhaskar, 1975).

ontologically-speaking, empiricism is inextricably confined to the domain of the empirical. It is thus insufficient to solely concern ourselves with questions about events' general validity if we are to ensure that social science is to genuinely possess an explanatory capacity. In contrast, the realist concept of generality instead refers to what Bhaskar (1975) terms events' *transfactual conditions*. That is to say, for critical realists, the purpose of generalization is thus the identification of those mechanisms, structures and properties that exist in the deep domain of the 'real' which directly or indirectly constitute 'actual' phenomena (Figure 2.1, lower level). For critical realists, this represents the fundamental essence of Bhaskar's (1975) revised scientific method.

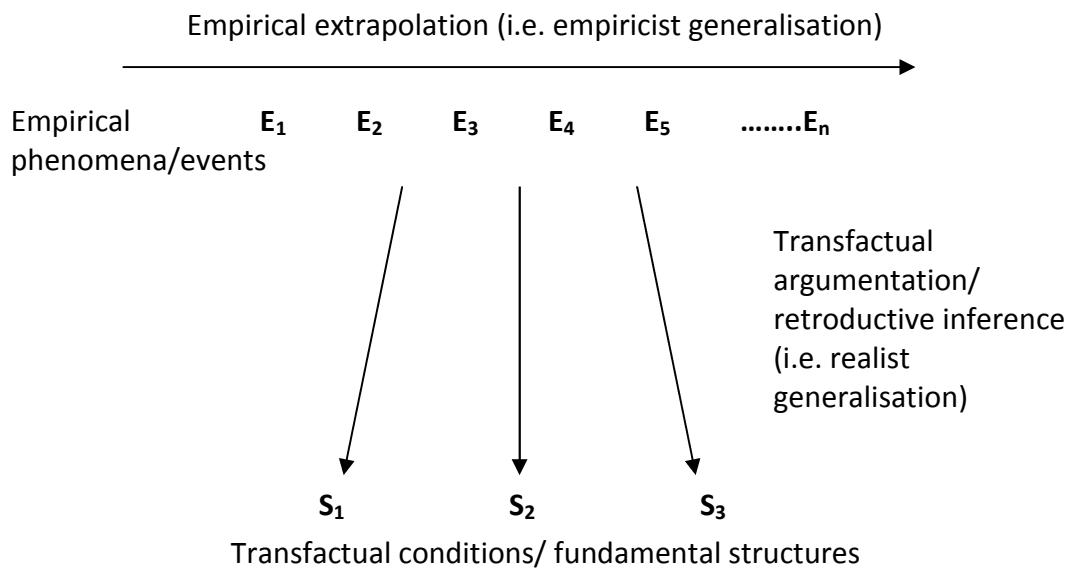


Figure 2.1 Two types of generalisation

Source: adapted from Danermark et al. (2002, p. 77)

While empiricist generalisation relies on inductive and deductive logic, therefore, realist generalisation instead employs two other modes of inference—abduction and retrodiction—that are more suited to the revised explanatory goals of social science. In other words, in the same way that a carpenter recognises that a screwdriver is an inappropriate tool with which to carve wood, or that an axe is an inappropriate tool with which to achieve a smooth finish, critical realists here argue that some inferential tools are more applicable than others in the quest to produce particular types of generalisable

explanatory knowledge. Moreover, just as carpenters cannot cut wood effectively or efficiently with a blunt axe, the social scientist must appreciate that even the optimal mode of inference for a given situation must be employed in a considered fashion, underpinned by a thorough understanding of its epistemological function.

First formalised by Peirce (1932), and termed ‘theoretical redescription’ by Bhaskar (1975), abduction can be broadly interpreted as a mode of inference that relies upon creative judgement, critical thinking and causal postulation. Whereas deduction reasons from the general to the particular, and induction reasons from the particular to the general, abduction essentially involves *recontextualising* an event within a novel conceptual framework in order to give the event meaning (Peirce, 1932; see also Danermark *et al.*, 2002). By way of example, consider the following hypothetical situation involving a prison inmate, where we shall draw on Peirce’s (1932) terms: rule, case and result.

If we are told that *all* prisoners in the local prison are wearing orange jumpsuits, and we are about to meet an inmate from the local prison, we do not need to see the inmate to know for certain that he or she will be wearing an orange jumpsuit. This is *deduction*, because we have reasoned from the ‘rule’ (i.e. the universal law that all inmates are wearing orange jumpsuits) to the ‘result’ (i.e. that the inmate is wearing an orange jumpsuit) by way of the ‘case’ (i.e. that the inmate is from the local prison). If, on the other hand, we are presented with the ‘case’ first—that the inmate is from the local prison—and we then observe the ‘result’ (i.e. s/he is wearing an orange jumpsuit), we can *induce*, albeit fallibly, a rule (i.e. all inmates in the local prison wear orange jumpsuits). Finally, if we unexpectedly find a person hiding in a garden wearing an orange jumpsuit (the result), we *abduce* by interpreting this event in terms of our existing knowledge of seemingly relevant ‘rules’ (i.e. our existing knowledge that all the inmates in the local prison wear orange jumpsuits), and hence imbue the event with plausible meaning (i.e. the person in the garden might be an escaped inmate from the local prison (the case)).

When conveyed in formal terms—as with deduction and induction—it is easy to lose sight of just how basic and prevalent abduction is in everyday life. In truth, we constantly abduce when we give meaning to household events by situating them within broader conceptual frameworks. We infer abductively, for

example, when we interpret the presence of a crumpled sock lying on the stairs in terms of someone dropping laundry, or the presence of cutlery laid on the dinner table in terms of an imminent meal. Indeed, abduction is such an elementary thought process that we hardly need to note its omnipresence in social science; simply focussing on one set of phenomena—manifestations of capitalism—we see Marx ([1867] 1992) abducing in terms of historical materialism; Weber ([1905]1958) in terms of religious conviction; and Sombart (1915) in terms of greed and possession.

Importantly, deductive conclusions can be logically certain while inductive and abductive conclusions cannot. For example, at the moment of abductive inference—from our limited vantage point at the kitchen window—we cannot be *completely sure* that the person lying in the garden is an escaped prisoner. It is perfectly possible that they were intoxicated and fell asleep in the garden on their way home from a fancy dress party. Hence, while inductive conclusions can be strengthened through the intelligent use of statistical tools, the only means of strengthening abductive conclusions involves attaining greater knowledge of the mechanisms and structures we employ to make such inferences in the first instance. Thus, as abductive inference serves to cast events and phenomena in terms of a particular theoretical light, genuine causal explanation necessitates *retroductive* inference ‘from actual phenomena to structural causes...[and] from manifest phenomena to their generating mechanisms’ (Smith, 2006, p. 8; see also Bhaskar, 1975). In order to truly *explain* phenomena, in other words, we must move beyond abductive inference and purposefully undertake retroductive processes of transfactual argumentation to arrive at warranted knowledge of transfactual conditions (cf. Figure 2.1). The criterion upon which retroductive inferences are to be judged is thus their *explanatory power*. Just like detective work, retrodiction thus moves beyond abductive ‘hunches’ and interrogates the generative mechanisms, structures, tendencies and latent powers found in the domain of the real. Hence, when Inspector Morse admiringly declares “you’ve done it *again*, Lewis!” it is because Lewis has formulated and defended a brilliant retrodiction—tying together knowledge of disparate events, motivations, testimonies and capacities to account for how and why a particular phenomenon (e.g. a murder) came to be.

While they remain conceptually distinct, abduction and retrodiction can be so intertwined in practice that they are often viewed as synonymous. For example, when we use abductive inference to recontextualise the phenomenon of the person in the garden in the context of a potential prison escape, one could easily argue that our thought process is characteristic of ‘a mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them’ (Sayer, 1992, p. 107). Yet this is Sayer’s definition of retrodiction, not abduction. At the level of relatively simple phenomena—such as our prisoner example—such conflation is perfectly understandable; the two modes of inference are almost indistinguishable here because, through recontextualisation, we arrive at a viable explanation almost immediately. However, in the context of more complex social phenomena, it becomes easier to discern where the modes are respectively employed. Consider, for example, the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s (1989) explanatory account of how the holocaust came to be possible. Left unconvinced by existing explanatory accounts which traced the occurrence of the holocaust to the spatially- and temporally-contingent socioeconomic characteristics of Nazi Germany (i.e. economic crisis and anti-Semitism), Bauman (1989) first abductively recasts the phenomenon of the holocaust in the context of modernity, arguing that the conditions which made the holocaust possible may instead be found in the structure of modern society itself. From this platform, he subsequently retrodicts in order to determine those *transfactual conditions* which are capable of explaining the holocaust: first, the ‘gardening culture’ constitutive of modernity, through which those who do not ‘fit in’ are removed; and second, power-laden bureaucratic hierarchies constitutive of modernity, whereby divisions of labour act to distantiate actors from the consequences of their actions and authoritarian social control is endemic (see also Danermark *et al.*, 2002).

In concluding this section, it is worth illustrating how the substantive components of this thesis—Chapters 3, 4 and 5—simultaneously correspond to the cornerstones of the critical realist scientific method and the three research objectives set out in Section 1.4. As we have discussed, the central activity for critical realist social science is *transfactual argumentation*, founded upon abductive and retroductive inference. Importantly, however, the full critical

realist method involves four complementary stages which both precede and succeed these. First, it is necessary to undertake what Danermark *et al.* (2002) simply term ‘description’. Here researchers endeavour to depict the nature of events and experiences found in the ‘actual’ domain, paying particular attention to the way in which relevant actors *make sense* of situations. Second, this depiction is studied by way of ‘analytical resolution’ (*ibid.*), whereby emergent themes and significant dimensions of the ‘actual’ are highlighted and recognised as being of interest. In this thesis, these two stages together correspond to Chapter 3, where we examine the manner in which policy actors encounter the notion of ‘best practice’ and, in so doing, accentuate those elements of their experience which pertain to the notion’s popularity. In Chapter 4, we extend this analysis by way of abduction and retrodiction—attempting to explain the ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ in terms of its transfactual conditions. Intertwined with this, we will also carry out a fifth stage, rephrased as ‘comparative abstraction’, where the merits and limitations of the emergent explanation are evaluated against existing abstractions in terms of explanatory penetration—thus establishing the extent to which the emergent theory contributes to existing explanatory knowledge. Finally, in Chapter 5, we return to actual domain and undertake the process of ‘contextualisation’ (*ibid.*), whereby the implications of our retroductive conclusions with regard to the ubiquity of ‘best practice’ are appraised in a holistic sense—examining the manner in which the structures and generative mechanisms uncovered in Chapter 4 interact with other aspects of the policy development process (see Figure 2.2.).

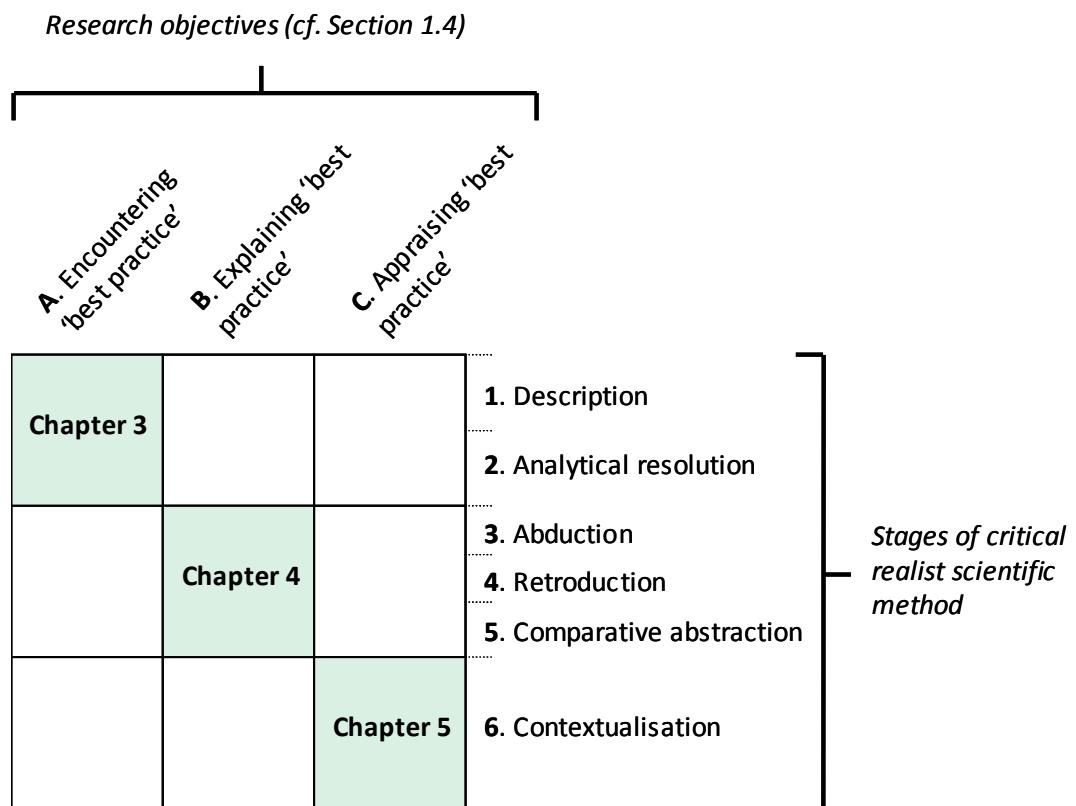


Figure 2.2 Objectives, substantive approach and thesis structure

2.3 Research design

Since their inception, the philosophical positions outlined by Bhaskar (1975, 1979) have come to inform a variety of empirical approaches in sociology, human geography and heterodox economics. Although some commentators appear mistaken in equating Bhaskar's 'epistemological timidity' (Pratt, 2009) with an aversion to questions of method and applied social research (e.g. Baert, 2005), it is from these disciplines that the major works dealing with the methodological repercussion of Bhaskar's ontological and epistemological contributions have emerged (e.g. Sayer, 1992, 2000; Layder, 1990; Ekström, 1992; Pratt, 1995; Yeung, 1997; Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Lawson, 2003). As Yeung (1997) and Pratt (2009) point out, and as should hopefully evident from the preceding sections, this is because critical realism is metatheoretical in character; it lays the ontological and epistemological foundations for social

science, but it devolves the formulation of appropriate methodological apparatus to social scientists themselves.

In this final section, we thus examine how the critical realist sentiment is manifested in the *practice* of this research—establishing, describing and reflecting upon the means by which the three research objectives stated in Section 1.4 are to be resolved. To reiterate, these were:

- (A) How is the notion of ‘best practice’ *encountered* and *understood* within the UK sustainable transport community?
- (B) What are the *generative mechanisms and structures* that explain the present ubiquity of ‘best practice’ in the UK sustainable transport community?
- (C) What are the *broader implications* of ‘best practice’ thinking with regard to policy learning and policy development?

Significantly, we can consider these three objectives to be related in a *derivational* sense. That is to say the strength of arguments made in relation to (B) will be highly contingent upon the quality of knowledge and argument produced in relation to (A) and, in turn, the strength of arguments made in relation to (C) will be highly contingent upon the quality of knowledge and argument produced in relation to both (A) and (B) (Table 2.1). Given this derivation, the net worth of the arguments put forward in the forthcoming chapters will be greatly determined by the extent to which (A) is satisfactorily addressed. In other words, it is vital that accurate, comprehensive and insightful knowledge is produced about how actors in the sustainable transport community presently encounter and understand the notion of ‘best practice’; for if these foundations are not conceptually sound, subsequent efforts to explain and appraise the ubiquity of ‘best practice’ thinking will fall short of the required standard.

| Objective | Primary knowledge source | Complementary knowledge sources |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| A (Chapter 3) | Detailed empirical fieldwork | — |
| B (Chapter 4) | Output from (A) | Existing literature on 'best practice' and theories of the policy process |
| C (Chapter 5) | Output from (B) | Approaches to policy learning |

Table 2.1 Derivational nature of the research objectives

In light of this, it is profitable to conceptualise our research design in terms of what Rom Harré—Roy Bhaskar's D.Phil. supervisor—terms *intensive* and *extensive* empirical procedures (Sayer, 1992). Unlike other methodological dichotomies in contemporary social science, this conceptualisation has merit precisely because it stems explicitly and directly from clear, overarching ontological and epistemological convictions (in this case, critical realist ones). Hence, in contrast to the tiresome, blinkered and misguided 'debate' between qualitative and quantitative methods (for an overview, see Kwan and Schwanen, 2009; Essletzbichler, 2009), conceiving of research approaches in intensive or extensive terms instead enables researchers to recognise the complementarity of different methodological instruments—given that they may pertain to alternative modes of scientific inference and forms of generality. Methodological debates are thus played out on a more fruitful plane, as researchers recognise the fact that social scientists may seek different things, by asking different questions and by using different techniques, whilst genuinely residing in the same epistemological 'space'.

In addressing objective (B) and *ergo* (A), it should now be clear that we are concerned with undertaking retroductive inference in order to establish the transfactual conditions which account for the ubiquity of the 'best practice' notion. Central to this process is the concept of *natural necessity*, aimed at defining the indispensable properties that are constitutive of this ubiquity, as 'abstractions must...at any given point in time, separate the object's necessary properties from the contingent ones and show what it is in the object that makes it what it is and not something else' (Danermark *et al.*, 2002, p. 44). The key

question for us here is thus: ‘how is the ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion possible?’ or, more explicitly in terms of natural necessity, ‘what properties must exist in the world for the ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion to exist and be what it is?’ (*ibid.*). It is through the straightforward recognition that this question pertains to the workings of causal process in a set of substantively-related cases that we arrive at the need for an *intensive* research approach in this thesis. Our focus is thus on:

‘processes, activities, relations and episodes of events rather than statistics on particular characteristics...[hence where] results are more vivid because they describe individuals and their activities concretely rather than in the bloodless categories of statistical indicators.’

(Sayer, 1992, p. 242)

While this quote succinctly encapsulates the essence of the intensive approach, the fact that it has been taken out of context may erroneously portray Sayer’s (1992) position as anti-extensive. It is worth stressing again that critical realists, such as Sayer, are strong proponents of extensive research—an approach that seeks to discern common properties and patterns in a given population—yet, following Bhaskar (1975), they assert that the primary purpose of social science is explanation; something that extensive research, alone, cannot achieve.¹¹ Rather, the advantage of extensive research lies in its capacity to buttress explanatory endeavours through empirical description of what Lawson (2003) terms ‘demi-regularities’. For example:

‘if we want to understand and explain the new poverty at the end of the 1990s, it is highly relevant to ask ourselves what poverty is like in this particular case [i.e. through intensive research], but also to ask *how many* people there are among the new poor, and what is *empirically characteristic* of the new poverty. Thereby we can get some idea of what *empirical patterns are produced* by a particular mechanism or structure of mechanisms’

¹¹ Due to the ‘epistemic fallacy’ discussed in Section 2.1.

(Danermark *et al.*, 2002, p. 166, emphasis added)

Intensive research—in examining causal relations—represents the methodological rationale for a wide variety of popular research instruments; including participant observation, interviews, questionnaire surveys and action research. In this thesis, the ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion is interrogated through eight, strategically-selected, in-depth case studies, with each study focusing on the manner in which an individual policy actor encounters and understands the notion of ‘best practice’ in the context of their professional roles, objectives and activities. Crucially, this approach fulfils the descriptive imperative underpinning objective (A), whilst simultaneously providing a comprehensive and detailed point of departure for the explorative intentions underpinning objective (B). The selected cases are outlined below in Table 2.2.

| Case | Name [pseudonym] | Organisation [pseudonym] | Position | Job description |
|------|---------------------|---|------------------------------|--|
| A | Will | <i>Marlsworth County Council</i> | Transport planner | Developing, implementing and evaluating active travel policies for Marlsworth |
| B | Sam | <i>Marlsworth Cycling Campaign</i> | Chair † | Lobbying Marlsworth's politicians and practitioners to improve local 'cycability' |
| C | Chris | <i>Marlsworth Pedestrians' Association</i> | Chair † | Lobbying Marlsworth's politicians and practitioners to improve local 'walkability' |
| D | Martha | <i>Whitehall</i> | Senior civil servant | Funding and encouraging active travel policy nationwide |
| E | Harry | <i>Organisation for Sustainable Transport</i> (national charity) | Campaigns director | Lobbying national government to develop and implement more sustainable transport policies |
| F | Graham | <i>Cycle UK</i> (national charity) | Campaigns and policy manager | Lobbying national government to improve UK 'cycability' |
| G | Lisa | <i>University of Eastbrook</i> | Academic researcher | Developing and testing future UK active travel scenarios in conjunction with the public and key stakeholders |
| H | Keith | <i>MoveIT</i> (peer-to-peer professional network) | Chair | Facilitating international 'best practice' development and dissemination amongst active travel practitioners |

† Both Sam and Chris undertake their roles in a voluntary capacity. All other participants are remunerated professionals.

Table 2.2 Research participants and core attributes

In selecting these cases, a range of criteria were employed in order to maximise the potential critical insights that that they might afford, both individually and collectively. In essence, these criteria strived to ensure a balance between what might be termed 'case homogeneity' and 'case heterogeneity'. The

intention for achieving a degree of case homogeneity stems from a wish to examine the manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is encountered and understood within a particular policy network. In the introductory chapter, we problematised the notion of ‘best practice’ within the broad context of sustainable transport policy. Our *empirical* focus, however, is purposefully narrower; centred upon a relatively close-knit policy network almost exclusively concerned with the short-, medium- and long-term future of walking and cycling (active travel) in the United Kingdom. Specifically, all eight participants were drawn from a group of advisors and stakeholders connected to a UK research council-funded project which we shall call the ‘Futures project’.¹² Each participant is UK-based, with an almost exclusive professional focus on UK active travel.

The reason for selecting the participants from this network is twofold. First, a tacit axiom appears evident in the broad transport policy literature that a commonality of understanding exists around the notion of ‘best practice’—most apparent in the fact that the notion is almost never defined. If such commonality of understanding were indeed to be present, it is more than reasonable to assume that it would manifest itself most palpably amongst a relatively homogenous, cohesive subset of the transport policy community (as this would ‘control’ somewhat for potentially varying interpretations according to modal or geographic foci). However, if we can demonstrate a divergence of understanding at the network scale (cf. Chapter 3) we can immediately discredit this postulate.

Second, with respect to ‘positionality’ (Valentine, 1997; McDowell, 1998), I am a member of this particular policy network myself.¹³ This proved highly beneficial in the research process, often in intangible ways. For example, possessing a sound understanding of participants’ professional objectives and activities in advance of the research, as well enjoying personal friendships with

¹² The Futures project seeks to develop and explore a range of potential urban futures for UK cities, with a particular focus on improving the quality of the urban environment for walking and cycling. Specifically, the project involves the creation of internally-consistent mobility scenarios, sensitive to various societal, economic and environmental priorities, the development of multimedia narratives for use with stakeholders and the public, and the development of innovative multi-criteria analysis methods to assess the likely implications of alternative futures.

¹³ As a research fellow in the Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford, a substantial proportion of my work is concerned with developing medium- to long-term strategies for increasing rates of active travel in the UK.

some of them, enabled the exploration and probing of certain issues in much greater depth—and often in much great frankness—than would have otherwise been possible. This ‘closeness’ to the material also greatly facilitated the analytical and conceptual work undertaken in respect of objectives (B) and (C).

As noted above, however, I consciously sought to temper the extent of case homogeneity with a degree of case heterogeneity. Hence, within the overarching network, individual decisions on participant selection were made in respect to three criteria—relating to *ex-ante* estimations of potential cases’ ‘circumstance’, ‘scale’ and ‘function’, respectively. By ‘circumstance’ I refer to the whether a potential case was thought to most closely represent: (1) what Denscombe (2007) terms an *extreme* case, whereby retroductive inference is actively facilitated though the appearance of a phenomenon (i.e. usage of ‘best practice’) in an abnormally pure or explicit form (cf. Graham, Lisa, Keith); or (2) what Collier (1994) terms a *pathological* case, whereby retroductive inference is actively facilitated though the appearance of a phenomenon (i.e. usage of ‘best practice’) as a result system flux and disruption (cf. Will, Sam, Chris, Martha, Harry).¹⁴

By ‘scale’, I simply refer to whether a potential case was thought to be concerned with: (1) *national*, UK-wide active travel policy (cf. Martha, Harry, Graham); (2) *local* active travel policy constituted at the city/county level (cf. Will, Sam, Chris); or (3) *overarching*, ascalar policy-related support (cf. Lisa, Keith). By ‘function’, I refer to whether a potential case was thought to be characterised by: (1) *demand-side* responsibilities and activities, pertaining to actors with a campaigning objective seeking to change the status quo—with whom the notion of ‘best practice’ is often associated (cf. Sam, Chris, Harry, Graham); (2) *supply-side* responsibilities and activities, pertaining to public sector actors with development or managerial objectives, seeking to formulate, implement and/or evaluate active travel policies (cf. Will, Martha); or (3) *facilitatory* responsibilities indirectly related to policy (cf. Lisa, Keith). Ensuring scalar and functional heterogeneity in this manner was considered to be crucial in

¹⁴ Technically-speaking, it may be that Collier’s (1994) pathological analogy is more appropriate to ‘extreme’ cases. The OED (1989), for example, define ‘pathological’ in the mathematical sense as: ‘grossly abnormal in properties or behaviour; not exhibiting certain properties common to almost all other examples of its class’. However, Collier’s (1994) usage is followed here for continuity.

order to make substantive contributions with respect to objectives (A), (B) and (C).

Upon identifying each case as appropriate and desirable for inclusion, letters of request were written to the respective actors outlining the objectives and desired outcomes of the research. Happily, positive responses were received from all. Figure 2.3 illustrates the relationship between the various selection criteria discussed above and the final eight cases chosen.

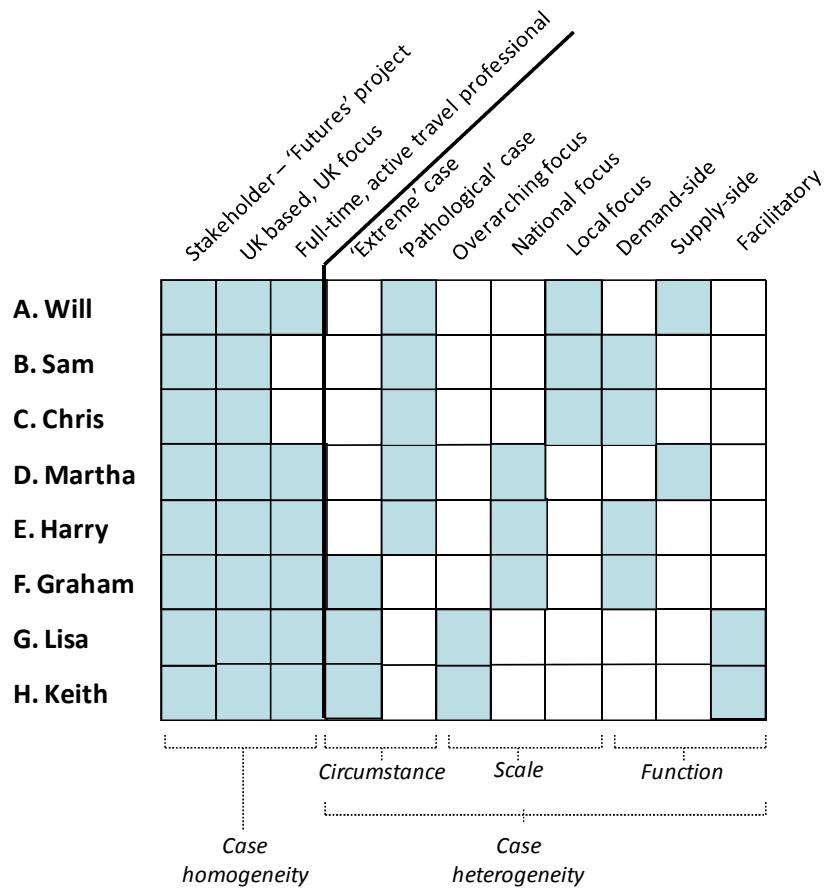


Figure 2.3 Research participants and case selection criteria

The specific procedure by which actors' encounters with, and understandings of, the 'best practice' notion were explored consisted of two substantive elements: semi-structured interviews and a technique known as 'cognitive mapping'. Interviews with each participant were conducted on a face-to-face basis, with five taking place at participants' workplaces, two at participants' homes and one at my own office in Oxford. Lasting anywhere

between 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, each interview was digitally recorded and followed three pre-determined stages. In Stage 1, the participant was asked in great detail about their ultimate professional objectives, their routine actions, the ‘targets’ that they sought to achieve through these actions and the key audiences that they felt it was necessary to both ‘speak’ and ‘listen’ to. This laid the contextual foundations for Stage 2, where the interview proceeded to trace exactly *how* the notion of ‘best practice’ was encountered within this professional framework. Depending on their individual circumstances, the discussion here pertained to either *endogenous* interaction, whereby participants themselves made direct or indirect use of the ‘best practice’ notion in order to meet their objectives, *exogenous* interaction, whereby participants’ abilities to meet their objectives were directly or indirectly impacted by external actors’ usage of the ‘best practice’ notion, or a combination of the two. Finally, in Stage 3, the interview concluded with a discussion of participants’ understanding of the notion of ‘best practice’ in a broader sense. In other words, the conversation stepped back from a focus on how the notion was manifested in their professional activities, and instead encouraged participants to reflect upon its generic advantages, limitations, meanings and implications as they perceived them. A sample interview schedule from Case A, illustrating these three stages, is provided in Appendix (i).

Following each interview, audio recordings were transcribed using a word-processing package and a process of referential coding was undertaken in order to organise the resultant body of textual data into a suitable format for examination (see Denscombe, 2007). In part, this involved high-level ascription of the data to the three objectives (A), (B) and (C), according to their respective relevance. More significantly, however, this involved a reflexive engagement with questions of analysis and interpretation. Indeed, considering interviews as ‘dialogue rather than interrogation’ (Valentine, 1997, p. 111) or ‘conversation[s] with a purpose’ (Eyles, 1988 in *ibid.*, p. 111), it becomes clear that beyond the obvious need for reflexivity and sensitivity there is little definitive guidance available to support researchers’ interpretive efforts (in contrast to the well-documented, procedural guidance aiding statistical analysis). Indeed, analysis of interview data is a messy, iterative process shot through with questions of representation, veracity and meaning. As ever with such practices, there is a

balance to be struck. As Crang (1997, p. 183) tellingly observes, ‘analysing qualitative material is not an ineffable and mysterious process but neither is it a case of painting by numbers’. Hence, while one must retain a belief in the possibility of making valid interpretations (thereby avoiding over-anxious paralysis), it is vital to acknowledge the fact that making sense of interview-generated ‘talk data’ material is far from unproblematic.

Following the tenets of ‘grounded theory’, the data were interrogated using two forms of analytical coding: *open* coding and *selective* coding (Strauss, 1987). Collectively, these pertain to a process whereby relevant descriptions, arguments and opinions articulated by participants during the interviews are both categorised and analysed according to their various properties and dimensions. In practice, however, it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between open and selective codes, as the process of analytical coding is characterised by a significant degree of iterative movement between these two forms. Open coding—Involving the recognition and formalisation of *emergent* themes in the data (such as the theme of ‘outcome/process conflation’ introduced in Chapter 3)—entailed a thorough, line-by-line reading of the transcripts, making detailed notes and attempting to get a ‘feel’ for the data. This was an extremely fruitful process; new insights continually emerged, and others that had been all too fleeting in the maelstrom of the fieldwork also returned and became clarified.

Through selective coding, these themes were related together in a systematic fashion so as to support theoretical analysis (*ibid*). However, as Crang (1997) argues, codes are not to be understood as an explanatory end in their own right. Thus the interpretation of material was inextricably tied into the ontological framework of critical realism. Hence, selective coding was closely aligned to processes of retroductive inference and the search for the generative mechanisms and contextual triggers (Collier, 1994) discussed in Chapter 4. Interestingly, the value of the coding and interpretation stage was heightened by the fact that it proceeded without access to standard qualitative analysis software (which, working professionally as a qualitative researcher over the previous few years, I had become accustomed to using). As troubling as this initially felt, the absence of technological mediation in the interpretation of the raw interview data actually appeared to prove beneficial. In being forced to approach the thorny issue of coding and analysis from ‘first principles’, and in devising a tailored coding tree

based upon a series of separate working documents, I felt much more attuned, and ‘closer’ to the data than I had initially thought possible—aiding both recall and interpretation.

The final point to make in relation to interpretation concerns the production of a ‘good’ account. Traditionally, and perhaps in line with the etymology of the term, the interpretive merits of ethnographic accounts were judged with respect to the degree to which they convincingly reflected the worldviews of the participants involved (Crang, 1997). Such a conception clearly chimes with the requirements of Objective (A). Appreciating how the notion of ‘best practice’ is understood and encountered in the UK active travel community necessitates that interpretation and discussion remains faithful to these understandings, as to deviate significantly from them would inherently jeopardise the quality of our account. However, Objective (B)—together with critical realist convictions—demands that our account must go beyond participants’ immediate (and necessarily partial) understandings and attempt to trace the underlying forces and ‘unsaid structures’ (Crang, 1997; Giddens, 1984) that might serve to explain how and why the notion of ‘best practice’ continues to exist. There are, of course, legitimate concerns that may be raised here with regard to the ‘privileging’ of the researcher’s voice. Again, it is a question of balance and judgement. However, I feel strongly that—providing caution, sensitivity and reflexivity are humbly exercised—there ought to be room for researchers to make connections between phenomena and to draw attention to unrecognised themes. Indeed, if this were not the case, it would be legitimate to question the validity of social science as an enterprise *per se*.

The second substantive element in the research procedure, as noted above, was a technique known as ‘cognitive mapping’. Essentially, cognitive mapping is a means of diagrammatically representing an individual’s perception of a particular issue through the depiction of salient causal relationships—perhaps most strongly epitomised by the work of Axelrod (1976), Eden (1992) or the contributions to Huff and Jenkins’s (2002) edited collection *Mapping Strategic Knowledge*. The bulk of the academic attention fostered on cognitive mapping in recent decades has tended to come from scholars working in management science and organisational behaviour, although limited usage is evident in

mainstream sociology, political science and economic geography (see, respectively, Carley and Palmquist, 1992; Young, 1996; Pinch *et al.*, 2010).

Before we discuss the justification for employing cognitive mapping in this research, it is important to pre-empt two potential misinterpretations of the term. First, the semantic associations of the term ‘cognitive’ in this context arguably do more harm than good, for they tacitly endow the technique with greater transformational significance than it genuinely merits (Pinch *et al.*, 2010). Importantly then, cognitive mapping is *not* concerned with representing a model of cognition *per se*. Rather, it is viewed in this thesis as a useful heuristic device with which to trace and interpret participants’ encounters with—and, indirectly, their understandings of—the notion of ‘best practice’ as it relates to their professional undertakings (*ibid.*; Eden, 1992). To state this plainly, a cognitive psychologist would glean nothing of substantive interest from our approach. Second, it is important to differentiate the form of cognitive mapping employed here from that associated with the earlier work of Lynch (1960) and others in the sub-discipline of behavioural geography, whereby cognitive mapping instead refers to:

‘a process composed of series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his (*sic*) everyday spatial environment.’

(Downs and Stea, 1973, p. 9)

As should now be evident, cognitive mapping was primarily employed in order to support the fulfilment of objective (A) and, to a lesser extent, objective (B). Hence, the specific nature of the causal maps contained in this thesis, and the manner in which they ought to be interpreted, are set out in Chapter 3 where the first map to be discussed—Will’s (Case A)—will be thoroughly explained. The intention in this chapter, however, is to justify the use of cognitive mapping in terms of its contribution to the research process beyond that afforded by semi-structured interviewing alone. Specifically, I argue that cognitive mapping adds value in two distinct ways. First, it offers what might be termed *descriptive benefits*. That is to say, while the standard means for relaying significant

qualitative data consists of extended discursive narrative interspersed with interview vignettes, cognitive maps—in providing a holistic and accessible summary of cause-effect relations—instead serve to ‘ground’ such discussion in terms of the overarching purposive context for each case. Hence, they ably link participants’ actions to their wider objectives whilst retaining the discursive flexibility afforded by qualitative data. Second, it offers *analytical benefits*. Specifically, their focus on causal reasoning serves to clarify trains of argument and provides a sense of how pertinent variables in a situation interact, thus aiding interpretability of the data. Moreover, in following the same overarching format—set out in terms of participants’ objectives, targets, audiences, actions and encounters with the notion of ‘best practice’—the cognitive maps enable readers to compare and contrast participants’ actions and perceptions at a *holistic* level; something not usually possible in standard qualitative research without poring over raw interview transcripts.

The existing literature sets out two principle approaches for cognitive mapping (see Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2004). The first of these involves asking participants to complete what is commonly-termed an ‘implication grid’—a large matrix comprised of a set of variables set out along both the x-axis and the y-axis—which provides space for participants to state their perception of postulated causal relationships. There are several disadvantages to this approach; however, the main limitation is the need for the researcher to specify, *ex-ante*, the causal variables that he or she is most interested in. Clearly, this is inappropriate for this research as our aim is not to test a theory predicated on causal relationships, but rather to *create* one. The second approach—freehand mapping—facilitates this through gleaning causal relationships from participants themselves, and is thus the approach followed in this thesis. The standard method for freehand mapping involves the researcher and participant co-producing a cognitive map *in situ*, literally sitting down together with a pencil and a large sheet of paper and tracing out the causal relationships linking numerous variables. The rationale for this is easily appreciable; participants are in the best position to explicate their causal understandings of a particular situation, while the researcher is assumed to play a facilitatory role in the development of the map, prompting and probing for causal relationships where they are not readily forthcoming.

However, having attempted this method several times in a previous project (see Pinch *et al.*, 2010), I am of the opinion that the *in situ* format is plagued by numerous practical drawbacks. In essence, these can all be traced back to the fact that it requires both the researcher and the participant to perform a raft of complex mental processes in addition to those already required during the course of a standard interview. Although relatively experienced in interviewing,¹⁵ I still find that it requires considerable mental effort to build and maintain conversational flow and rapport, whilst ensuring the discussion is balanced with respect to emergent and pre-specified themes and fits comfortably within an allocated timeframe. Like a difficult game of tennis, this typically involves thinking three or four ‘shots’ ahead—ensuring that each question or prompt makes a definite contribution, however small, to the end result. The added burden placed on both parties through the addition of a cognitive mapping exercise, therefore, is significant. To be performed properly, the time-consuming process of extracting causal relationships *in situ* would involve making highly unreasonable demands on the participants—something I was not prepared to do.

I hence attempted to circumvent this issue by producing the cognitive maps myself—based on the content of each semi-structured interview—and subsequently submitting these draft maps to the respective participants for verification. This may be viewed as five-stage process. First, in the informal preamble to each interview I made it clear to participants that my intention was to create a cognitive map from the impeding discussion. At this point I also showed them an example of a map I had produced for a previous project. Second, during the interviews, I made a conscious effort to frame questions in such a manner that participants often either responded directly or implicitly in causal terms. Where these were not readily forthcoming, I often opted to posit a causal relationship myself, and immediately gave participants an opportunity to either confirm or refute my assertion. Third, I thoroughly read and re-read the interview transcripts, extracting all stated or insinuated causal relationships and proceeded to represent these in diagrammatical form, making a conscious effort to build each map around the participants’ objectives, targets, audience, and the

¹⁵ Prior to the fieldwork undertaken for this thesis, I had conducted around 150 interviews under the auspices of various academic projects. These covered a range of fields, including: social networking, public health, commercial design and sustainable transport.

endogenous and/or exogenous influence of the ‘best practice’ notion. This entailed several hours of concentrated thinking per map, testament to the limitations of the *in situ* method. Fourth, acknowledging that this process builds in plenty of opportunities for misinterpretation, participants were emailed the draft maps and asked to check for errors of commission—where the nature of causal relationships and/or variables were incorrect—and errors of omission—where causal relationships and/or variables were missing.

Conclusions

Drawing on a range of secondary literature, this chapter has discussed the theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning this thesis. First, grounded in Bhaskar’s (1975, 1979) philosophy of science, it has articulated the core ontological convictions of critical realism. The argument here concerned the need to conceptualise reality as ‘stratified’ in character (avoiding the ‘epistemic fallacy’ necessarily committed by empiricist reasoning). In addition, the need to recognise the openness of social systems was heavily emphasised, leading to a sustained critique of the Humean, successionist conception of causality. In its place, a normic view of causality was advocated, discussed in terms of tendencies and (contingent) generative mechanisms. Secondly, the epistemological implications of critical realist ontology were explored. Here it was stressed that the primary goal of social science is explanation, interpreted as a process of detailed abstraction which, via transfactual argumentation, is designed to reveal the generative mechanisms and structures acting to constitute events. Given the nature of this abstraction, and the absence of meaningful social laws, the value of both abductive and retroductive inference was highlighted. Finally, the research design was discussed at length. After making the case for pursuing an intensive approach, eight strategically-selected case studies were briefly outlined. This was followed by a discussion of the methodological and practical considerations involved in undertaking in-depth, semi-structured interviews and cognitive mapping. Next, in Chapter 3, we shall trace the manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is variously encountered and understood by the research participants.

Chapter 3

Encountering ‘best practice’: analytical description

‘In cities, formulaic responses thoughtlessly repeat what has gone before. Issues are approached from narrow perspectives and fail to capture reality. Solutions are driven by manageable financial calculation with no room for insight and potential. Uncreative urban acts are all around us in spite of the best practice exceptions and, as a result, mainstream town planning interventions tend to disappoint. People seem fearful of discussing what quality and 21st century urbanism is or could be...[I]f best practice were gathered in one place, our ‘dream city’ would exist – perhaps.’

— Charles Landry (2008, p. 41)

Taken from *The Creative City*, this epigraph provides an illustrative insight into the well-known urbanist Charles Landry’s understanding of the ‘best practice’ notion. Most evidently, we can see that he regards ‘best practice’ to be emancipatory in nature; the notion is framed as the creative antithesis of a ‘formulaic’ status quo and is thus held to be symbolic of innovation and potential. Ostensibly, this conceptualisation is highly compatible with the received understandings of the ‘best practice’ notion outlined in Chapter 1. Indeed, if we were to come across this passage in a different context—in developing a critique of mainstream urban planning, for example—the manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is employed would be of little interest.

On closer inspection, however, legitimate questions may be asked about Landry’s position. Where he states ‘in spite of the best practice exceptions’, for example, he implicitly characterises the notion of ‘best practice’ in *relative* terms, asserting that ‘best practices’ are superior to typical ‘uncreative urban acts’. Yet in speaking of a hypothetical ‘dream city’, the notion is additionally

characterised in *absolute* terms, whereby the geographic accumulation of disparate ‘best practices’ would be constitutive of an ‘urban utopia’ (*ibid.*, p. xi). Just what, then, does Landry (2008) mean by ‘best’? Should it be taken to mean that (1) ‘best’ practice X is better than practices Y, Z, etc.? Or that (2) ‘best’ practice X corresponds perfectly to a facet of our urban ideal, whatever that may be? These two senses are clearly conceptually distinct, yet this distinction has gone unacknowledged.

I start with this epigraph because it neatly encapsulates the purpose of Chapter 3. In addressing objective (A), we are here concerned with tracing the nuanced, complex and sometimes contradictory manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is both encountered and understood within the sustainable transport community (cf. Section 1.4). In critical realist terms, we are thus undertaking processes of ‘description’ and ‘analytical resolution’ (Danermark *et al.*, 2002)—documenting how the research participants experience and makes sense of the ‘best practice’ notion in relation to their professional objectives and activities. In so doing, emergent themes will together sketch out the ‘demi-regularities’ of ‘best practice’ found in the domain of the actual—forming an empirical foundation for later theoretical work in Chapters 4 and 5 (Lawson, 2003; Bhaskar, 1975).

As with all case study research, there are difficult decisions to made here concerning how the data ought to be reported and discussed (Yin, 2003). On the one hand, arguments can be made for structuring this chapter on a case-by-case basis—successively introducing and discussing each case in relative isolation. On the other hand, there are compelling reasons for arranging the discussion according to pertinent theoretical variables. There are, of course, both advantages and disadvantages to each of these positions. Following the former model maintains the structural integrity of each case, and enables readers to understand emergent themes in the context in which they have arisen. Yet, this occurs at the expense of thematic discussion *between* cases—something rather central to the critical realist approach. In the latter model, this dilemma is turned on its head; thematic discussion is easily facilitated, but there is little value added by the case studies above and beyond a purely conceptual discussion based on ‘disembodied’ interview extracts.

Clearly, one way in which a balance might be struck between these two alternatives is to briefly introduce each case in turn—conveying its basic tenets and retaining a degree of contextual awareness—before comparatively discussing emergent themes. However, when more than two or three cases are involved, this dialectical approach risks placing a particularly onerous burden on both author and reader alike as comparative discussion simply becomes too complex to adequately manage and process. In order to avoid this, discussion in Chapter 3 is thus separated into three manageable sections, structured according to the spatial scales at which the eight participants perform their professional duties: first, we shall focus on the experiences of Will, Sam and Chris who are directly involved in local active travel policy within the same city, Marlsworth. Second, we will examine the experiences of Martha, Harry and Graham, who are directly involved in national active travel policy; and third, we will examine the experiences of Lisa and Keith, who are indirectly involved with active travel policy at both scales.¹⁶

3.1 Interpreting cognitive maps

Before proceeding with the substantive content of this chapter, it is first necessary to briefly explain how the cognitive maps that accompany the eight cases ought to be interpreted. Figure 3.1 shows a segment of Will's map (Case A) that attempts to graphically represent the manner in which his ultimate objectives are influenced by what we can loosely term 'targets' and, in turn, 'audiences'. These overarching categories are represented by the light blue shaded areas. Beyond denoting sections of the map that correspond to particular issues, these are of no particular significance; they function as an orientation device, similar to gridlines on an Ordnance Survey map. The small pieces of text in the map, however, are important. These are termed *nodes* and represent the basic concepts that Will refers to in the interview when he attempts to describe and explain various issues relating to his professional position. The vast majority

¹⁶ It is important to note that this scalar differentiation is merely employed in order to facilitate comparative analyses of participants' experiences; cases are not purported to be 'representative' in an inductive sense.

of these nodes are variable in nature; they can increase or decrease according to various influences.¹⁷ For example, one of the nodes relating to 'audiences' reads: '*Quality of practitioners' strategic recommendations*' (Figure 3.1, left hand side). This can, of course, improve or decline.

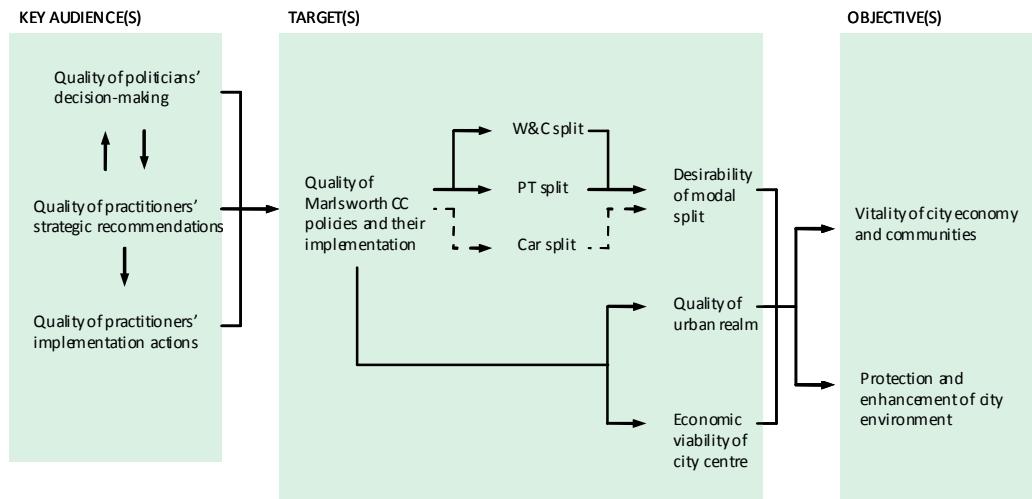


Figure 3.1 A sample cognitive map

Solid lines in the map represent *positive causal relationships* between nodes and dashed lines represent *negative causal relationships*, while the arrow at the end of each line indicates *direction of causality*.¹⁸ All else being equal, this means that if nodes (A) and (B) are linked with a solid line that starts at (A) and ends at (B), then as (A) increases, so too (B) increases. Correspondingly, as (A) decreases, (B) will also decrease. If the two are linked with a dashed line, on the other hand, as (A) increases, (B) will decrease and as (A) decreases, (B) will increase. Crucially, the overall 'magnitude' of a particular node may well be determined by its relations to several other nodes.

¹⁷ Occasionally, there will be nodes in the maps that refer to instances or events, such as 'Wallborough study visit' (Sam's map in Case B) where this is not applicable. However, this should not pose a problem for the interpretability of any map.

¹⁸ Our discussion of causality in this context should not be read as following on from the discussion of Humean and realist causality presented in Chapter 2. Rather, in cognitive mapping, we are concerned with how the *participants themselves* view the nature of relationships between various concepts. Indeed, for our purposes it is largely irrelevant whether or not a causal relationship specified by a participant is present in 'reality' or not. By default, if it matters to the participant, it matters to us.

Although this may sound complicated, the cognitive maps are really very straightforward and intuitive to follow. Indeed, we can illustrate these points using a well-known example from physiology. Leaving aside genetic factors, it is widely acknowledged that if we consume more calories than we expend over a certain period of time, our weight will increase. Using the same symbols found in Figure 3.1, our causal reasoning about this simple system can hence be represented as follows (Figure 3.2):

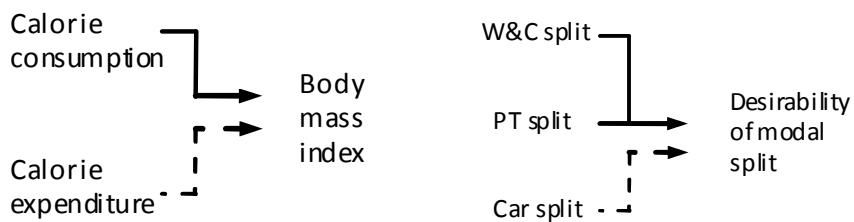


Figure 3.2 Causal representation of BMI

Figure 3.3 Causal representation of modal split

Now notice the similarity between Figure 3.2 and the adjacent extract from Will's map reproduced as Figure 3.3. In the same way that we can understand body mass to be a function of calorie consumption and expenditure, we can understand the desirability of a particular modal split—from Will's perspective—to be a function of car use, public transport use and uptake of walking/cycling.¹⁹ As the solid and dashed lines indicate, Will would find the modal split to be *more* desirable if car use were to decline relative to usage of public transport and active travel. In turn, this increase in the desirability of the modal split has a positive causal influence on Will's two objectives (Figure 3.1, right hand side).

Finally, it must be noted that the maps presented in this chapter are not 'to scale'. This might sound like an odd point to make about cognitive maps, but it is an important one to bear in mind for two reasons: (1) in their current format the maps are unable to illustrate the *relative importance* of nodes or relationships as

¹⁹ Modal split refers to the proportion of trips undertaken by different modes of transport within specified geographical and temporal parameters (e.g. 60% car; 20% public transport; 10% cycling; 10% walking).

participants perceive them; as a result, this should be solely inferred from the chapter text; and (2), somewhat related to this, no significance should hence be attributed to the amount of page space, length of lines or number of nodes used in the maps to depict particular relationships. You will see that each of the eight maps have been structured, from right to left, according to participants' 'objectives' (OBJ), 'targets' (TRG), 'audiences' (AUD), 'activities' including or excluding endogenous functions of 'best practice' (ACT) and, in some cases, 'exogenous functions of best practice' (EXG). Beyond this structure, the specific placement of nodes and lines mainly reflects the need to ensure that the overall dimensions of the map are compatible with standard printing formats.

3.2 Local encounters: active travel in Marlsworth

In this section, we will focus exclusively on the manner in which the notion of 'best practice' is variously encountered by three key policy actors in the English city of Marlsworth.²⁰ Case (A) concerns the experience of Will, a transport planner working for Marlsworth County Council who has a significant degree of responsibility for active travel policy in the city. Cases (B) and (C), respectively, concern the experiences of two local policy campaigners, Sam and Chris. Sam is the chair of an organisation called Marlsworth Bicyclists and Chris is the chair of Marlsworth Pedestrians' Association. Both Sam and Chris routinely lobby Marlsworth County Council and local politicians with the objective of improving conditions for cycling and walking in the city. Indeed, it is important to realise that Will, Sam and Chris are well-known to each other. Sam and Chris are good friends, and have joined forces on several occasions when the need to make forceful points to Marlsworth County Council has arisen. Will, although a keen cyclist himself, is often the target of these 'forceful points' and meets regularly with Sam, Chris and representatives from other lobbying organisations every four to five months.

Before we briefly introduce the three cases, it is worth reminding ourselves that in Chapter 2, they were held to represent what Collier (1994) terms

²⁰ Marlsworth is a pseudonym. In terms of population, it is larger than Bath but smaller than Plymouth.

‘pathological’ cases, whereby the appearance of a phenomenon (i.e. the ‘best practice’ notion) is augmented through system flux and disruption. In the case of Marlsworth, this relates to the fact that Will and his team at the County Council are currently in the process of developing a new ‘local transport plan’ (LTP3), which will govern local transport policy decision-making from 2011 to 2016. In its proposal for LTP3, the County Council lists three high-level priorities. One of these is ‘developing and increasing cycling and walking for local journeys, recreation and health.’ As a result, an increased level of attention is currently being paid to active travel in Marlsworth, and an opportunity for enacting change is widely recognised amongst actors on all sides of the policy debate. Will is currently drafting the active travel strategy for LTP3, while Sam, Chris and others are seeking to influence its eventual content through lobbying and responding to LTP3 consultation documents.

Case: A

Pseudonym: Will

Organisation: Marlsworth County Council (MCC)

Role: Transport planner

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

As a local authority planner, Will has wide range of responsibilities relating to transport in the city of Marlsworth. As shown on the far right hand side of Will's cognitive map (Figure 3.4; OBJ), his overarching professional objective is to 'ensure the city's economy and communities continue to thrive, whilst protecting and enhancing its unique environment'. The extent to which Will and his team achieve this objective rests, in turn, upon their ability to address three 'targets' (i.e. measurable indicators of success): first, the desirability of the transport modal split in Marlsworth, determined by relative increases in walking, cycling and public transport, and relative decreases in private car travel; second, the quality of Marlsworth's urban realm; and third, the economic vitality of the city centre. Underpinning all of these targets is the degree to which MCC develops and implements high-quality transport policies. Through his work, Will seeks to ensure that the planning team make high-quality, strategic policy recommendations that directly improve the decision-making capacity of local politicians.

Case: B

Pseudonym: Sam

Organisation: Marlsworth Bicyclists (MB)

Role: Chair

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Sam founded Marlsworth Bicyclists approximately six years ago, after returning to Marlsworth from an extensive period of overseas travel to find that the 'cyclability' of the city had deteriorated during his absence.²¹ As of 2010, the organisation has approximately 250 members, although the bulk of its activities are undertaken by a small organising committee. The objective of MB is simply to improve the quality of 'cyclability' in the city. For Sam, this is essentially determined by the nature of MCC's local transport policies, and the extent to which these are adequately implemented by practitioners. The organisation thus seeks to ensure that local transport policies include measures to support cycling and reduce car use in the city. As a result, Sam and his team focus their campaign efforts on increasing politicians', practitioners' and the public's commitment to cyclability.

²¹ 'Cyclability' and 'walkability' are simply shorthand terms for the quality of cycling or walking conditions in a particular area. Areas considered to have high levels of cyclability or walkability will meet key criteria related to safety, legibility, convenience, etc.

Case: C

Pseudonym: Chris

Organisation: Marlsworth Pedestrians' Association (MPA)

Role: Chair

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Chris is a long-standing campaigner for the rights of pedestrians in the UK. Although presently retired, chairing MPA in a voluntary capacity, his previous career involved periods as a transport planner, a university lecturer on traffic engineering and a policy adviser to a national sustainable transport charity in London. The fundamental objective of MPA, in Chris's words, is to ensure "intelligent delivery of walkability" within the city. In other words, MPA exists in order to improve the quality of MCC's local transport policy. Such improvement, for Chris, pertains to both improved pedestrian facilities in the city, and the adoption of measures designed to reduce adverse impacts of car use. Exactly like MB (cf. Case B), therefore, MPA concentrate their campaign efforts on increasing politicians', practitioners' and the public's commitment to walkability.

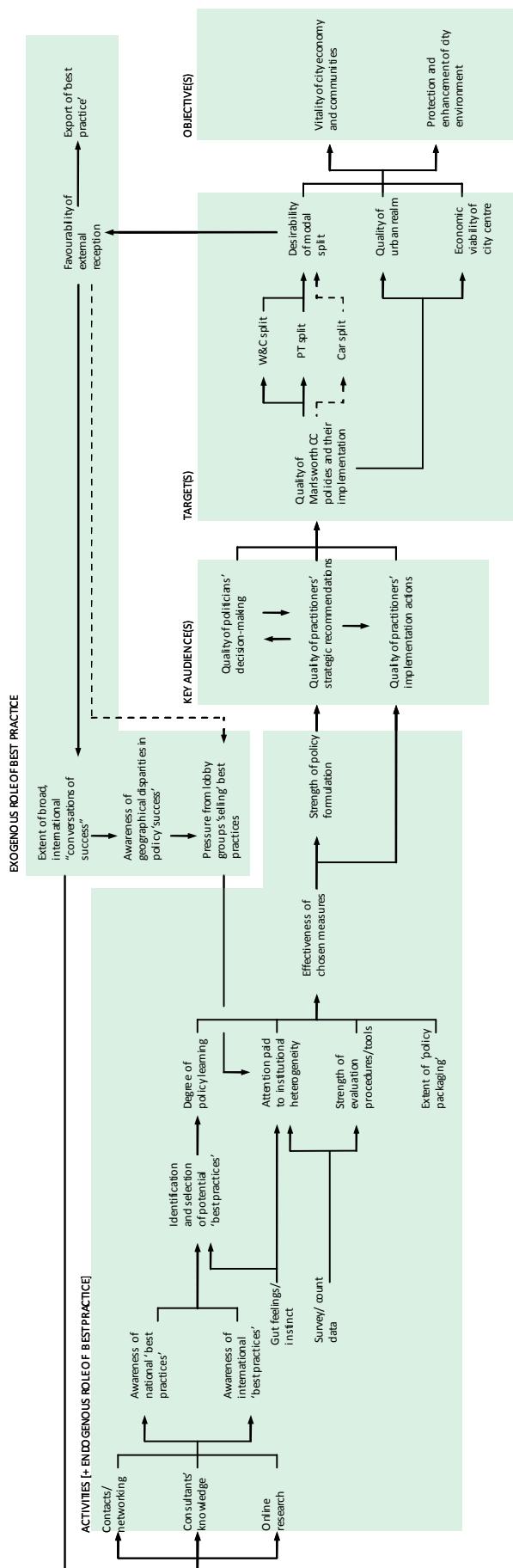
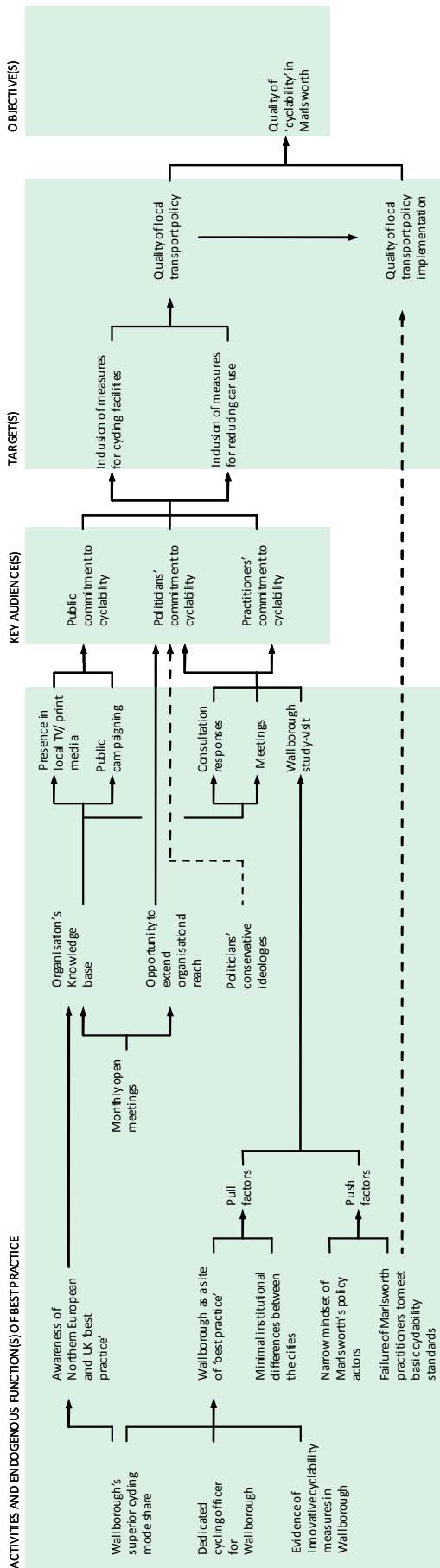


Figure 3.4 Will's cognitive map (Case A)



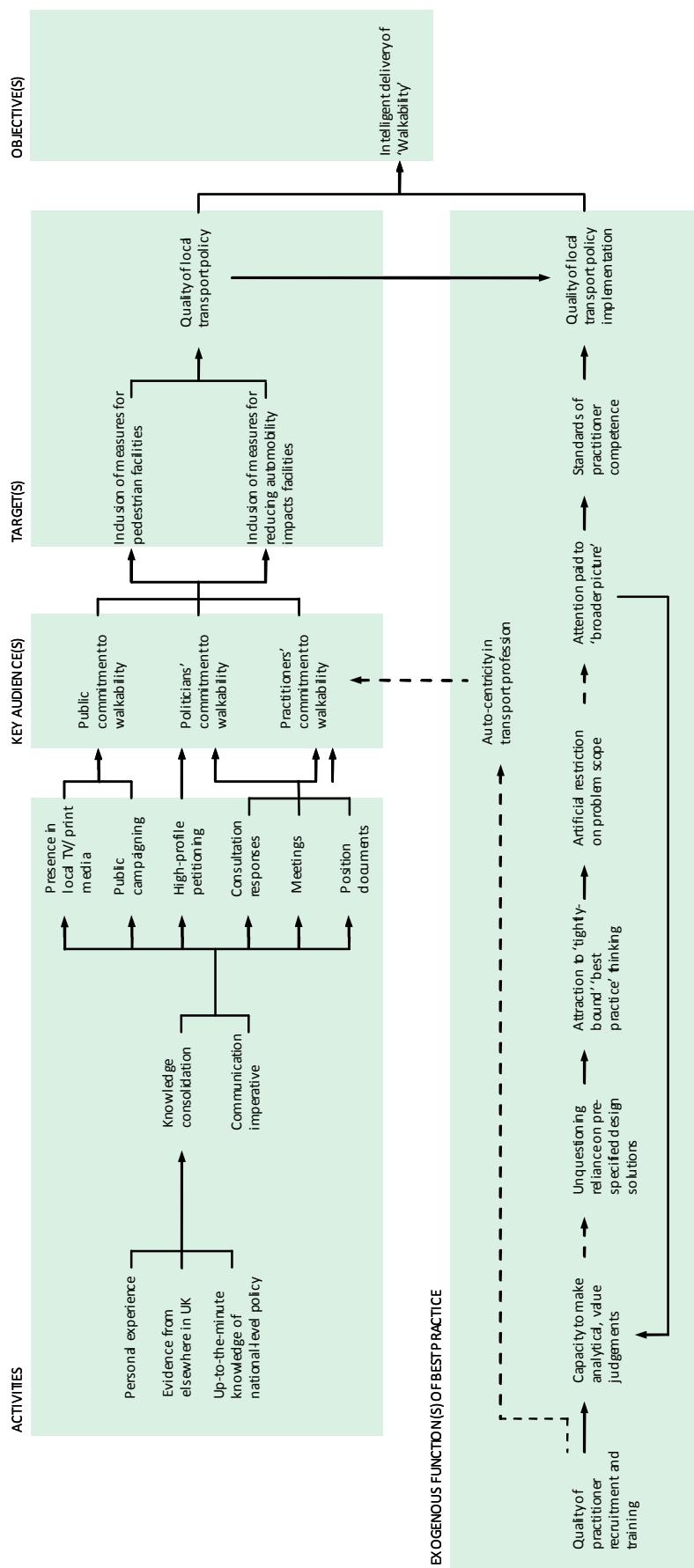


Figure 3.6 Chris's cognitive map (Case A)

Endogenous and exogenous functions of ‘best practice’

In what ways, then, do these three local policy actors encounter and understand the notion of ‘best practice’? The most immediate observation we can make is the marked differences between Will and Sam on the one hand, who both appear to be relatively comfortable with ‘best practice’ in the context of their organisational activities, and Chris on the other hand, who strongly objects to ‘best practice’ approaches and makes a point of never employing the phrase himself. In the following discussion, therefore, we will first discuss the manner in which Will and Sam encounter the notion, before exploring the reasons why Chris finds the notion of ‘best practice’ so problematic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the principle manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is encountered by Will and his colleagues at Marlsworth County Council is in relation to *policy learning*. Specifically, Will holds ‘best practices’ to represent tangible policy interventions that have performed successfully in a different geographical context and which may, if replicated, perform similarly successfully in Marlsworth:

“The notion of ‘best practice’ is the notion of *success* of various policies and strategies. So what people have set out to achieve—have they achieved that? And if they have, what have they done to achieve that? And can that be taken and transplanted elsewhere? Can we *use* that ‘best practice’?”

(Will, interview, original emphasis)

Although Will describes his involvement in active travel projects as being “from cradle to grave”, the majority of his current work in relation to LTP3 is focused on policy formulation—developing ‘packages’ of various policy measures, including those related to infrastructure improvement, parking management, active travel promotion, safety and security. In so doing, Will emphasised that he and his colleagues constantly undertake processes of policy learning, and routinely examine national and international ‘best practices’ in the construction of future policies and strategies:

“We do that a lot really, trying to gather best practices...especially with the public realm stuff that we’re doing...we’re constantly using what best practice there is around, but unfortunately, because we don’t have a huge number of examples in this country, we look abroad.”

(Will, interview)

When “gathering” and “looking” for ‘best practices’ in this way, Will and his colleagues typically draw upon three main sources of information (Figure 3.4, left hand side). First, citing the internet as “a wonderful thing”, Will often undertakes online research, which provides a straightforward, desk-based and hassle-free means of acquiring information (albeit often superficial) about the nature of myriad active travel interventions worldwide. Second, Will argued that the collective experience of large consultancy firms can act as a rich depository of international policy knowledge, and this can be tapped as and when the need arises. Most significantly, however, Will thirdly stressed the importance of informal communication and networking with fellow practitioners as a means of both identifying and understanding ‘best practices’ in context:

“We’ll phone up another borough councils or district councils or transport authorities when they’ve done something that we feel we could benefit from. And going to conferences and things like that is invaluable, because the networking is invaluable, so I learnt a lot from a conference I went to in Brighton and I got a personal guided tour of what they had done [in their city centre], and what they are doing to get cycling city status, and that was really helpful.”

(Will, interview)

Broadly speaking, this ‘learning-orientated’ understanding of the ‘best practice’ notion is shared by Sam (Figure 3.5, ACT). Along with other senior members of Marlsworth Bicyclists, Sam is highly aware of what might be termed ‘international cycling best practice’, and this awareness constitutes a notable part of the organisation’s knowledge base:

“We have ideas about ‘best practice’ from the Netherlands and Germany and places like that and we’re *really* aware of that and we go on the websites of places like Copenhagenize.com and are aware of some of the cool things that are going on.”

(Sam, interview, original emphasis)

Interestingly, although Sam stressed that Marlsworth Bicyclists do not consciously employ the ‘best practice’ notion in their lobbying activities, this knowledge of ‘international cycling best practice’ is certainly drawn upon in the course of campaigning. Indeed, rightly or wrongly, Sam clearly perceives a degree of policy ignorance on the part of Marlsworth County Council and—in citing ‘best practice’ examples—attempts to ‘enlighten’ local practitioners and politicians to the extent that genuine cycle-friendly policies are included in the forthcoming LTP3:

“there is a serious disconnect between some of the best practices—the really innovative and, you know, simple, interventions that are made in Northern Europe—and sort of the car-based “choice” obsessed stuff that goes on [in Marlsworth]...For several years we’ve been talking [to Marlsworth County Council] about a raised platform at the end of Frog Street because the traffic lights there are a complete waste of time...so we’ve said well look Dutch ‘best practice’ would be to remove those lights, which cost a lot of money every year anyway, and just put in a raised platform where no one has priority.”

(Sam, interview, emphasis added)

As one of the principle focal points for such campaigning, however, Will expressed frustration with the *ad hoc* fashion in which such overseas examples are employed by lobbyists, explaining this with reference to institutional context:

“Saying ‘this is what they do in Amsterdam’, ‘this is what they do in Copenhagen’, ‘this is what they do in Freiburg’ [is unhelpful], you *can’t just take that model and transpose it into Marlsworth...* We’re constantly being quoted the example of places on the continent where cyclists can turn left at red traffic lights. Now that sounds all well and good, but a) we don’t have the culture for that, and b) just suddenly implementing that would cause quite a few accidents. Also it may encourage red light-jumping in general, which is something that we are trying to discourage as well as cycling without lights and cycling on pavements.”

(Will, interview, original emphasis)

Indeed, echoing the tenets of the ‘pragmatic critique’ outlined in Chapter 1, the saliency of institutional heterogeneity in policy-making was continually stressed by Will throughout our interview. A keen cyclist himself, he appears to follow a quasi-ethnographical approach in his appraisal of the spatial transferability of both domestic and international cycling ‘best practices’, using his first-hand knowledge of Marlsworth’s cycling culture to determine whether potential measures would complement or contradict measures already in existence. This ‘instinctive’ awareness of cycling practice is supplemented by an informed knowledge of jurisdictional constraints and baseline data from traffic counts, together providing Will with what he took to be a relatively strong ability to assess *ex-ante* the likely feasibility, effectiveness and acceptability of implementing ‘best practice’ examples in Marlsworth. Given his awareness of institutional constraints on policy convergence, it is thus unsurprising that the apparent institutional naïveté of some lobbyists can be a source of irritation. For Will, this is compounded by the fact that the various ‘best practices’ put forward by different lobby groups are often incompatible amongst themselves. For example, the Dutch ‘shared space’ approach to junction design advocated above by Sam is largely at odds with the modal segregation favoured by disability groups:

“So there’s a situation where you have one group telling you that ‘A’ is ‘best practice’ and another group telling you ‘B’ is ‘best practice’ and the two aren’t compatible?”

(Interviewer)

“Yes, exactly, that’s what you find. And sometimes what you find is that in trying to make everyone happy you make no one happy... what you have to be careful with in European examples is the whole culture. Some countries may have a better-suited culture to shared space for example, whereas we’re not really used to that, and again we have a fairly strong disability lobby group that are opposed to that which we have to work around.”

(Will, interview)

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from this that Sam and the Marlsworth Bicyclists are genuinely naïve with respect to the saliency of institutional heterogeneity. Indeed, in addition to maintaining a presence in local media, public campaigning, participating in policy meetings and consultation exercises, Sam recently arranged a study visit for local politicians and practitioners to another UK city which we shall call ‘Wallborough’ (Figure 3.5; ACT). The purpose of the visit was to help address what Sam perceived as Marlsworth politicians’ narrow mindsets and the inability of Marlsworth practitioners to meet basic standards of implementation in relation to active travel. Wallborough was selected as the location for the visit *precisely because* it was perceived to have very similar institutional characteristics to Marlsworth, whilst simultaneously representing a site of cycling ‘best practice’. As Sam explained:

“Wallborough is a very similar city, with a similar political make-up; conservative county council in a non-conservative city. In other words a city that has quite a strong desire to cycle and is quite happy with measures that prevent the easy use of cars everywhere... so we wanted to show the local Marlsworth politicians and planners what was going on there and how [Wallborough County Council] had fitted that round peg into the square hole.”

(Sam, interview)

“I feel like there is an awful lot that can be learned from Northern Europe and from best practice in Wallborough where, for example, they have done filtered permeability which means that bicycles can go through little road blocks, but cars can’t. And [the visit] was really interesting, we were taken on a ride around Wallborough to look at some of the facilities they’ve got, and given a short lecture on how they had gone about it.”

(Sam, interview)

Interestingly, three things appear to have led to Sam conceptualising Wallborough as a site of cycling ‘best practice’: first, and most significantly, the fact that it has a higher cycling modal share than Marlsworth; second, the fact that Wallborough County Council employ a dedicated cycling officer, something Marlsworth County Council feel is unnecessary; and third, the presence of novel infrastructural measures such as the filtered permeability example mentioned

above. In Chapter 5 we will explore the implications of using modal share as a criterion for identifying ‘best practices’ in more detail. However, it is interesting to note here that while Sam perceives Marlsworth’s cycling modal share to be inferior to Wallborough’s, Marlsworth actually has a relatively high rate of cycling by national standards. As a result, it is implicitly seen by other UK practitioners to be a *source* of ‘best practice’ from which to draw lessons themselves (Figure 3.4; EXG).

“So do people approach you as a site of ‘best practice’?”

(Interviewer)

“Quite a few, yes, people contacting us, either through networking or they just sort of know that Marlsworth is that kind of place...[We’re] held up there as the demand management forerunner for a lot of places...if you ask any transport professional outside the county ‘what is your image of transport in Marlsworth?’, they’ll tell you it’s cycling”

(Will, interview)

In such situations, Will is more than willing to assist fellow practitioners in learning about particular active travel interventions that have worked successfully in Marlsworth. Once again, however, he maintained the need for such practitioners to appreciate the fact that major cultural differences exist between cities, even within the UK:

“In Marlsworth we have a cycle culture, so if someone from Lancaster phoned up we would say, you know, ‘we have 20,000 cyclists coming in and out of the city centre each day, whereas you might just have 2,000, so that’s going to have a huge impact on how something will operate, given that we start from such a high baseline’. So that would be something I would be wary of. Just because something may work in Marlsworth—just as something may work in Copenhagen—it may not work elsewhere.”

(Will, interview)

Like Sam and Marlsworth Bicyclists, the organisational activities undertaken by Chris and Marlsworth Pedestrians’ Association also take several

forms, including high-profile petitioning, responding to policy consultations by “saying intelligent things”, holding meetings with local politicians and publishing position documents (Figure 3.6; ACT). The organisational knowledge underpinning these activities, in turn, stems from three principle sources: Chris’s extensive professional experience; up to the minute knowledge of UK national active travel policy; and policy evidence from elsewhere in the UK. Given this latter source, one might expect Chris to be a strong proponent, tacitly or explicitly, of ‘best practice’ thinking. However, the opposite is very much the case; Chris strongly objects to the notion of ‘best practice’ and associates it with what he perceives to be a dearth of analytical thinking amongst active travel practitioners.

Having spent many decades as a practitioner himself, Chris believes that the vast majority of practitioners are unable to conceptualise active travel interventions in a holistic manner. A focus on ‘best practice’ is thought to reinforce this lack of critical thinking by placing an artificial restriction on problem scope through highlighting overly-detailed points at the expense of broader strategic perspectives (Figure 3.6; EXG). As a result, active travel interventions often fail to meet *basic* standards of quality, clearly running contrary to Marlsworth Pedestrians’ Association’s objective of ensuring “intelligent delivery of walkability”. It is worth quoting Chris at length here, as he explains his reasoning by way of an example:

“So why don’t you like the term ‘best practice’?”

(Interviewer)

“I think it’s very limiting. Let’s take a step back first, James, this is potentially controversial but it’s my view acquired over many years of watching people that work in the game of supplying transport solutions. Most people who call themselves traffic engineers aren’t engineers; they’re technicians and that means that they’re competent at reading technical advice and implementing that advice. It doesn’t necessarily mean that they are able to make value judgements about whether one thing or another should be delivered. They’re recruited to deliver design solutions and what do they do? *They look to best practice recommendations for those...* Take Long Street, for example; [Marlsworth County Council] put the dropped kerbs in but they didn’t think about the effects of rainfall and drainage. So the dropped kerb with its tactile surface, installed in order to provide guidance to the poorly-

sighted pedestrian on where to cross the road actually delivers pedestrians into water after rainfall. *‘Best practice’ says ‘put this colour of tactile surface in’, but ‘best practice’ forgets about the basics and they’re not done.* That’s why I think worst practice is what you should guide people towards rather than giving them specific, tightly-bound advice about how to deliver outcomes.”

(Chris, interview, emphasis added)

3.3 National encounters: active travel in the UK

In this section, we will examine the manner in which three policy actors in the active travel community encounter and understand the notion of ‘best practice’ at the *national* scale. To provide some context to the following discussion, it is important to note that the vast majority of decisions relating to specific walking and cycling interventions in the UK are devolved to local government, with local authority officials largely responsible for implementation (cf. Case A).²² As a result, the focus of national debate on active travel instead tends to concern agenda-setting, overarching policy trajectories, high-level funding priorities and the viability of appraisal mechanisms (Macmillen *et al.*, forthcoming).

Case (D) relates to Martha, a senior Whitehall civil servant with significant responsibility for the UK government’s active travel policy, while Case (E) concerns Harry, a campaigns director for a major sustainable transport charity and Case (F) concerns Graham, campaigns and policy manager for a national cycling organisation. As with Section 3.2, we are thus exploring usage of the ‘best practice’ notion within in a tight nexus of supply-side and demand-side actors; Martha is responsible for developing overarching active travel strategies, and both Harry and Graham seek to lobby Martha and other national-level decision-makers in order to ensure that the chosen policy direction is ‘sustainable’ and genuinely supports the needs of cyclists and pedestrians.

In Chapter 2, Graham was highlighted as an ‘extreme’ case (Denscombe, 2007) with respect to his organisation’s prolific usage of the ‘best practice’ notion. Martha and Harry, however, like Will, Sam and Chris discussed previously, were held to represent ‘pathological’ cases (Collier, 1994), affected by system flux and disruption. The reason for this characterisation is due to the profound political changes that occurred in the UK during Spring/Summer 2010 with the election of the new coalition government. Although the coalition has pledged to ‘support sustainable travel initiatives, including the promotion of cycling and walking’ (Cabinet Office, 2010, p. 31), broader political priorities have led to a major review of government spending, with the UK transport

²² Indeed, motorways and major A-roads are the only sections of the UK road network managed by central government—neither of which relate to active travel.

budget reduced by £682 million in the Chancellor’s emergency budget of June 2010. Indeed, the scale of the upheaval in Whitehall was such that the interview with Martha had to be postponed for a significant period.

Case: D

Pseudonym: Martha

Organisation: Whitehall

Role: Senior Civil Servant

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Martha is a senior Whitehall official who works closely with government ministers and has a significant degree of responsibility for overall UK active travel policy. Her ultimate objective is to increase the uptake of cycling and other means of sustainable travel throughout the UK population (Figure 3.7; OBJ).

Although she liaises with primary care trusts and various bodies undertaking school-based cycling proficiency training, Martha’s principle role is to manage the calculated transfer of funding and policy guidance to UK local authorities from Whitehall in order to improve the extent to which active travel is catered for in local transport plans (e.g. Marlsworth County Council’s LTP3 discussed in Section 3.2). She summarises her role as “worrying about cycling policy in the round.”

Case: E

Pseudonym: Harry

Organisation: Organisation for Sustainable Transport (OST)

Role: Campaigns Director

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Harry joined this small but influential sustainable transport charity in 2009, having previously worked for a similar charitable organisation that specialised in campaigning for the rights of pedestrians.²³ The overall objective of the Organisation for Sustainable Transport is to reduce the distance travelled by car in the UK by reducing the need to travel and encouraging modal shift (Figure 3.8; OBJ/TRG). Broadly, in his current role, Harry thus focuses on three policy targets: improving public transport; combating anthropogenic climate change through anti-road building campaigning; and encouraging walking and cycling through planning policy and traffic reduction. Harry stressed that OST are very much a pragmatic organisation; rarely involved in ‘blue skies’ thinking around active travel, and instead focussed upon the minutiae of government policy-making. Their primary audience thus consists of government ministers, shadow ministers, Members of Parliament and senior civil servants (i.e. Martha, Case D).

²³ Interestingly, Chris (Case C) also used to work for this other charity.

Case: F

Pseudonym: Graham

Organisation: Cycle UK

Role: Campaigns and Policy Manager

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Cycle UK is a national charity that represents the interests of cyclists across the United Kingdom. The organisation primarily aims to influence national transport policy, ultimately seeking to improve the 'cyclability' of the UK urban and suburban road network (Figure 3.9; OBJ). Graham has been Cycle UK's campaigns and policy manager since the 1990s and is responsible for articulating and communicating the organisation's policy stance to government ministers, senior civil servants and to relevant Members of Parliament. This stance is twofold: first, Cycle UK wish to see significant nationwide improvement in cycling facilities; and second, they wish to see a significant reduction in both the volume and speed of motor traffic on UK roads. Beyond an engagement with national policy formulation, Cycle UK also advise NHS trusts and rail operators on cycling issues and seek to enhance the public image of cycling in local and national media. In addition, Cycle UK maintains a nationwide network of over 400 local volunteers who complement the organisation's national focus with targeted campaigning at the local authority level.

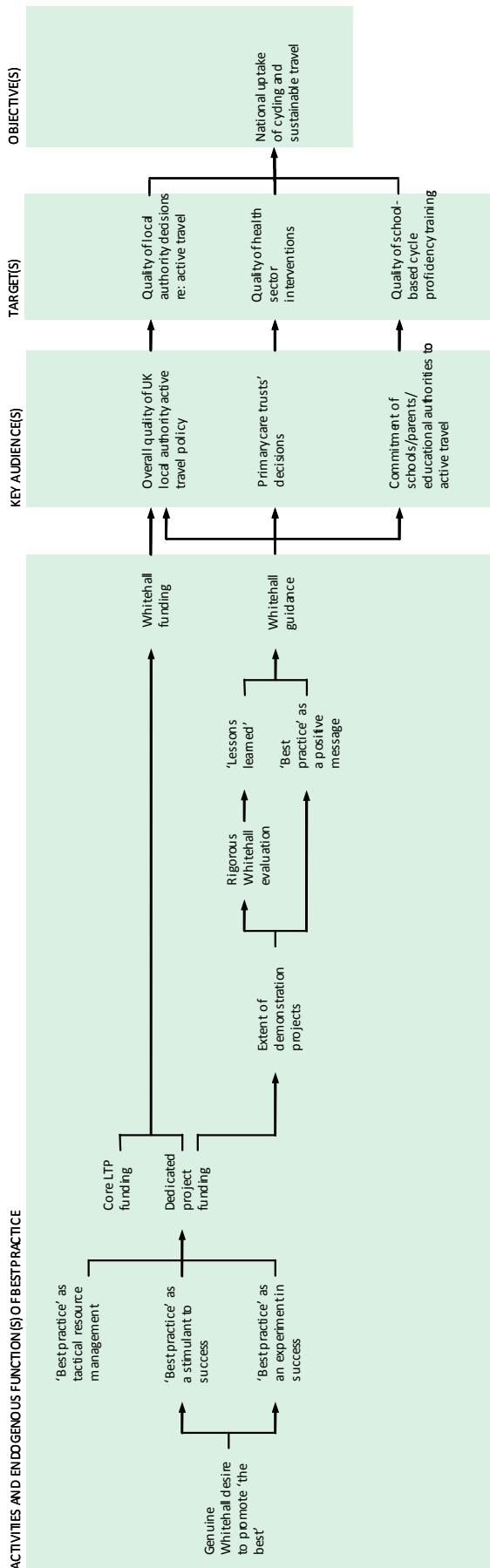


Figure 3.7 Martha's cognitive map (Case D)

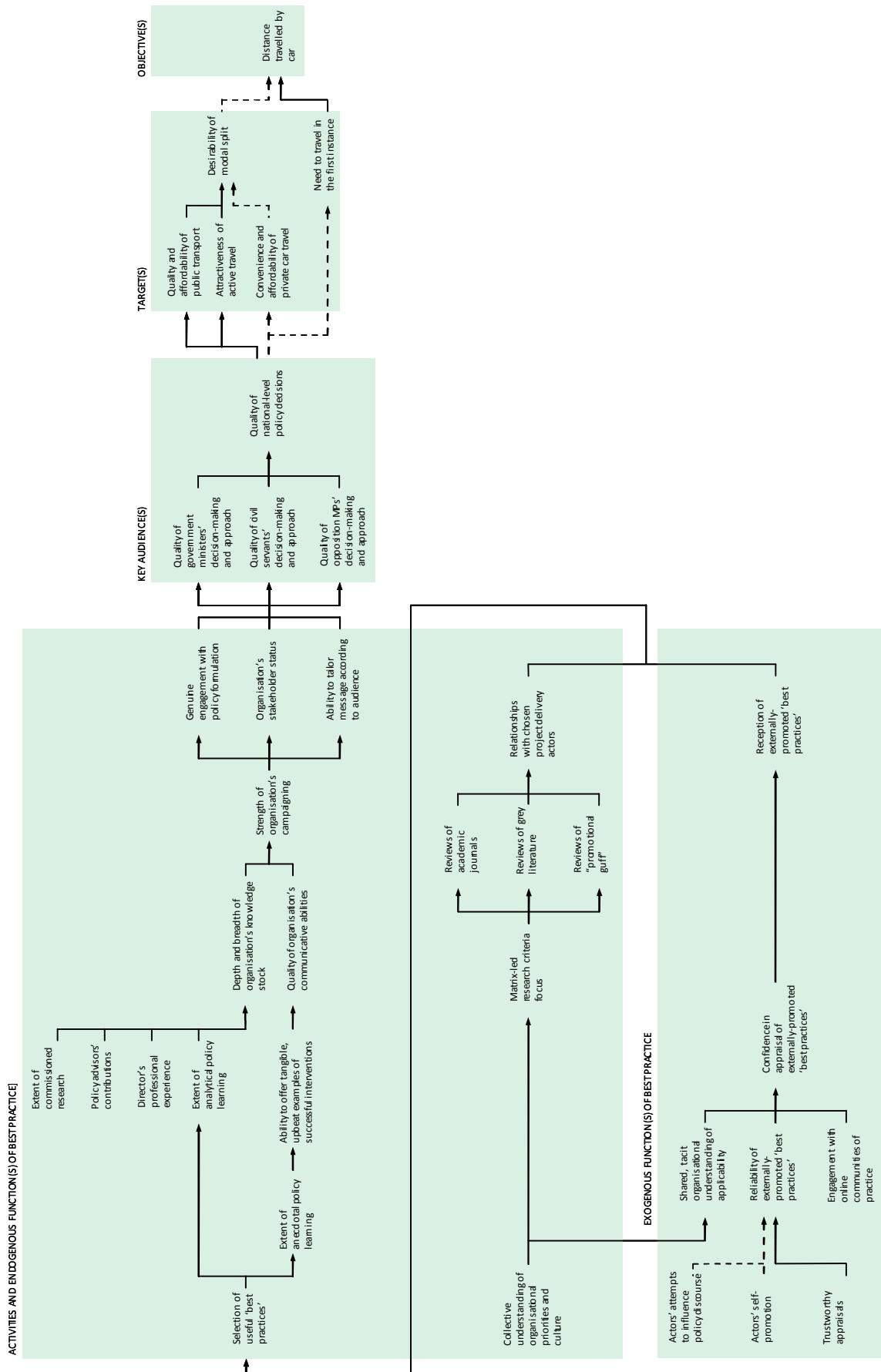


Figure 3.8 Harry's cognitive map (Case E)

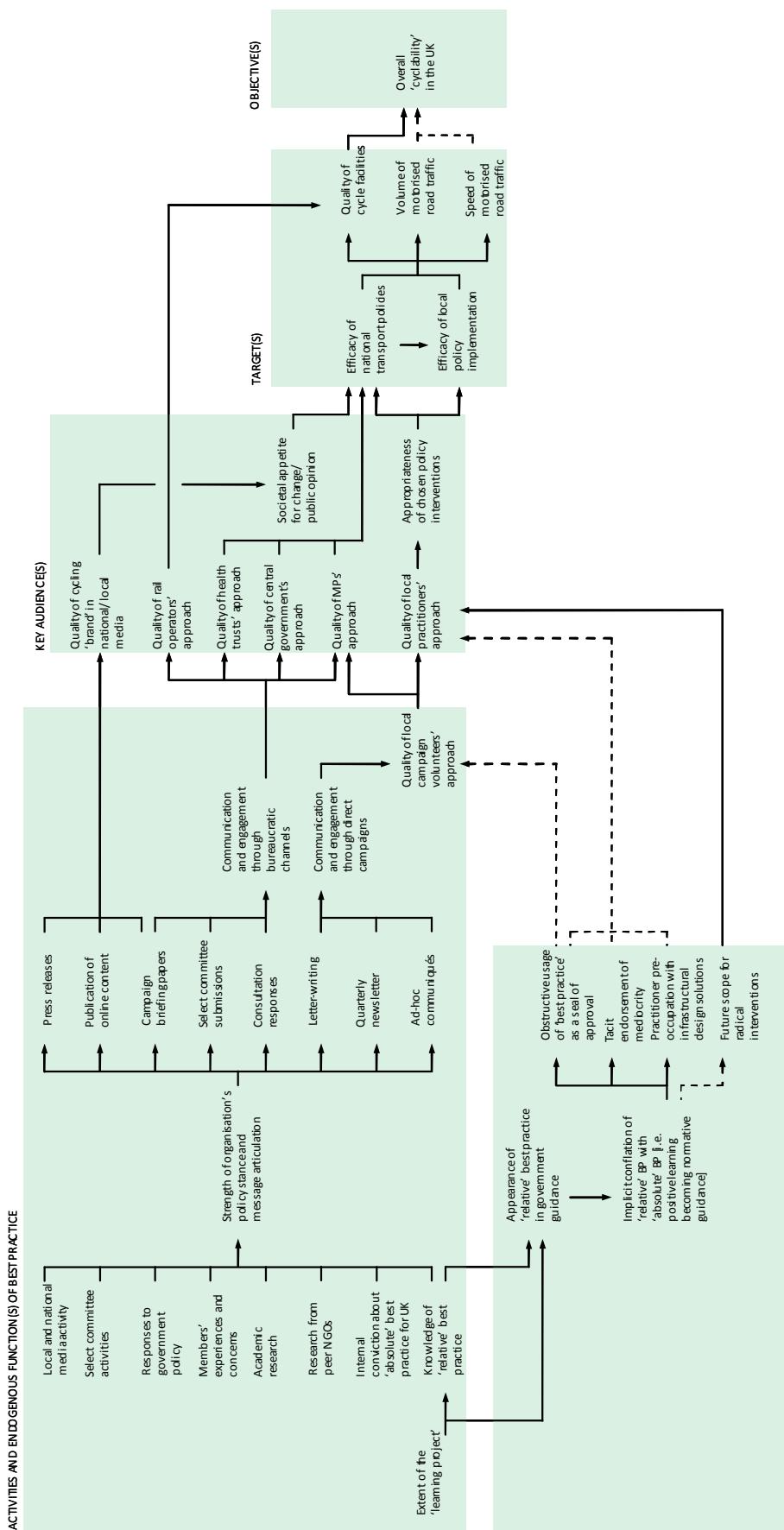


Figure 3.9 Graham's cognitive map (Case F)

Endogenous and exogenous functions of ‘best practice’

When discussing local actors’ encounters with the notion of ‘best practice’ in Section 3.2, we firstly charted how the notion was broadly used and understood before exploring some of the notion’s nuances and perceived limitations. For continuity, our discussion here broadly follows this same format. Again, we begin with a focus on policy learning—something that Martha, Harry and Graham all variously engage in—before subsequently examining some of the more ‘unorthodox’ manifestations of ‘best practice’ present in national policy circles. We finish with a discussion of Graham’s fascinating and multifaceted experiences of ‘best practice’ in the context of Cycle UK’s campaigning activities.

As shown in Figure 3.7 (ACT), one of Martha’s main professional responsibilities is to oversee the variegated process of distributing central government funds to local authorities. Although the bulk of the funding that local authorities receive for active travel from Whitehall takes the form of a lump sum earmarked for their local transport plans (cf. Marlsworth’s LTP3 currently in preparation), Martha additionally supervises the allocation of additional funds to a limited number of local authorities on a competitive basis. It is in managing this additional funding that Martha principally encounters the notion of ‘best practice’:

“We have smaller amounts of separate funding streams which is very much ‘best practice’ related around demonstration projects to show how good cycling could be in certain places, and this is allocated on a bid basis...you want [local authorities] to do their cycling infrastructure, or their cycling schemes or their coaxing people into cycling a bit better, so you give them some dedicated funding to do it and you monitor and evaluate it rigorously.”

(Martha, interview)

As she states herself, Martha and her Whitehall colleagues “don’t want to see [their] money spent in ways that are unwise”, and thus fund ‘best practice’ demonstration exercises as a means of both creating and disseminating knowledge of particular local authority interventions that meet national active travel objectives in a “cost-effective and well-planned” manner. For example,

Whitehall currently invest approximately £20 million in a highly-competitive programme designed to encourage uptake of active travel and public transport use through the provision of infrastructure improvements and so-called ‘smarter choice’ measures. Of the fifty local authorities that initially applied to the programme, only three were awarded funding. As a condition of the funding, the success of the specific interventions implemented by these three local authorities is rigorously evaluated, with ‘lessons learned’ consolidated into...

“...guidance that goes out from the department to local authorities saying ‘have you thought about this?’ ‘Why don’t you try that?’ ‘Wouldn’t it be better if you did this?’... [This] has a more widespread impact in that other local authorities notice that Whitehall still cares about these things, because they want to do what’s overall, kind of, finding favour, so it helps to make [such interventions] more widespread.”

(Martha, interview)

Although Graham encounters the notion of ‘best practice’ in two distinct senses—as we shall discuss below—the first of these is very much akin to Martha’s experience, insofar as it explicitly concerns peer-to-peer learning amongst local authority practitioners. Specifically, over the last decade, Cycle UK have developed what we shall term their ‘Learning Project’, a high-profile, nationwide scheme whereby local authority practitioners from across the UK are invited to participate in a series of two-day exchange visits to their peers’ towns and cities. The overarching intention of the Learning Project is thus to enable practitioners to gain first-hand experience of their peers’ active travel interventions and to give them:

“the opportunity to probe into the processes behind examples of good practice to understand the key factors that contribute to their success, and to identify best practice through a process of peer review.”

(Cycle UK, Learning Project statement)

While Martha and Graham both directly engage with local practitioner learning through ‘best practice’, however, Harry’s role is more indirect—focussing instead upon “[policy] levers at a national-level that can

impact upon what local authorities do.” Indeed, the Organisation for Sustainable Transport aim to be an “insider” campaign group, involved in early stages of strategic policy formulation through close dialogue with ministers and Whitehall officials.²⁴ Nevertheless, an awareness of current ‘best practice’ in local sustainable transport decision-making is certainly present—enhancing the depth and breadth of their analytical knowledge base (Figure 3.8; ACT):

“We are interested in ‘best practice’ and we do talk to particular local authorities that are developing what we think are interesting ideas...[For example] we’re sketching out a project with local authorities about good practice and how you improve transport in suburban areas rather than new-build areas or town centres.”

(Harry, interview)

In addition, Harry noted how the tangible, upbeat and anecdotal character of ‘best practice’ examples is also *rhetorically advantageous* in his interaction with senior policy figures, enabling him to both adopt a compelling, positive tone in campaign messages and to tailor such messages to key individuals’ learning styles:

“...So does the organisation advocate a ‘best practice’ approach?”

(Interviewer)

“Yeah, as a campaigning organisation we don’t want to be just a negative carping organisation banging on about how terrible everything is with visions of doom, anger and outrage, so we always want to have a positive message to tell... [Best practice] actually does encourage people to think a little bit and you get a process of *change*, rather than just stasis. So you *can* get people to walk and cycle; it’s not just about giving up and saying ‘it’s been in decline for the last 30 years, therefore it will always be in decline’, it’s recognising that things can be different and they can be done as well; it’s not completely cloud cuckoo land.”

(Harry, interview, original emphasis)

²⁴ Harry holds policy meetings with Whitehall officials on a weekly basis.

“‘Best practice’ is also really important in terms of making your case *seem real* and giving people something to fasten onto and from a campaigning and lobbying point of view, then obviously it’s about how you engage with people with different ways of thinking. So ‘best practice’ is useful for some people; it’s that anecdotal evidence which appeals to some people, whereas others want more of the overarching, numbers-based, fact-crunching, benefit-cost ratios, that kind of narrative.”

(Harry, interview, original emphasis)

This former view is partly shared by Martha:

“[In using the ‘best practice’ notion] you might want to highlight a particular case even though you expect that everyone is meeting the national standard and doing it properly, you might want to show examples to try and encourage people to come up [to that standard]. *It can be a more positive way of going about things than inspecting and penalising people for not delivering.*”

(Martha, interview, emphasis added)

Despite these advantages bestowed by the ‘best practice’ notion, however, Harry and his colleagues are often deeply sceptical of individual ‘best practice’ examples promulgated by policy actors in the sustainable transport community. In essence, this scepticism arises from the often ambiguous and opaque manner in which certain practices come to be labelled as ‘best’, at the expense of alternative approaches to active travel management (Figure 3.8; EXG). First, the ‘best’ title is often conferred upon interventions that have put themselves forward as nominees for professional award ceremonies. Although such ceremonies ostensibly claim to recognise ‘best practice’ in an official capacity, Harry is left unconvinced:

“A lot of the award-winning schemes are just [rewarding those] who happened to apply for them and it’s not at all a rigorous process...the things that appear to be a more formal process are completely rubbish in terms of being able to say whether [interventions] are good or not.”

(Harry, interview)

Second, similarly regardless of whether interventions have made *bona fide* contributions to sustainable travel objectives, Harry suggested that the 'best practice' label often goes hand-in-hand with capital-intensive, 'flagship' projects:

"Have there been cases that you've come across that are labelled 'best practice' that you look at and think, 'that's not what I would consider to be 'best practice'"?"

(Interviewer)

"There probably are; I can't think of any off-hand. I mean it tends to be more when there has been large expenditure on large developments or regeneration that doesn't take into account how people use spaces. So it looks good and the architects' plans...can look really amazing with all these people in the artist's impression, but actually in practice there's quite a difference. One example actually is the Westfield Shopping Centre. I went to a talk about it and they were portraying it as a great shiny example of sustainability, building a new community that was going to be amazing etc., but in practice it's got loads of parking, so it's very much car-orientated."

(Harry, interview)

Third, Harry argued that many 'best practice' interventions suffer from a lack of longevity, possessing a risky, fleeting existence often contingent on seed funding:

"If you look at a lot of these [best practices], they are put up and everyone forgets about them rather than trying to maintain them, or they were designed to look good for a short period of time, but actually a few years down the line you discover that the cutting edge stuff you put in at the time actually doesn't work very well and looks a bit sorry for itself...[For example] in Wiltshire, there's a demand responsive transport services in one of the rural areas and its being cut because funding is tighter...I think it had some external funding at the beginning or started as a trial service, and it will, I'm sure, have been described as 'best practice' in some guidance on rural transport. But it isn't being maintained because the local authority doesn't see it as being important anymore. *It is a classic thing where you've got 'best practice' and then as soon as money is tight, or you don't have external funding coming in, then it goes.*"

(Harry, interview, emphasis added)

Finally, and most intriguingly, Harry argued that the labelling of particular practices as ‘best’ may result not from proven success, but from clandestine, bureaucratic mechanisms acting at both local and national scales. On this point, it is worth quoting him at length:

“Well, there are people in [Whitehall] looking for examples to use to shape discourse on walking and cycling and transport more widely; and then people at a local level—local authorities primarily—who want to promote what they’re doing to make their organisation look good, and to make them individually to look good as well to help in terms of their career progression. So there are people *looking for different things out of ‘best practice’ stuff*, and why they want to push something forward as ‘best practice’. So in [Whitehall]…they would want to be looking for examples where they can be *seen to be pushing things forward a bit, and pushing innovation, but not too radical* that might scare people or might have negative comeback for them as individuals within [Whitehall] and their status within [Whitehall], or the status of their team within [Whitehall].

So you’ve got those things, [and] whether there are politically-negative things…so the [Whitehall] conception of ‘best practice’ will also involve political controversy, so ‘best practice’ for them won’t be a particularly controversial scheme…[I]f the congestion charge had been very unpopular after it was implemented, they wouldn’t have put that forward as ‘best practice’, but now they’re probably more comfortable with the idea of it being ‘best practice’. So if ministers get lots of letters complaining about something, then that probably doesn’t count as ‘best practice’, even if it has some of the positive impacts that make it what we consider to be ‘best practice’!”

(Harry, interview, emphasis added)

Because Martha’s interview was postponed due to the aftermath of the UK 2010 general election, and thus took place after Harry’s interview had been analysed in detail, an opportunity arose to ask her directly about such ‘disingenuous’ usage of the ‘best practice’ notion. As shown, she candidly acknowledged that sometimes the ‘best practice’ label is indeed capitalised on for “tactical” reasons, specifically related to funding-constraints:

“There’s also a more tactical aspect to [best practice] where you’ve only got a pot of money that’s so large you can’t afford to fund everybody, [so] you present it as a demonstration or ‘best practice’ pot—although actually what you’re trying to achieve is to at least get something to happen somewhere. *You would never describe it that way, because it would look like you hadn’t won the argument to get lots of money...* I think sometimes [best practice] is used not to demonstrate ‘best practice’, but its all the money that you think you’ve got to spend on a particular thing and you just, you want to spend it on that, you want to try and encourage, I don’t know, bus use or something, so you have a fund of money to get greener buses or something, and you’d actually like to do this universally. It’s not a kind of experiment or having some kind of beacon that illuminates everywhere else, it’s just that, resource-wise, it’s all you can afford—which is slightly different.”

(Martha, interview, emphasis added)

In light of his extensive reservations about alleged ‘best practices’, therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that Harry and his colleagues follow what is arguably the most fastidious approach in engaging with ‘best practice’ of all the eight cases studied (although cf. Keith, Case H). Understandably reticent to take externally-promoted ‘best practices’ at face-value, they aim to offset the ambiguity that such examples introduce into policy debate by actively learning from two sources of ‘best practice’ knowledge that are perceived as more trustworthy (Figure 3.8; EXG): first, Harry pays significant attention to the output of detailed appraisals on sustainable transport and active travel from organisations such as the Audit Commission and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence; second, he and his colleagues participate in online ‘communities of practice’, which support informal, yet detailed, peer-discussion:

“I think communities of practice are quite useful, so there’s the ‘Streets’ mailing list which deals with the design of streets, and its mainly a group of urban designers, road safety officers and local authority officials and they’re quite good about discussing, via email, particular schemes and whether they are good practice or not; what’s good about them, what’s bad about them. And you get a nice process by which discussion takes place and for getting different viewpoints on what is successful.”

(Harry, interview)

In addition to raising their confidence in externally-promoted ‘best practices’ in this manner, Harry and his colleagues also appear to adopt a relatively formal approach when pro-actively undertaking in-house policy learning (Figure 3.8; ACT). Specifically, Harry noted that his team have, on occasion, created an electronic ‘research matrix’, designed to highlight pertinent criteria for policy learning and grounded upon their shared, tacit understanding of what ‘good practice’ ultimately corresponds to. In turn, this matrix serves to structure their reviews of academic literature, ‘grey’ literature and so-called “promotional guff” and facilitates subsequent engagements with project delivery actors.

Yet although Harry’s experiences ably illustrate some of the ambiguity surrounding the notion of ‘best practice’, arguably the most fascinating insights into its multifaceted character are to be found in Graham’s experiences at Cycle UK. Interestingly, this concerns the very same conceptual conflation that Charles Landry made in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, whereby the notion of ‘best practice’ can be simultaneously interpreted in both a ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ sense. As we implied above when discussing the ‘Learning Project’, Cycle UK’s explicit engagement with the notion of ‘best practice’ has historically been very much aligned with the ‘relative’ sense. As Graham makes clear when explaining the central tenets of the Learning Project:

“It is not us lecturing to the local authorities who participate in the scheme about what Cycle UK thinks is best practice, it is encouraging *them* to identify it. So it is at the level of identifying best practice [as] ‘best in class’...it is very definitely the *relative* best.”

(Graham, interview, original emphasis)

However, as evidenced by Graham’s cognitive map, his organisational role within Cycle UK is by no means restricted to the Learning Project and practitioner support (Figure 3.9; ACT/AUD). On the contrary, he and his team undertake a wide range of campaigning activities, which manifest themselves in two forms. The first, following bureaucratic policy channels, involves disseminating briefing papers, responding to policy consultations and submitting evidence to parliamentary select committees. The second—used when the first

does not achieve its desired outcomes—Involves resorting to direct action, “making noise” through the media and calling on Cycle UK’s local volunteers to write to their MPs. Crucially, for both of these campaigning strategies to be effective, Graham recognises that he must be able to articulate comprehensive and coherent stances on a range of cycling issues. Yet although the organisation certainly aims to keep abreast of current debates in cycling policy—following the work of other active travel NGOs, for example—Graham stressed that Cycle UK’s core policy stance has remained ultimately unchanged for many years, and remains predicated on the need for reductions in both the volume and speed of motor traffic on the UK road network (cf. Figure 3.9; TRG).

It is here that we can see how Graham encounters the notion of ‘best practice’ in an ‘absolute’ sense. For him, ‘best practice’ for cycling does not correspond to the ‘best’ interventions currently in place in the UK, but rather the notion is analogous to this vision of a low-speed, low-car future. Indeed, it is the future realisation of this vision that fundamentally guides and inspires Graham and his team, and it is toward this ‘absolute best practice’ that policy interventions ought to be directed:

“So how would you define the notion of ‘best practice’?”

(Interviewer)

“I think...there are two possible definitions. One is the dictionary definition if you like, which is ‘what is the best in class?’—whether or not it’s any good—and the other is ‘what is the stuff you want to recommend?’, you know...and two are out of kilter, particularly on infrastructure things.”

(Graham, interview)

“So there’s a mismatch between what is labelled as ‘best practice’ and what is [ultimately] fit for purpose?”

(Interviewer)

“Yes, and that’s even before you start raising that wider question of ‘is society in general responding adequately to climate change?’ Even if we took a narrow focus—‘are we doing a good enough job of catering for cyclists?’—I couldn’t really say that there’s an awful lot of [absolute] ‘best practice’ on infrastructure. Often we’ve wanted to get a good local authority speaker to speak to other local authorities and say ‘here are the kind of things we’re doing’, and inspire people that it can be done. But is there really anyone that fits the bill? Not really...[because] *best practice is a willingness to reduce volumes and speeds of traffic.*”

(Graham, interview, emphasis added)

Moreover, quite unlike Sam (Case B), and even Will (Case A)—discussed in Section 3.2—not only is Graham highly critical of efforts to transpose international examples of ‘relative best practice’—citing legal and cultural discontinuities between the UK and the Netherlands with respect to Dutch ‘shared space’ schemes, for example—he simply does not recognise such transfers as particularly worthwhile endeavours *per se*, precisely because such examples of ‘relative best practice’ still fall short of Cycle UK’s ‘absolute best practice’ vision for UK cycling:

“We do not advocate that ‘best practice’ would be ‘follow what they do in the Netherlands’. Now, what is the thinking behind that? Well, there are different lines of thinking. As an organisation, we’re pretty sceptical of putting cyclists on the pavement, you’ve probably gathered that. So...there is one line of thought which says, ‘well, actually, even what they do in Holland is in some ways flawed; because actually what we should be doing is simply reducing the volume of traffic on the roads rather than getting cyclist out of the way of it’...We shouldn’t need to even do what the Dutch do...the Dutch approach is not [absolute] ‘best practice’. Real ‘best practice’ *would be drastic reductions in car use.*”

(Graham, interview, emphasis added)

In theory of course, there is no inherent reason why these two senses of ‘best practice’ cannot reasonably co-exist, even within a single organisation such as Cycle UK; in many ways they are complementary. However, when the two distinct senses are *tacitly conflated*, this can have direct and indirect ramifications for a broad range of policy actors, as the critical reception of Cycle

UK’s Learning Project brilliantly illustrates (Figure 3.9; EXG).²⁵ Indeed, somewhat ironically, the Learning Project’s high-profile in the active travel community, coupled with its ostensible success, has led to a situation whereby some of the ‘relative best practices’ identified by practitioners through peer-review—in the form of case studies and photographs—have been incorporated into official Whitehall guidance as *normative* examples of ‘best practice’, tacitly cast in the ‘absolute’ sense. As Graham frustratingly recounted:

“They were turned from ‘best practice’ into *guidance* – how to do it. And we were saying ‘Hey, *no!* It might be better in relative terms to a lot of what goes on, [but] that doesn’t mean that it’s right and it doesn’t mean that it should end up in a document saying ‘this is how to do it’”

(Graham, interview, original emphasis).

For Graham, the fallout from this conflation is significant because, in explicitly endorsing arguably mediocre practice, the scope for genuinely radical policy change was diminished. Yet, arguably, the most fascinating consequence of this conflation is to be found in the organisational dynamics of Cycle UK itself. Specifically, in labelling certain active travel interventions as ‘best practice’, the Learning Project inadvertently served to publicly endorse any local authority practitioner who subsequently decided to implement them. As a result, this official ‘seal of approval’ drastically curtailed the ability of Cycle UK’s local volunteer base to pose valid concerns about such interventions, despite the fact that they all fell far short of ‘absolute best practice’:

“The fact that [the practitioners] were participating in the Learning Project where some of their things were being highlighted as ‘best practice’ meant that they could say ‘piss off local campaigner, your own bloody national office programme said that what we’re doing is best practice!’ You know, *they were using it as a seal of approval which it was never meant to be. We were clear within the project that it was [about] learning, not an endorsement process.* But some [practitioners] were using it that way, particularly to keep our own local campaigners in check—which was quite rightly resented. So yeah, we’re well aware about

²⁵ We can think of this conflation in terms of Saussure’s ([1910] 1993) semiotics, as the *signifier* ‘best practice’ simultaneously corresponds to two distinct *signified* concepts: ‘the best existing practice’ and ‘the ultimately desired practice’.

that potential mismatch...local authorities themselves might use this label ‘best practice’ in different ways to how we intended it within that Project.”

(Graham, interview, emphasis added).

3.4 Overarching encounters: active travel 'facilitators'

In the preceding sections, we focussed upon a sample of local and national actors who are all *directly engaged* in decision-making on active travel policy. We have seen that, on the supply-side, Will (Case A) and Martha (Case D) perform a variety of functions relating to policy formulation and implementation while, on the demand-side, Sam (Case B), Chris (Case C), Harry (Case E) and Graham (Case F) all seek to shape the outcome of policy decisions through targeted campaigning. In this final section, however, we instead examine the manner in which the notion of 'best practice' is encountered by two actors who do not seek to intervene in specific policy decisions *per se*, but nevertheless seek to influence the policy-making process in an overarching, *facilitatory* sense, whereby their actions 'make (an action, process, etc.) easy or easier; to promote, help forward; to assist in bringing about (a particular end or result)' (OED, 1989, np.). In other words, both actors discussed in this section tend to 'sit above' the complex, context-dependent churn of material decision-making and instead, through their professional undertakings, aim to shape meta-level policy discourse (Case G) and other actors' capacity for knowledge dissemination (Case H).

Case (G) concerns the experience of Lisa, an academic researcher who plays a central role in the 'Futures Project' first described in Chapter 2, and Case (H) relates to Keith, the chairperson of an international professional network concerned with worldwide development of walking policy. In Chapter 2, like Graham (Case F), both of Lisa and Keith were highlighted as 'extreme' cases (Denscombe, 2007). With respect to Lisa, this designation corresponds to the fact that the notion of 'best practice' is exceedingly prevalent in the Futures Project and that, within the project, she has played a central role in generating this prevalence. With respect to Keith, extensive references to 'best practice' are to be found in his organisation's publicity materials, and the notion is broadly embraced by its members. However, as we shall see, he is less than enthusiastic about the 'best practice' notion himself.

Case: G

Pseudonym: Lisa

Organisation: University of Eastbrook (UE)

Role: Academic researcher

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

Lisa is a principle researcher on the Futures project, which seeks to develop and explore a range of potential urban futures for UK cities, with a particular focus on improving the quality of the urban environment for walking and cycling. Specifically, the project involves the creation of internally-consistent mobility scenarios, sensitive to various societal, economic and environmental priorities, the development of multimedia narratives for use with stakeholders and the public, and the development of multi-criteria analysis methods to assess the likely implications of alternative futures. The overarching objectives of the project are to improve the quality of 'walkability' and 'cyclability' in UK cities and to reverse the steady decline of walking and cycling rates in the UK (Figure 3.10; OBJ). Uniquely, the Futures project seeks to broaden the temporal focus of the national active travel policy, concentrating on medium- to long-term planning strategies rather than short-term interventions. The target for the project is thus to improve the quality of national and local UK active travel policy (Figure 3.10; TRG). Lisa aims to achieve this by increasing policy-makers' appreciation of the potential benefits of active travel and encouraging them to "think differently" about the role of walking and cycling in 21st Century urban transport systems.

Case: H

Pseudonym: Keith

Organisation: MoveIT

Role: Chair

Objective(s), target(s) and audience(s)

MoveIT is an international network of policy professionals that seeks to facilitate the growth of walking as a means of improving global environmental quality and public health. More specifically, MoveIT aims to increase the effectiveness of policy interventions made relation to walking worldwide. The network is hence designed to provide peer-to-peer support and learning opportunities for policy-makers and practitioners—underpinned by the extensive development and sharing of 'best practices'. MoveIT launched in the late 1990s, with 400 members from 35 different countries. These members hail from a variety of professional backgrounds, and include transport engineers, urban planners, health professionals, community organisers and a small number of politicians. Keith has been chair of the network since its inception. He is based in the UK where he also works as an active travel consultant.

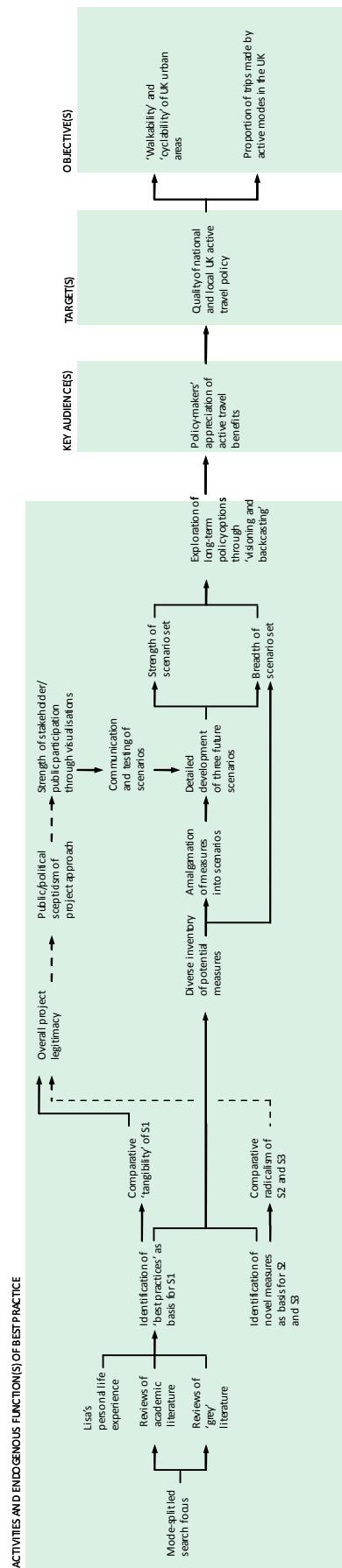


Figure 3.10 Lisa's cognitive map (Case G)

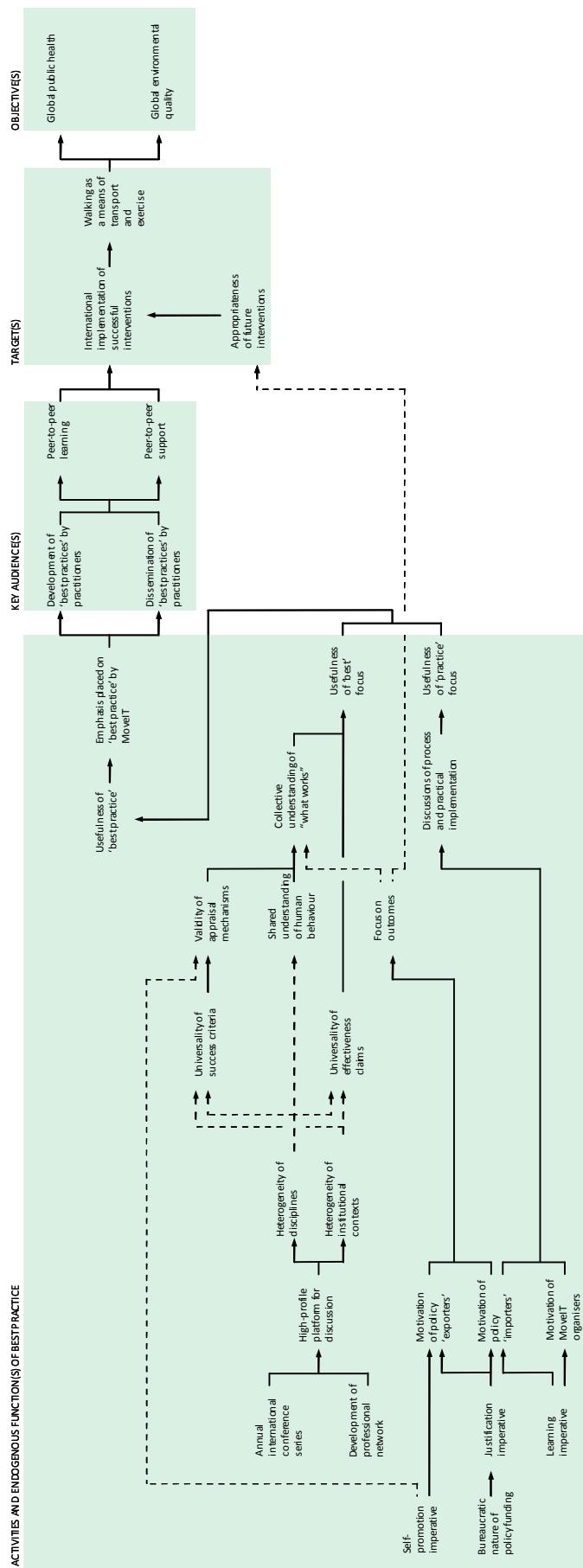


Figure 3.11 Keith's cognitive map (Case H)

Endogenous and exogenous functions of ‘best practice’

In common with the preceding sections in this chapter, we shall begin our discussion here by examining the manner in which Lisa and Keith employ the notion of ‘best practice’ in the course of their professional activities, and the perceived strategic benefits that this yields. As can be seen from Figures 3.10 and 3.11, the empirical material generated with respect to both of these cases is exclusively concerned with such ‘endogenous’ encounters. Indeed, Lisa made almost no references in her interview to other actors’ usage of ‘best practice’ and, although Keith discussed different actors’ conceptions of the notion at length, this was solely within the immediate context of the MoveIT network. Following this examination, we shall subsequently explore the participants’ conceptual understandings of the ‘best practice’ notion—focussing predominantly on Keith’s reflective and highly-critical perspective. As noted previously, the notion of ‘best practice’ is extremely prevalent throughout both the Futures Project and the MoveIT network. As a result, the following discussion is interspersed with contextual details in order to afford a fuller appreciation of Lisa and Keith’s respective experiences.

While an overview of the Futures Project has already been provided, its specifics merit fuller discussion. In essence, Lisa and her academic colleagues have used a series of computer-generated urban environments in order to manipulate various aspects of the public realm—such as roadways, pavements and street furniture—and thus develop a range of future ‘active travel scenarios’ for UK cities. At the time of Lisa’s interview, three of these scenarios had been fully developed and were about to undergo an extensive period of testing, whereby their respective feasibility and popularity would be established through a series of focus groups, variously involving the public, key stakeholders and the Futures Project’s own advisory network.²⁶

Importantly, each of these three scenarios were developed in accordance with a unique guiding principle, or ‘storyline’. The storylines underpinning Scenarios 2 and 3 were relatively radical in character and implied significant social upheaval—concerned with major political change and a severe energy

²⁶ From which the eight participants discussed in this thesis were drawn (cf. Chapter 2).

crisis, respectively. Scenario 1, however, was designed to represent a hypothetical walking and cycling future for the UK comprised entirely of current global 'best practices' in active travel, variously drawn from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and the United States of America (Figure 3.10; ACT). The actual 'best practices' included in Scenario 1 ranged from 'soft' interventions, such as US-style 'share the road' campaigns, to substantial infrastructural interventions, such a Dutch-style, cycle-friendly roundabouts (Figure 3.12).



Figure 3.12 Dutch 'best practice' for the UK

Source: Futures Project

Within the Futures Project team, Lisa was the researcher responsible for the development and coherence of Scenario 1. As we can see, she went about selecting particular 'best practices' for inclusion in the scenario in two ways. First, on the basis of her personal cycling experiences in different national contexts; and second through reviewing academic and 'grey' literature—basing her search on locations with relatively high cycling rates via a focus on modal share:

"You know, no one mentions Sweden next to the Netherlands, but I thought it was fantastic for cycling, everything was there, it was integrated, you know...I've cycled in all those places as a utility cyclist, not a leisure cyclist; and I thought of those places because they're

easy to cycle in, and they have examples of similar things that I would call 'best practice' [such as] dedicated cycle lanes."

(Lisa, interview)

"In the first stages when we were thinking about the scenario we thought 'well we don't have anything [to structure our search around] so lets do mode split...My Scenario 1 review started with looking at journal papers which all discuss mode split. I think at first though it was just a broad literature review, where I read journal papers and there's the paper about lessons from Germany, Netherlands and Denmark, they're the big three I suppose...I basically got examples from everywhere and just sort of thought about what's achievable."

(Lisa, interview)

Lisa first encountered the notion of 'best practice' while studying for a degree in environmental science and broadly conceptualises it in terms of 'instructional guidance'. Fundamentally, therefore, her rationale for following this 'best practice' approach in the Futures Project relates to the fact that international active travel 'best practices' have been proven to work effectively elsewhere and may thus prove effective in the UK.

"I think the first time I came across best practice, it was not transport related, it was sustainable storm water, and that's where you build bioswales and natural drainage, and that was like a design manual basically: '[use] this depth, this substrate, these plants, this is the 'best practice' for building one of these, because if you use these other plants, or build it from concrete, it won't work, right?' So I understand best practice to be an idea of how you would do something so that it works...as ideas that you can take from other places that ideally have been replicated... 'Best' is an example that has been set for people."

(Lisa, interview)

In addition to this emphasis on effectiveness and replicability, Lisa interestingly also stressed that the notion of 'best practice' served to partly 'legitimise' the overall approach of the Futures Project, which, by its very nature, has proved relatively controversial with some audiences (Figure 3.10; ACT). As noted, a substantial component of the project involves 'testing' the scenarios with

members of the public and other policy stakeholders in order to arrive at a collectively-desirable future image of UK active travel. In this process, Lisa argued that the ‘best practice’ emphasis of Scenario 1, unlike the radical nature of Scenarios 2 and 3, meant that it was relatively ‘tangible and thus “grounded in some sort of reality”—serving to counter the inevitable public and political scepticism of the ‘anti-car’ approach taken in the project as a whole.

“So [the best practice emphasis] helps to present the scenarios does it, because someone can’t just say ‘this is fanciful’, because it exists?”

(Interviewer)

““Yeah, I think it’s really helpful. Because I think when we get to talking to the public more, there’s going to be some fear from some people, that Scenario 3 is too far, or Scenario 2 is like ‘*What!??* There are no cars *anywhere*?’

(Lisa, interview, original emphasis)

For Keith, however, the notion of ‘best practice’ remains very much about policy learning. Although the MoveIT network maintains a permanent presence on the internet, its principle organisational activity is a high-profile, annual members’ conference, hosted in a different country each year. In providing this platform for discussion, Keith intends to reassure MoveIT members that they are not alone in their efforts to improve walkability and, more significantly, aims to provide a means for practitioners to reflect on their policy experiences and to openly share knowledge with each other about “what works”:

“Very often there is a practitioner who ‘gets it’; they’ve got all the knowledge, all the manuals all the tools, but they haven’t necessarily got the political support for [improving walkability]. And our opportunity is to grow a movement of people where we can support them; they may only need to come [to the conference] once to realise they’re not alone. Because sometimes I think people quite often feel that in this sort of world they are the only people doing [walkability interventions]—particularly inside their own organisations; they’re probably at the bottom of the pile and don’t feel particularly supported. [So we] give them connections to learn from each other, and [to] realise that actually most ideas could be

adopted and adapted and made relevant to their own place without having to think about it for themselves.”

(Keith, interview)

“I think what we mean by ‘best practice’ is to try and expose the visibility of what’s happening and to recognise the value that that is currently playing and to ensure within professionals that they have some check to see whether those sorts of things are happening equitably across their own authority areas, or whether there are things that they could learn from outside of their discipline or outside of their area that would add value to their existing work.”

(Keith, interview)

Within this context, the notion of ‘best practice’ enjoys a great deal of currency. For Keith, the primary reason for this relates to the fact that, for the most part, MoveIT members appear desperate for knowledge about *policy implementation*:

“There are so many strategies and tools; I’ve just been to a meeting today to talk about providing yet another ‘toolkit’. If I’m a practitioner in any field, I’m awash with tools that I could use, and in every project with every bit of research, there’s yet another tool and yet another paper. So we’re not short of information, but it is their *applicability* that I think is difficult to understand or to value. So I think what ‘practice’ has is that opportunity to say ‘we gave it a go.’”

(Keith, interview, original emphasis)

In omitting ‘best’, however, this quote also serves to hint at Keith’s highly-critical attitude to the notion of ‘best practice’. As can be seen in his cognitive map (Figure 3.11; ACT), Keith discussed the value of the notion at some length, charting the manner in which it is both advantageous and disadvantageous in the context of the MoveIT. Essentially, Keith argues that while focussing on the nature of ‘practice’ is highly valuable, a focus on ‘best’ is less so:

“Best practice in my mind, therefore, is more about the sharing of practice than necessarily an emphasis on best...I’m as interested in exposing the *processes* as I am about the outcomes themselves. And very often, too many write-ups of what are technically called ‘best practice’ just tell you what they’ve achieved and they have a councillor who says [we achieved] 20% this and 20% that—the point being how the hell did they get there in the first place so that someone even agreed to let that sort of thing happen? And did they even know that it was the right sort of thing to do before they did it, or did they just get lucky?”

(Keith, interview, original emphasis)

Indeed, Keith went to great lengths to explain why he believes that placing too great an emphasis on ‘best’ is detrimental to the overall quality of policy learning within the MoveIT network. First, and perhaps least surprisingly, Keith echoed the ‘pragmatic critique’ in noting that interventions that ‘work’ in one location are unlikely to ‘work’ in all locations (cf. Chapter 1; see also Cases A and F). Interestingly, however, in stating this opinion, he implied that the institutional limits to genuine policy convergence do tend to be widely-recognised within the MoveIT community:

“I don’t think anyone would claim that they have the best answer. They might have an answer that suits their location but that doesn’t mean that’s the best for everybody else’s location anywhere in the world.”

(Keith, interview, emphasis added)

Second, and extremely relevant to MoveIT—given the heterogeneity of its membership base—Keith argued that what is ‘best’ for walking policy with respect to the criteria of one professional discipline (e.g. public health) may not be ‘best’ for walking policy with respect to those of another (e.g. sustainable transport):

“I think [policy actors] get away with the ambiguity of using the word ‘best’ because we’re not all measuring the same things...If I’m a health practitioner and my goal is to get people

who are sedentary to be more active, then clearly, almost anything I do to encourage them to walk is likely to be positive...it's much more likely that I am going to be 'best practice' in the fact that my measure of success will be more people [walking]. However, in the transport world, I don't really care whether someone who is sedentary is going to be more active or not—what I'm interested in is whether someone who is driving short distances is going to be willing to transfer to walking or cycling instead. So my measures from the beginning are different and they may well be different people; they are certainly not sitting on the sofa, they're sitting in their cars!"

(Keith, interview)

Third, related to this ambiguity, Keith argued that labelling a particular intervention as 'best' can reassure other practitioners that it is inherently effective, leading them to justify a similar course of action within their own jurisdictional-spheres. While not inherently problematic, Keith clearly views this phenomenon with an element of discomfort:

"The trouble I have with [best practice], is that there's very little system for anybody to decide whether that value has been positive or is actually 'best', which is the point I keep making. But somehow or other it reassures people that its being done already to make you think that actually there's less risk of it all going pear-shaped or getting no return out of it whatsoever. And I think where people have to make a justification before they want to make a decision or do something, they have to, there's normally – even in a committee paper – there's some area that says 'what is the risk?' and 'what is going to be the impact of this?' And you cannot afford for that element of risk to be unconsidered and you cannot afford for that impact not to be positive. and normally, if you're going to stand up in front of that committee and make a recommendation for that decision before that policy or that investment is agreed, then you'll want some evidence in your favour when cross questioned against it to say well actually its been done before and its had this positiveness about it. And I think very often we describe 'best' as meaning 'something that wasn't negative happened', and that's quite an interesting thing."

(Keith, interview)

Finally, although an intervention labelled as 'best' may have resulted in a positive impact, Keith argued that it may nevertheless have been poorly designed

and/or fallen short of what was actually possible in the circumstances. Here, it is worth quoting a frustrated Keith at length as he articulates this by way of a fascinating example from his experience as an active travel consultant:

“I did a job recently for [a UK local authority]...They had to bid for funding with a whole load of ideas about what they were going to do to try and make their citizens more healthy [via active travel]. The first thing they did with the money was a questionnaire—they got an 80% response rate and they ‘ticked the box’. And then they put in the cycle lanes, parking and signage. [However] if you’d actually analysed the questionnaires, what [the local residents] all said is ‘we’re disjointed from our community; we haven’t got bikes and we want to walk’ ...[So] actually they had to spend more money on marketing at the end to say ‘we’ve just built you this bloody cycle path, for goodness sake use it! I know you didn’t want it and you didn’t ask for it but please use it!’ And of course they’ll get 20% more people using it and they will show it up as ‘best practice’: you know, ‘we said we’d do a bike lane, we did a questionnaire and we did a bike lane and we got 20% of people using it’ and that will be held up as ‘best practice’. But, if you explore the processes and find out that 80% of people didn’t want it and would have been much happier with a led walk once a week going into town and exploring how the rights of way network could be slightly tweaked to be better connected to where they live, to get them to the shop and to get them home again, they could have spent maybe only 10% of the cash [and] they could potentially have had an 80% greater impact on physical activity for a tenth of the cost...and that is the difference between ‘practice’ and ‘best practice’ for me—actually being able to be clear from the beginning about what the measures of success are and that they are based on an understanding of behaviour before you start. And without that benchmark you’re never actually going to be able to define ‘success’ or ‘best’ and that’s the problem.”

(Keith, interview)

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to describe the manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ has been encountered within a particular subset of the UK active travel policy community. Its purpose has been to investigate, in detail, how the notion is both used and understood in order to build an empirical foundation for subsequent theoretical explanations. As a result, this chapter has attempted to avoid premature interpretation and discussion, with cognitive maps and verbatim

interview extracts instead used to capture the core essence of actors' encounters with 'best practice' in relation to their respective professional objectives, targets, audiences and activities.

Even within this small policy community, the content of this chapter demonstrates a striking degree of variation in the purposive functions of the 'best practice' notion and it is clear that the actors both encounter and 'define' the notion in diverse and nuanced ways. Some are exponents of the notion. For these actors, 'best practice', while certainly not unproblematic, can prove relatively expedient as a means of reaching their wider policy targets and objectives. For Will (Case A), for example, 'best practice' is a helpful concept for structuring the policy learning process; and for Sam (Case B), it represents a valuable tool for achieving leverage in his policy campaigning. Chris (Case C), however, vehemently opposes the notion of 'best practice' as he sees it as both placing artificial restrictions on problem scope and being complicit in the lowering of professional standards. While the majority of actors conceptualise 'best practice' in a *relative* sense, Graham (Case F) views it largely in *absolute* terms, whereby judgements of performance are made not in relation to other practices, but in relation to an imagined utopian future. Similarly divergent were conceptions of 'practice'. For most actors, 'practices' correspond to material policy interventions, whereas for Keith (Case H) and Harry (Case E) greater emphasis is placed upon the processes by which such interventions come to fruition.

However, regardless of such functions, opinions and conceptual ambiguities, perhaps the most striking finding from this chapter is the sheer extent to which the notion of 'best practice' has registered so fundamentally in the actors' collective consciousness. Next, in Chapter 4, we shall attempt to develop a formal explanation of this present ubiquity of the 'best practice' notion in the sustainable transport policy community.

Chapter 4

Explaining ‘best practice’: transfactual argumentation

‘Stripped of any special significance by a generation of bureaucrats, civil servants, managers and politicians, lazily used as ‘political margarine’ to spread approvingly and inclusively over any activity with a non-material element to it, the word [REDACTED] has become almost unusable.’

—John Tusa (2003, p. 6)

A recurrent feature of the popular BBC television series *Have I Got News For You* is the ‘missing words round’, in which the show’s contestants are shown a partially-obsured phrase from a particularly unassuming ‘guest publication’ and are asked to guess specific words that have been concealed. In this spirit, it would be interesting—although admittedly not particularly humorous—to present this epigraph from John Tusa to a selection of social scientists and ask them to suggest which policy buzzword might have been omitted. Perhaps Martin and Sunley (2003) and their adherents would suggest that ‘cluster’ fits the bill, or maybe Marshall and Toffel (2005) would opt for ‘sustainability.’ Indeed, although the actual word missing from Tusa’s passage is ‘creative’, we can probably imagine a whole swathe of definitionally-dubious terms in contemporary public policy to which this ‘political margarine’ analogy might apply, including—given the empirical material presented in the previous chapter—‘best practice.’

Taking the presence of this conceptual ambiguity as a point of departure, our task in this chapter is one of *explanation* (cf. Objective B). Specifically, through retroductive, transfactual argumentation we are here concerned with establishing the *structure* of the ‘best practice’ notion, for it is the causal powers and

tendencies derived from this structure, when exercised under certain conditions, which can account for the notion's present ubiquity and heterogeneous deployment within the UK transport policy community. Of course, while the strength of critical realist explanation lies in its concern for detailing the internal, necessary relations between objects, this logic of inquiry has concomitant risks. Not least among such risks is the propensity for realist abstraction to become an insular process, in which theory is built from first principles in comparative isolation. To counter this, while discussion and interpretation in this chapter will draw heavily on the empirical material presented in Chapter 3, it will also seek to incorporate a number of contextual and theoretical insights from Ed Page, Harriet Bulkeley and Luciano Vettoretto, the existing contributors to the nascent 'actor critique' of 'best practice.'

This chapter is comprised of three sections. First, I abductively contextualise the central discussion by offering a perspective from political science on the complex and antagonistic nature of contemporary UK transport policy. Second, within this 'conditional' context (Sayer, 1992), I characterise the 'events' described in Chapter 3 as manifestations of five causal powers, which, taken together, necessarily constitute the structure of the 'best practice' notion. Finally, I briefly attempt to synthesise the discussion in accordance with the principles of critical realist research outlined in Chapter 2.

4.1 Intractable conflict and advocacy coalitions

If we are to have any hope of producing a meaningful and comprehensive account of the 'best practice' notion, it is imperative to reflect more deeply upon the *nature* of contemporary policy issues, the manner in which they are governed and the inherent challenges facing those actors involved. Given that Chapter 3 demonstrated that encounters with the notion of 'best practice' are genuinely variegated and appear irreducible to policy learning *per se*, we shall here abduce that the notion's transfactual conditions may instead reside in the complexities of what have been termed 'messy' (Ney, 2009) or 'wicked' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) policy problems.

As the political scientist Steven Ney (2009) notes, while vast amounts of financial and intellectual capital are ostensibly devoted to solving contemporary policy problems, it is an extremely rare event when such problems are considered to have been successfully addressed. This paradox has been characterised in terms of 'intractability' (Rein and Schön, 1993) or a 'dialogue of the deaf' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and is patently visible across a range of spatial scales and jurisdictional domains. Consider, for example, recent attempts at healthcare reform in the United States (Gostin and Connors, 2010), or international legislative efforts made in relation to anthropogenic climate change (Hulme, 2009). In each case, *bona fide* 'progress' is nowhere to be found; innumerable policy actors are locked in perpetual disagreement and hostility while associated policy activities continue apace.

For some, the causes of such intractability are to be found in the nature of contemporary policy processes *per se* (see, for example, Reich, 2007; Wilby, 2009). Although this position is often caricatured in the literature and represents something of a 'straw man', its ethos nevertheless resonates strongly with popular, normative conceptions of what policy-making 'ought to be about'. In essence, subscribers to this school of thought argue that hyper-pluralism, self-serving political gamesmanship, rampant lobbying and corrupt pork-barrelling together serve to needlessly complicate the policy process and hence obstruct rational and judicious decision-making (Tsebelis, 2002). Implicit in this view is thus the assumption that policy-makers are tasked with effectively and efficiently addressing theoretically-achievable and self-evident policy problems through carefully-formulated policy interventions that are predicated on expert knowledge. Of course, this remains appreciably difficult in many respects; policy-makers must take into account how proposed measures are likely to interact with those already in existence and may also need to consider the extent to which the deployment of multiple measures can avoid contradictory or unintended effects (see OPTIC, 2009). Nevertheless, according to this perspective, given policy problems are still presumed to 'have answers', which would be readily forthcoming if it were not for distracting and obstructive interferences.

Admittedly, this viewpoint is not completely outlandish; there would be little point in policy-making whatsoever if genuine progress were impossible. Yet

when one considers the *nature* of the policy domains in question—such as welfare reform, environmental regulation, transport management or financial governance—it becomes increasingly clear that they are not only characterised by inordinate technical complexity, but also by profound and entrenched value-laden disagreement which cannot be transcended through recourse to ‘fact’ alone; hence, they are ‘messy’ (Ney, 2009).

Indeed, far from lacking a factual basis, messy policy problems abound in data. Take the case of anthropogenic climate change, perhaps the epitome of a messy policy problem. Here, literally thousands of climate scientists are in near unanimous agreement that emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is a direct cause of global warming (IPCC, 2007). Yet although this fact has certainly proved instrumental in elevating the issue of climate change to the fore of international political debate, its existence *per se* has proved insufficient for the realisation of genuinely significant policy change. To be sure, there are those who dispute the facts of climate change directly, whether through advancing ‘facts’ of their own, or attempting to debase those that predominate (e.g. Booker, 2009).²⁷ Yet even if we focus upon those who accept the validity of climate change, there is little evidence of agreement as to the optimal course for policy action. Some voices in the debate gravitate to the poles of the argument, arguing that nothing whatsoever needs to be done (Griffin, 2007), or that a wholesale rejection of capitalism is warranted (Bergmann, 2008). Many on the political right advocate market-based solutions (CBI, 2009a) while many on the left favour a strong role for government and supranational institutions (Obama, 2009). Some see technological developments as the only viable solution (Robinson, 2009), while others view such developments with suspicion and hostility (Goddaven, 2009). Moreover, policy debate on climate change is far from discrete and self-contained; it spans an almost limitless spectrum of policy domains, implicating secondary issues in energy, transport, international development, healthcare, agriculture and defence.

²⁷ Indeed, if we consider the fact of anthropogenic climate change to represent ‘a particular truth known by actual observation or authentic testimony’ (OED, 1989, np.), we have unfortunately seen in the so-called ‘Climategate’ affair how fragile and unstable such ‘authentic testimony’ can be (House of Commons, 2010).

Far from representing a theoretically-straightforward process of factual resolution, therefore, policy-making essentially ‘becomes a process of exchange, transaction and bargaining between different institutions and policy actors’ (Ney, 2009, p. 27). One of the most palpable indications of this can be seen in what Chris Ansell (2000) terms the ‘networked polity’. In previous generations, it is argued, public policy was almost exclusively concerned with ‘classical duties’ such as public finance, defence and law and order. However, in recent decades, the scope of this portfolio has expanded greatly; encompassing social welfare, healthcare provision, transport, sports, the arts, the environment, regional development, science and a host of other issues (see Ney, 2009). As a result of this expansion, so the argument goes, political stewardship has become so specialised that the state can no longer manage this diverse and substantively complex portfolio ‘in house’. Therefore, in order to obtain the detailed technical knowledge necessary for effective government, we have witnessed a protracted period of state ‘outsourcing’, whereby certain functions and competencies in the policy-making process have been informally devolved to a multifaceted array of non-state actors, which, taken together, form what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) term ‘policy subsystems’.

Of course, it would be naïve to interpret this shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ solely in terms of a ‘coping strategy’; a full account must acknowledge the agency of neo-liberalism and ideological state retrenchment (see Docherty and Shaw, 2009). However, regardless of how the ‘networked polity’ has come about, the concept certainly resonates strongly with the nature of UK transport policy in its present form. As we noted in Chapter 1, the overarching project of mobility governance in the UK is informed and produced through the activities of countless politicians, civil servants, think tanks, academics and interest groups. Indeed, this heterogeneous assemblage of policy actors is a perfect example of what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999, p. 135) hold to be a ‘mature’ policy subsystem, characterised by:

‘a set of participants who regard themselves as a semi-autonomous community who share an expertise in a policy domain and who have sought to influence public policy in that domain for an extended period.’

Broadly then, in contrast to the traditional policy model, relationships between actors in the UK transport policy subsystem are *heterarchical* in nature. As evident in Chapter 3, while the conventional channels of policy communication tended to involve 'many to one' associations between disparate actors and the state, the networked polity involves a constellation of 'many to many' associations existing across the entire assemblage of policy actors involved in the subsystem (Ney, 2009). Crucially, these 'many-to-many' associations function as the gladiatorial arena in which the intractable, value-laden conflicts that define messy policy problems are played out. Specifically, within any given policy subsystem, the materiality of such conflicts can be attributed to the presence of two or more competing 'advocacy coalitions', which can be understood as functionally-diverse alliances of policy actors who coalesce around a shared set of core beliefs and engage in a concerted degree of policy coordination (see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Sabatier and Weible, 2007).

For Rein and Schön (1993, p. 146), these 'core beliefs' can be viewed as cognitive 'frames'—perspectives 'from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted upon.' Importantly, in recognising that advocacy coalitions thus rely on policy framing as 'a way of selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting' (*ibid.*), we can begin to appreciate the existence of the 'factual paradox' noted above, whereby factual statements proliferate in messy policy problems despite their inability to instigate change *per se*. In essence, frames *orchestrate* and impose cognitive order on data: they provide the means by which data can be considered relevant, valid and worthy of attention; they underpin the interpretation of data; and they contextualise data in terms of actors' overarching political objectives. In seeking to influence policy outcomes, therefore, advocacy coalitions create arguments that remain inherently contingent upon, and refracted through, the nature of their respective frames. Hence, as numerous advocacy coalitions put forth competing policy claims, 'facts' abound. Yet because opposing coalitions' frames are so intrinsically different, such 'facts' do not register in the subsystem to the degree that their proponents may wish (Ney, 2009).

Despite writing from outside the transport discipline, Ney (2009) identifies three core advocacy coalitions present in the contemporary UK transport policy

subsystem, which he dubs 'efficient mobility', 'sustainable mobility' and 'balanced mobility', respectively. Although these coalitions are inevitably a little stylized, they represent a valuable means of approaching and contextualising the various causal powers of the 'best practice' notion that will be imminently discussed. Let us briefly expand upon each of them in turn, albeit with some degree of artistic license.

First, the 'efficient mobility' coalition is comprised of a range of policy actors who maintain that efficient transport systems are the lifeblood of a strong UK economy, and that failure to ensure adequate capacity in the system will have an adverse and sustained impact on economic growth. The supposed role for policy-makers is thus broadly analogous to the 'predict and provide' approach outlined in Chapter 1, whereby additional capacity to the transport system should be supplied in response to increasing demand for travel. What policy-makers must *not* do is to interfere in market mechanisms through wasting tax-payers' money on subsidising the inefficient rail sector, or taking up scarce road space with unused cycle lanes. In terms of land transport, this coalition essentially seeks to *lower the cost* of moving people and freight by road, as this is the most flexible and thus most business-friendly form of transport in a post-Fordist economy. There are two forms of cost that typically incur their wrath: first, the opportunity cost incurred to the economy as a result of traffic congestion; and second the high cost of fuel duty, which many perceive to be a fiscal exploitation of motoring's high inelasticity of demand.

At the national scale, particularly vocal and influential actors in this coalition are organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Automobile Association (AA), the RAC Foundation, Drivers' Alliance, TaxPayers' Alliance and a number of right-wing, populist newspapers. These are joined at a local scale by organisations that seek to combat what they perceive as an anti-car sentiment in UK policy circles.²⁸ The essence of the 'efficient mobility' coalition is easily ascertainable from these recent statements from Edmund King, president of the AA, and Andy Godfrey, spokesperson for the CBI:

²⁸ Such as the lobbying group 'Rescue Oxford', for example.

‘A majority of AA members want to see a reduction in fuel costs even though duty increases are scheduled for October and rumours abound concerning an increase in VAT. *Escalating fuel costs will hinder economic recovery.*’

(King, 2010, p. 1, emphasis added)

‘*Capacity constraints on the UK transport infrastructure* are making it increasingly difficult for companies to reach their customers, attract staff and manage the delivery of their goods. Footfall is crucial for a successful retail business. Equally, deliveries need to be reliable to ensure stores are well stocked, and staff need to be able to access their jobs in a stress-free way. *Poor accessibility threatens the future vitality and viability of a retail location.*’

(CBI, 2009b, p. 11, emphasis added)

In direct contrast to the ‘efficient mobility’ coalition, the ‘sustainable mobility’ coalition consists of actors at the opposite end of the political spectrum who feel that the UK transport system, in its current guise, serves to entrench an inherently unfair and exploitative socio-economic order—degrading both the social and natural environment by catering for the indulgent wants of a wealthy, hyper-mobile minority. The costs of the transport status quo are disproportionately borne by the elderly, children, and those without access to private motor vehicles, while the benefits are reaped by multinational corporations in the automobile and energy industries. Uncurbed growth in private car travel is the major villain for this coalition, who point to its disbenefits at a range of spatial scales. Locally, the private car has forever decimated the fabric of urban life; car-induced urban sprawl has resulted in a bland, homogeneous built environment, and ever-present, speeding traffic has monopolised public space at the expense of alternative modes of transport, such as walking and cycling, which contribute to our physical and mental well-being. Globally, the transport sector is a major contributor of greenhouse gas emissions and thus, through anthropogenic climate change, directly harms both present and future generations worldwide. The task

for policy-makers is hence as a major one. They must act to internalise the social and environmental costs of car and air travel, strictly enforce concentrated land use planning, oversee radical investment in public transport, and reverse the long-term decline in active travel.

Nationally, key policy actors in the 'sustainable mobility' coalition include major environmental NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, together with the UK Green Party, and high-profile figures such as the columnist George Monbiot. At the local scale, numerous campaign groups are also active, especially those representing older people and the interests of pedestrians and cyclists. The following quotes from Tony Bosworth of Friends of the Earth and the UK Green Party's *Manifesto for a Sustainable Society*, neatly illustrate the stance of the 'sustainable mobility' coalition:

'The government's transport strategy is a shambles. Despite promising to cut traffic and get people on to public transport, little has been achieved...Motoring costs have fallen under Labour, while the cost of using buses and trains has risen. On top of this, it is building bigger roads that will eventually lead to more traffic and more congestion.'

(Bosworth, 2002, p. 1)

'[Our aims are for:] transport to be equitably accessible to all people irrespective of their age, wealth or disability, with local needs given priority over travelling greater distances; degradation of community life by inappropriate transport modes, especially excessive car use, to be reduced and reversed wherever possible; [and] where mobility is desired or needed, to satisfy this through sustainable modes of transport.'

(Green Party, 2009, p. 1)

Finally, attempting a degree of dialectic mediation between the 'efficient mobility' and the 'sustainable mobility' coalitions, those policy actors who subscribe to the 'balanced mobility' coalition recognise the complexity of contemporary transport problems and seek to reach a point of policy equilibrium. These actors argue that the transport policy debate ought not to be cast in terms of stark choices, but rather must acknowledge the genuine economic and social

benefits that contemporary transport systems can yield, while conceding that in their current form they generate significant environmental and social costs. In order to find a point of equilibrium between these aspects, policy-makers must thus strategically intervene in the transport system—implementing systematic, holistic and long-term packages of policy measures that serve to 'decouple' the link between economic growth and the demand for transport. However, if such interventions are poorly-designed with little foresight, they will be swallowed in the sheer complexity of the system, and genuine progress in transport policy will not be forthcoming. Measures that are typically favoured by the 'balanced mobility' coalition include: market-based pricing instruments, such as the London congestion charging scheme; technological instruments, such as the use of global positioning systems to maximise efficiency in the logistics sector; and measures designed to reduce the need to travel, such as mixed land use regulation and support for teleworking initiatives.

Judged in terms of substance, authentic membership of the 'balanced mobility' coalition is mainly limited to transport-related academics and a number of non-governmental organisations, such as the Campaign for Better Transport, the Commission for Integrated Transport and Sustrans. However, in rhetorical terms, a variety of other policy actors are affiliated, including the UK government and the European Commission. The following quotes from David Banister, director of the Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford, and Stephen Joseph, executive director of the Campaign for Better Transport exemplify the coalition's perspective. Note in particular how Joseph addresses the issue of 'decoupling':

'Within the framework of sustainable development, it is important to balance the positive role of transport in contributing to economic prosperity with negative factors relating to environmental, social and health implications. *There are no simple solutions to these conflicting factors.*'

(Banister, 2005, p. 11, emphasis added)

'We pulled together unions, businesses and civil society groups to argue that Heathrow should be improved, not expanded, and we conducted research

into alternatives, including rail upgrades and information technology, to show that *a twenty-first century economy wasn't dependent on people in metal boxes zooming through the sky.*’

(Joseph, 2010, p. 1, emphasis added)

4.2 Causal powers: heuristics and rhetoric

In this context, then, how can we come to understand the ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion in the UK transport policy subsystem? What function(s) does it perform in this networked polity, within and between competing advocacy coalitions? Just *why* is it used in the way that it is? Given the events we have discussed and highlighted in Chapter 3, and the preceding discussion of advocacy coalitions, I shall here argue that the notion of ‘best practice’, as encountered in the UK transport policy subsystem, can be considered as possessing five ‘trans-frame’ *causal powers* (Sayer, 1992). By virtue of these powers, and under specific conditions, the notion of ‘best practice’ is employed by policy actors, both within and between particular advocacy coalitions in the networked polity, in order to enhance their ability to realise certain policy objectives.

These causal powers may be broadly characterised as follows: (i) the power of *heuristic learning*; (ii) the power of *discourse manipulation*; (iii) the power of *egoistic promotion*; (iv) the power of *affiliative justification*; and (v) the power of *strategic articulation*. We shall now examine each power in turn, drawing on empirical material from Chapter 3 to contextualise our argument where appropriate. To facilitate this discussion, Table 4.1 summarises the presence of these five powers in the eight cases used in this research.

| Power Case | Heuristic learning | Discourse manipulation | Egoistic promotion | Affiliative justification | Strategic articulation |
|------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| A. Will | ✓ | | | | |
| B. Sam | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| C. Chris | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| D. Martha | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| E. Harry | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| F. Graham | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| G. Lisa | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| H. Keith | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |

Table 4.1 Actors' encounters with the causal powers

(i) *Heuristic learning*

Viewed as a networked polity, we have thus far seen that the UK transport policy subsystem is dominated by the presence of three antagonistic advocacy coalitions, each possessing a distinctive, normative identity predicated on their respective cognitive 'frames'. However, amongst this mêlée, decisions on transport policy clearly do not place in a vacuum. The polity consists of numerous policy actors performing an array of functionally-diverse roles at a range of spatial scales. For example, as we have seen in Chapter 3, Will (Case A) and Martha (Case D) are both *policy-makers*. Although their decisions are continually vetted and constrained by *elected politicians*, these actors nevertheless possess a certain degree of power and, through their actions, directly shape the course of active travel policy at the local and national scales. Sam (Case B), Chris (Case C), Harry (Case E) and Graham (Case F), on the other hand, are all *campaigners*. Regardless of which advocacy coalition they belong to, they are all united in their dissatisfaction with the status quo and seek to influence policy-makers and elected politicians in order to align the status quo with their frame-conditioned objectives. Finally, Lisa (Case G) and Keith (Case H) are *facilitators*. Unlike campaigners, they do not engage in direct dialogue with decision-makers or elected politicians on specific policy issues. Rather, they

seek to further the cause of a particular advocacy coalition through supportive, ancillary activities.

As 'an ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realise core policy beliefs' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 44), it is not difficult to recognise the central importance of *policy learning* in this context.²⁹ For policy-makers, campaigners and facilitators alike, policy learning can represent a highly cost-effective, pragmatic means of addressing the inherent uncertainties present in 'messy' policy domains. Indeed, for policy-makers, 'lesson-drawing' (Rose, 1991, 2005) or 'policy transfer' (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000) from spatially and/or temporally distinct political systems is often the most rational response when faced with a pressing policy problem with no obvious solution. For campaigners too, the acquisition of pertinent policy knowledge can prove vital in constructing a viable, coherent and compelling discourse around a policy problem, such as traffic congestion. Failure to achieve some threshold level of competence in this can have serious consequences, as more 'knowledgeable' coalitions wrest control of the policy debate and realign it in accordance with their objectives.

However, as previously discussed, messy policy problems are often international in scope and have a tendency to generate innumerable quantities of 'factual' information (Ney, 2009). As a result, policy actors seeking to acquire codified knowledge in relation to such problems are invariably confronted with an almost infinite array of case studies, reports, conferences, plans, proposals, datasets and other materials that may be of potential relevance.³⁰ Clearly, both 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1982) and resource constraints make formal evaluation of such materials a complete impossibility in most instances. Yet, equally as clearly, this in no way obviates the need for policy actors to learn and, on the basis of such learning, to act accordingly.

In this context, we can begin to appreciate why the term 'best practice' is drawn upon by policy actors involved in learning activities within the UK

²⁹ It should be noted, however, that this is one of several definitions of 'policy learning' and that the concept has been surrounded by considerable debate and conceptual ambiguity for several decades (see Bennett and Hewlett, 1992; Bulkeley, 2006).

³⁰ Indeed, simply entering the phrase "solving congestion" into the search engine Google yields upwards of 7,500 results (July 2010).

transport policy community. Simply put, actors are impelled to learn from other 'practices' and, reflecting their overriding desire to fulfil certain frame-conditioned objectives, have a predilection for learning from those that are 'best'. As we have demonstrated, 'practice' can here pertain to several conceptually distinct phenomena: policy interventions themselves (cf. Will, Sam, Martha, Harry, Graham, Lisa); policy interventions' design standards (cf. Sam, Chris, Graham); the process by which policy interventions come to be implemented (cf. Keith); or particular social actualities unrelated to policy (cf. Will). A *best* 'practice', therefore, is an instance of one of these phenomena that a policy actor deems to be superior, based on a tacit or explicit set of frame-conditioned criteria, irrespective of whether this framing influence is consciously acknowledged. For the majority of the research participants, such superiority is classed in 'relative' terms, whereas for Graham (Case F) we saw that it tends to be classed in 'absolute' terms.

However, while a concern for learning from 'best practices' may partly explain the prevalence of the term *per se*, the notion of 'best practice' simultaneously corresponds to a particular *learning approach*. In other words, 'best practice' is not simply a passive colloquialism; it appears deeply intertwined with the cognitive processes that condition the manner in which policy learning takes place. Specifically, the empirical evidence in Chapter 3 suggests that the 'best practice' notion may be considered to stand in a mutually constitutive relationship with a particular form of *heuristic* learning, providing policy actors with an informal, yet powerful, 'rule of thumb' or 'cognitive shortcut' (Weyland, 2005) for approaching and interpreting the sheer volume of information that may be of relevance to their policy learning activities (see also Page and Mark-Lawson, 2007). This emphasis on mutual constitution is important, for it reflects the fact that: (1) as such heuristics are biologically innate, they may predispose policy actors to a 'best practice' learning strategy; and (2) while such heuristics are innate, they may well themselves be triggered through an actor's conscious decision to adopt such a strategy.

Indeed, drawing on cognitive psychological theory, we can perhaps view the 'best practice' approach to policy learning as a loose variant of what Gigerenzer and Goldstein (1999) term the 'take the best' heuristic (TTB). As a so-called 'fast and frugal' heuristic—i.e. a 'simple rule in the mind's adaptive toolbox for

making decisions with realistic mental resources' (Todd and Gigerenzer, 2000, p. 727)—the TTB heuristic enables actors to rapidly decide between two or more alternatives on the basis of particular 'cues'. A commonly-cited example of this involves an individual attempting to estimate which one of two cities has the larger population. The individual has heard of both cities, yet has no direct knowledge of their respective populations. In employing the TTB heuristic, the individual first searches for a series of 'cues' that might indicate a larger population; for instance, whether the cities have international airports, a well-known university or a high-profile sports team. Second, these cues are tacitly sequenced in accordance with their perceived validity as proxy indicators; for instance: (1) airport, (2) sports team, (3) university. Finally, following this sequence, the individual attempts to differentiate between the two cities on the basis of the selected cues. As soon as a disparity is evident with respect to a cue (i.e. City A has an airport but City B does not), the individual makes a judgment in relation to the original question (i.e. perceives City A to have the larger population). If no disparity is evident in terms of the first cue (i.e. both cities have airports), the individual then repeats the process with regard to the second cue, and so on (Gigerenzer and Goldstein, 1999).

To illustrate how this may be of relevance to actors' policy learning experiences documented in Chapter 3, let us briefly concentrate on Will (Case A). As a local policy-maker, Will arguably adheres to the 'balanced mobility' doctrine, seeking to strategically implement a range of demand-management measures in order to sensitively meet the needs of the Marlsworth economy. This is an extraordinarily difficult and unenviable task, as such 'new realist' attempts at demand-management are particularly prone to failure (cf. Chapter 1). Moreover, Will's decisions are subject to continual scrutiny from other actors in the polity, many of whom have radically different, frame-based perspectives on the issues involved.³¹ In the face of such difficulties, we have seen that Will undertakes an informal process of 'lesson-drawing' (Rose, 1991) in order to identify a limited number of national and international examples of policy interventions that both (1) appear to have been successful in addressing similar

³¹ Indeed, even though Marlsworth's elected politicians ostensibly advocate a 'balanced mobility' approach to policy formulation, in realpolitik the 'efficient mobility' mindset prevails amongst the Conservative-controlled council (cf. Sam, Case B).

policy targets to his own, and (2) may be feasibly implemented in his own jurisdictional sphere. Yet, as we have also seen, in searching for such interventions, Will draws on a several sources, notably the internet and the experiences of consultants and his fellow practitioners—a method which undoubtedly uncovers myriad interventions that may be of relevance.

In this context, the TTB heuristic may explain how, without recourse to formal evaluation techniques, Will is able to cognitively process the respective merits of these countless alternative interventions and rapidly converge on those which appear to warrant further consideration and/or mobilisation. Based on the content of Will's interview, we can see that he tends to appraise potential policy interventions on the basis of certain core criteria relating to both successiveness and transferability: how *effective* they are likely to be in positively impacting key policy targets; how *compatible* they are likely to be with other measures; how *acceptable* they are likely to be with key stakeholders; and how *implementable* they are likely to be in relation to jurisdictional, legislative and environmental constraints. Following the example above, we can interpret such criteria as decision 'cues' used in the TTB heuristic and view Will's informal policy learning process as a manifestation of the TTB heuristic in action; i.e. alternative interventions are sequentially compared against the particular cues, and decisions are taken as soon a significant disparity becomes evident. Further, we can postulate that these cues, and the tacit order in which they are hierarchically arranged, are a function of both Will's 'balanced mobility' frame-based priorities—which in themselves are sensitive to those of other actors in the polity—and the nature of pertinent situational circumstances. For example, in periods of fiscal retrenchment, we can imagine a 'cost effectiveness' cue moving up the hierarchy and playing a greater role in determining which interventions come to be viewed as 'best practice'.³²

³² However, as Newell *et al.* (2003) note in their empirically-based critique of the TTB heuristic, this neat, theoretical model bears only a partial resemblance to the chaotic, disordered processes of everyday decision-making. In practice, actors are shown to be more deliberative than the heuristic would suggest, and less likely to discount alternatives on the basis of the first cue alone (cf. Harry, Case E; Keith, Case H).

(ii) Discourse manipulation

The second causal power bestowed by the notion of ‘best practice’ is fairly imperceptible, yet highly significant. Essentially, it concerns the manner in which policy actors—in defining certain ‘practices’ as ‘best’—can indirectly manipulate the meta-discourses surrounding a given policy problem, and thus change the very *nature* of the problem as it is perceived. For Bulkeley (2006), this can be interpreted through the theoretical lens of governmentality (see Foucault, [1979] 1991), whereby the notion of ‘best practice’ may be seen to represent a subtle governmental ‘technology of performance’, regulating the nature of debate within transport policy subsystem without resorting to formal instruments of authority (see also Higgins and Lockie, 2002).

Although a governmentality perspective is by no means restricted to a focus on the apparatus of the state, Harry’s (Case E) observation of Whitehall officials’ selection of ‘best practices’ is a telling instance of such regulation at work.

“So there are people looking for different things out of ‘best practice’ stuff, and why they want to push something forward as ‘best practice’. So in [Whitehall]...they would want to be looking for examples where they can be seen to be pushing things forward a bit, and pushing innovation, but not too radical[ly].”

(Harry, interview)

In this example, we can view the notion of ‘best practice’ as a means of establishing certain norms across the networked polity that correspond to a particular ‘political rationality’ (Bulkeley, 2006). Specifically, this political rationality appears as a bureaucratic, realpolitik permutation of the ‘balanced mobility’ perspective—seeking to temporarily placate the sustainable mobility coalition whilst delicately retreating from the logic of ‘efficient mobility.’

According to Vettoretto (2009, p. 1082), this technology of performance is particularly apparent in European spatial planning and policy-making, whereby the notion of ‘best practice’ corresponds to ‘a regulative instrument, which is expected to influence sense-making and cognitive frames through selection, translation and diffusion of success stories that are considered appropriate with regard to some general and universalistic principles.’ In publishing collections of

'best practices', therefore, European regulators seek to disseminate knowledge amongst a particular audience that prescribes an officially-sanctioned solution to a common problem. Linguistic codes thus act to strategically delineate the central tenets of a normative model, thereby defining which 'practices' are viewed as acceptable and which, by default, are not.

Interestingly, Vettoretto (2009) further notes that for those on the receiving end of such 'best practices', this may not necessarily be perceived as oppressive, restrictive or burdensome. On the contrary, the surety of pre-specified 'best practices' can be highly-valued in policy domains that are typically characterised by complexity and uncertainty. However, we can add here that in instances where actors' frames diverge significantly from the political rationality being advocated through 'best practices', this passivity can rapidly evaporate. In campaigning for the rights of pedestrians in Marlsworth, for example, Chris (Case C), is in constant dispute with the local authority over the issue of so-called 'footway parking', whereby motorists park their vehicles with two or more wheels on the pavement and obstruct the safe movement of wheelchair users, the elderly and parents with young children. The local authority's proposed solution, following 'best practice' guidance, was to *formalise* this custom by painting white lines on the pavement and stipulating that motorists must leave a minimum gap for pedestrians. For Chris, however, this was something of a travesty with the blame perceived to lie squarely with the overarching political rationality from which such 'best practice' was derived:

"They're not asking the question: 'what's the capacity of this street to contain stored motor vehicles?—'n' vehicles—therefore we'll devise a management system that prevents more than 'n' vehicles coming in here and preserves it at least partly as a space. The question that is being asked is 'how can we get as many vehicles in here as we can, almost regardless of the effect that has on other users of the space?...I see that as condoning *worst* practice because it's a limited perspective on a problem."

(Chris, interview, original emphasis)

Clearly, on the basis of limited evidence, it is difficult to judge the extent to which the 'best practice' notion is *consciously* employed as a means of discourse manipulation in the UK transport subsystem. For example, recall the Whitehall officials that appropriated the 'relative best practice' output from Cycle UK's

Learning Project and published it as normative guidance (Case F). Although this certainly shaped the tone of the discourse on UK active travel policy, it would almost certainly be disingenuous to characterise this as a deliberate attempt to nullify radical progress. Moreover, in her candid interview, Martha (Case D) gave the distinct impression that where the notion of best practice is used "tactically" in Whitehall, this is done for pragmatic reasons of resource constraint and face-saving rather than any conscious attempt to 'set the rules of the game'.

However, as the experiences of Graham (Case F), Sam (Case B) and Lisa (Case G) can attest, it is possible to characterise the notion of 'best practice' as a deliberately-deployed rhetorical device which actors calculatingly use to manipulate certain discourses. Here, 'best practices' function as key characters in 'stories'—articulating a particular narrative derived from political rationalities, or regulatory 'models' (Bulkeley, 2006; Vettoretto, 2009). What constitutes 'best' in such circumstances is thus defined through tacit or explicit frame-conditioned criteria and when such 'stories' are told by particularly powerful actors in the polity, other actors may, to varying degrees, become socialised into the norms of the corresponding advocacy coalition.

For Graham, this pertains to the 'absolute' conception of 'best practice', whereby 'best' is not a relative judgement on an existing practice, but rather a utopian vision for UK cycling. In articulating this 'absolute best practice' vision, Graham achieves two things. First, in an intra-frame sense, this vision functions as a pure 'political rationality', used to orchestrate organisational activities and anchor shared understandings within Cycle UK and its affiliates in the 'sustainable mobility' coalition (cf. Harry, Case E). Second, this political rationality is deliberately constituted as 'best' practice as a means of influencing the inter-frame discourses on particular cycling issues, such as whether cyclists ought to be accommodated on the carriageway or on segregated cycle paths. Through Cycle UK's campaigning activities, therefore, 'best practice' is rhetorically used to implicitly frame both problems *and* solutions, at once deployed to characterise existing practices as sub-optimal while simultaneously positing a favoured, frame-conditioned 'answer'.

However, for both Lisa and Sam, even the notion of 'relative best practice' can be strategically used to shape meta-discourses on active travel. Sam, it should be noted, very much adheres to the principles of the 'sustainable mobility'

coalition.³³ His local campaigning activities, therefore, are very much inter-frame in character. For as we have seen, his target audience is mainly comprised of 'balanced mobility' policy-makers such as Will (Case A), and local Conservative politicians who, despite their 'balanced mobility' platitudes are perceived by Sam to be staunch adherents to 'efficient mobility' logic. As we discussed in Chapter 3, Sam points to specific examples of cycling 'best practices' in Wallborough and Northern Europe in order to address what we might characterise as a perceived 'knowledge deficit' on the part of these supply-side actors. However, the *notion* of 'best practice' in this context corresponds to far more than a synonym for 'good examples'. Specifically, it is used rhetorically in order to enlighten the state of the discourse surrounding cycling in Marlsworth, drawn upon as a means of transcending provincial, narrow-minded debate:

"I think too often as a cycle campaigner you can be depicted as some sort of sandal-munching, lefty lunatic—and there are those to be sure—but it's easy to marginalise cycle campaigners. So when we can say that 'the DfT says this is best practice' it's kind of appealing to sort of established [trails off...]. It's to sort of say 'look, you think what we're asking for is crazy, but actually they've done it for 30 years in the Netherlands where they're all perfectly sane and car ownership is just as high as it is in the UK. And in Germany it's even higher, but people just chose not to drive all the time; they keep the Mercedes for the weekend or whatever. *So it's an appeal to a higher good or force, that's beyond the County Council and beyond their hierarchies and received wisdoms. It's almost like a grail; I think 'best practice' is referred to as a grail.*'"

(Sam, interview, emphasis added)

This process very much echoes Lisa's approach to developing Scenario 1 in the Futures Project. Given the nature of the project, the 'sustainable mobility' coalition needed little convincing that the integration of overseas 'best practice' into UK active travel policy was desirable, if not always practically feasible. The challenge for the Futures Project, rather, lay in its attempt to reach out to those policy actors, stakeholders and members of the public who aligned themselves

³³ Indeed, in its initial stages of development, the core members of Marlsworth Bicyclists were drawn from the ranks of Marlsworth's local Friends of the Earth campaign group.

with the 'efficient mobility' or 'balanced mobility' coalitions. As with Sam, the notion of 'best practice' in this endeavour was at once used to refer to 'good examples' of particular interventions, and also as a means of structuring the overarching approach to active travel policy in the UK. Hence, in peppering images of typical UK urban environments with overseas 'best practices' (cf. Figure 3.12), the overriding intention was not to recommend specific 'best practices' *per se*, but to "get people to think differently" about the role of walking and the potential roles they can play in sustainable urban transport systems.

(iii) Egoistic promotion

As well as affording the power of discourse manipulation, we can also point to the agency of the 'best practice' notion in terms of its power to facilitate what we may term 'egoistic promotion'. Simply put, this power manifests itself in situations where policy actors seek to promote their respective practices as 'best' as a means of attaining various forms of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984). Naturally, the desire to 'look good' is present in all walks of life, and prestige is generally viewed positively. Nevertheless, within the context of the networked polity, we can point to a few specific benefits that the 'best practice' marque can bestow upon policy actors.

Recall, for example, Harry's comments about the recently-opened Westfield Shopping Centre, whereby the developers effectively attempted to 'greenwash' the project through the strategic association of its attributes to a number of core values held by the 'sustainable mobility' coalition, such as 'community' (Case E). In this context, the *ambiguity* surrounding 'best practice' represents its core competency; the notion can be called upon in a range of distinct circumstances as a means of rapidly establishing useful credentials, in turn supporting actors' abilities to advertise particular 'practices' and to benefit accordingly.

Coincidentally, Keith (Case H) discussed this promotional, branding power of 'best practice' at great length, drawing on the re-development of Kensington High Street, London and its relationship to the Westfield Shopping Centre. Noting that no formal evaluation of the Kensington redevelopment had ever been

undertaken, coupled with the fact that wayfinding appeared to have become more difficult for pedestrians subsequent to the scheme, Keith became suspicious of the official, long-standing narrative that labelled the scheme as 'best practice' in relation to walkability. The first sense in which this narrative was disingenuous concerned the massive financial investment which had gone into the redevelopment, an amount that vastly overshadowed spending by other authorities on active travel (i.e. an unfair comparison). Secondly, however, upon investigating the motivations behind the redevelopment in more detail, Keith discovered that original impetus for its introduction was to minimise the loss of retail trade to the Westfield Shopping Centre. The notion of 'best practice' thus had nothing to do with the walkability of the redevelopment *per se*. Rather, it functioned as a form of place-marketing, strategically deployed as a 'badge of honour' to advertise the merits of Kensington High Street in the face of increased retail competition (see also Vettoretto, 2009). Indeed, one may argue that, in certain cases, such high-profile developments cannot afford *not* to be associated with one or more 'best practices.'

However, within the active travel policy community, where such capital-intensive projects are rare, perhaps the most significant benefits derived from this power of egoistic promotion relate to the allocation of public funds. In competing for scarce financial resources, particularly in the current era of fiscal retrenchment, certain policy actors are essentially obliged to present themselves and their achievements in as positive a light as possible. Arguably, this requirement is augmented through ostensibly meritocratic funding procedures that seek to 'back the best', such as the highly-selective Whitehall-funded demonstration projects discussed by Martha (Case D). In bidding for such funding, those local authority officials (e.g. Will, Case A) with a track-record of implementing effective policy interventions may enjoy a considerable reputational advantage over their peers, appearing as more trustworthy and reliable channels for investment, especially if those evaluating alternative proposals make use of 'fast and frugal' heuristics as discussed above. Moreover, the importance of having a close association to 'best practices' in this 'backing the best' environment can become greater still when one considers the significance of positive feedback. Assuming, not altogether unreasonably, that some form of positive causal relationship is likely to exist between funding

allocation and policy effectiveness, a lock-in situation may well result whereby those undertaking egoistic promotion enjoy protracted benefits over many years.

(iv) Affiliative justification

Somewhat related to the power of egoistic promotion, but nevertheless conceptually distinct, we can also see evidence of ‘best practices’ being cited by policy actors in defence of certain policy-related decisions. In acting as a legitimizing rationale for particular courses of action, the notion of ‘best practice’ thus affords the power of ‘affiliative justification’. More formally, while the notion’s power of ‘egoistic promotion’ is drawn upon in situations where actors seek to gain ‘symbolic capital’ themselves, the power of ‘affiliative justification’ is used to profit from the symbolic capital possessed by: (1) the notion of ‘best practice’ itself; and (2) the established ‘best practices’ of others.

In candidly admitting that the notion of ‘best practice’ is used “tactically”, we can see echoes of this first form of affiliative justification in the experiences of Martha (Case D). Martha made it very clear in her interview that she has a genuine desire to see active travel ‘best practices’ implemented throughout the entire UK and, in controlling national funds for active travel projects, she expressed her wish to be able to fund all local authorities handsomely. However, as only limited funds are available for dedicated walking and cycling interventions, this is not possible. In order to present this unfortunate situation in a positive light, therefore, those funds that are available came to be branded as a “best practice pot”. This affiliation with ‘best’ thus enables Martha to justify limited spending in terms of meritocratic principles, rather than publicly admitting to austere circumstances within Whitehall.

With regard to the second form of affiliative justification—profiting from the symbolic capital of established ‘best practices’—we can point to the experiences of Graham (Case F), Lisa (Case G) and Keith (Case H). In Graham’s case, where Cycle UK’s organisational usage of the ‘best practice’ notion somewhat backfired, it is this power of ‘affiliative justification’ that the local authority practitioners used to shield themselves from the critical voices in the Cycle UK volunteer base. In claiming to follow ‘best practice’ guidance in their

choice of cycling interventions, such actors can immediately absolve themselves of wrong-doing, even if the nature of the interventions are clearly less than optimal. In Lisa's case, this affiliative justification was again used in an inter-frame context, but in a more proactive, calculated sense. Here 'best practices' were used to legitimise the radical and 'visionary' nature of the Futures Project, by tethering it to some kind of 'reality', albeit a diffuse and unfamiliar one. In Keith's interview, however, we heard how affiliative justification is not only used to repel hostile criticism, but instead drawn upon as a means of reassuring other policy actors as to the merits of a particular strategy under conditions of great uncertainty. In other words, so the argument goes, if proposed 'practice A' has already proved effective elsewhere—becoming a 'best practice'—this ought to instil confidence in a strategy based on the same approach.

(v) Strategic articulation

The final causal power of the 'best practice' notion, as evident from the empirical material in Chapter 3, relates explicitly to its psycholinguistic function. Specifically, in affording the power of 'strategic articulation', 'best practice' is drawn upon by policy actors in their attempts to codify and communicate particular frame-based beliefs to other actors across the networked polity. We can trace two forms of such articulation, both of which were noted by Martha (Case D) and Harry (Case E). First, each of these actors argued that the positive, upbeat connotations of the 'best practice' notion can be harnessed in order to inspire and motivate other policy actors. Here, the affirmative tone of the notion was thought to be considerably more effective as a means of changing actors' behaviour than straightforward castigation.

The second form of strategic articulation, somewhat related to this, pertains to the rhetorical value of anecdotal 'practice' examples in both textual and verbal communication. Whether such 'practices' are additionally purported to be 'best' in this context seems inconsequential; rhetorically, the effect is the same. For Martha, incorporating or 'sprinkling' (Bulkeley, 2006) such examples into policy materials appears commonplace and deliberate, noting that "quite often, if you write guidance, you're on the lookout for case studies to make it a bit more

meaningful.” However, the most interesting account of such strategic articulation is provided by Harry and concerns the premeditated communicative approach that he and his team employed in their recent dealings with an incoming government minister. Here, anecdotal examples of “practical things” are of great strategic value:

“We have to think about—in our contact with people—how we approach them, so the meeting with X the other day, three of us went along to that and we discussed on the way there what we were going to say, which we’d worked out beforehand, *but also the way we said it and the approach that we had, and what interests him, what his personality is and how he decides things*. ...He’s not the opposition spokesperson and campaigner that he was; he is now the responsible minister. *So we now need to shape our approach to him based on that changing role*. He’s now sitting there in front of his officials and wants to look good as well, so we don’t want to kind of reinforce the image of him in his previous role. But he quite likes getting into the nitty-gritty of things, so he wants to *focus on the practical things* that are to be done rather than an overarching narrative.”

(Harry, interview, emphasis added)

4.3 A realist synthesis

In this final section, we shall briefly attempt to synthesise the preceding discussion and offer a tentative, formal explanation for the present ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion in the UK transport policy subsystem. In so doing, we shall return to the ontological and epistemological precepts of critical realism first discussed in Chapter 2 and interpret this ubiquity in terms of a series of ‘events’, accounted for by certain ‘transfactual conditions’. Importantly, as implied by the term *transfactual*, it is vital to maintain a distinction here between the domains of the empirical/actual and the domain of the real (Sayer, 1992). In other words, abstraction via transfactual argumentation entails that while we must draw upon actual events and cases to have any chance of creating meaningful theory, we cannot reduce our abstraction to an explanation of specific events in a given context *per se*; we are thus attempting realist *generalisation*.³⁴

³⁴ Indeed, to categorically explain specific instances would be ‘retrodiction’ (Bhaskar, 1975).

Our transfactual argumentation in this chapter has been guided by the following banal, yet vital, questions:

‘What does the existence of this object (in this form) presuppose? Can it exist on its own as such? If not, what else must be present? What is it *about* the object that makes it do such and such?’

(*ibid.*, p. 91, original emphasis)

Given the centrality of *natural necessity* to this process (cf. Chapter 2), we have thus been concerned with abstracting the internal and necessary relations that make up the ‘best practice’ notion’s *structure*. In other words, because the notion of ‘best practice’ is a social object—as its presence is wholly dependent upon actors’ usage of the term—its nature is inherently constituted through its internal, necessary relations to other social objects, and it is these relations which we have effectively attempted to identify, through a focus on the notion’s causal powers (*ibid.*; Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Smith, 2006). As Bhaskar (1989, p. 42, original emphasis) makes clear, ‘a relation R_{AB} may be defined as *internal* if and only if A would not be what it *essentially* is unless B is related to it in the way that it is.’ For example, we might abstract the structure of an aeroplane (Ap) in terms of its internal, necessary relations with its wings (R_{ApW}), engines (R_{ApE}) or flaps (R_{ApF}). If any of these relations are removed, the plane *will not be what it essentially is*: an object capable of controlled, self-propelled flight.

As we saw in Chapter 2, while influencing the course of events in the actual domain, structures themselves lie deeper. Through retroductive inference in this Chapter, we have thus worked backwards—attempting to arrive at the ‘best practice’ notion’s structure by way of its causal powers and associated *events* (cf. Chapter 3). Indeed, albeit subconsciously, this is what we have done in the simple aeroplane example above. The fact that it achieved controlled, self-propelled flight (event) is understood in terms of lift, thrust and manoeuvrability (causal powers), and from this understanding we thus determined the necessary, internal relations comprising its structure.

Recognising the five causal powers in Section 4.2, therefore, we can here argue that the structure of the ‘best practice’ notion is comprised of two internal, necessary relations to other social ‘objects’, without which the notion *would not*

be what it essentially is. First, the power of *heuristic learning* reveals that ‘best practice’ is necessarily related to a particular form of cognitive heuristic, seemingly a variant of the ‘take the best’ heuristic identified by Gigerenzer and Goldstein (1999). Second, the powers of *discourse manipulation, egoistic promotion, affiliative justification* and *strategic articulation* reveal that ‘best practice’ is also necessarily related to a form of ‘rhetorical device’, capable of being allied to various political rationalities and governmental technologies (Bulkeley, 2006). To varying degrees, both of these relations may be considered as ‘symmetrical’ (Danermark *et al.*, 2002), insofar as the notion of ‘best practice’ derives its true nature from the two objects and, through mutual constitution, these objects in turn partly derive elements of their true nature from the notion of ‘best practice.’

Crucially, however, while this structure of the ‘best practice’ notion and its attendant causal powers are internally and necessarily related, the relationship between particular *generative mechanisms*—those processes by which such powers come to be exercised—and actual events is external and contingent, due to the fact that social systems are ‘open’ (*ibid.*; Bhaskar, 1975; Collier, 1994). It is thus vital to recognise that the causal powers bestowed by the notion of ‘best practice’ are *latent*, existing irrespective of whether they are exercised. Indeed, even when exercised, they are by no means guaranteed to manifest themselves in specific events as they will be inevitably conditioned by myriad concurrent mechanisms (Figure 4.1).³⁵

³⁵ In Figure 4.1, we can see Sayer’s (1992) concern for an object’s *liabilities* as well as its causal powers (e.g. an aeroplane’s inherent susceptibility to the force of gravity). As this chapter has focussed on explaining the *ubiquity* of ‘best practice’, the liabilities of the notion have not been addressed. However, in Chapter 5, these will be implicitly discussed in relation to the notion’s limitations and broader implications.

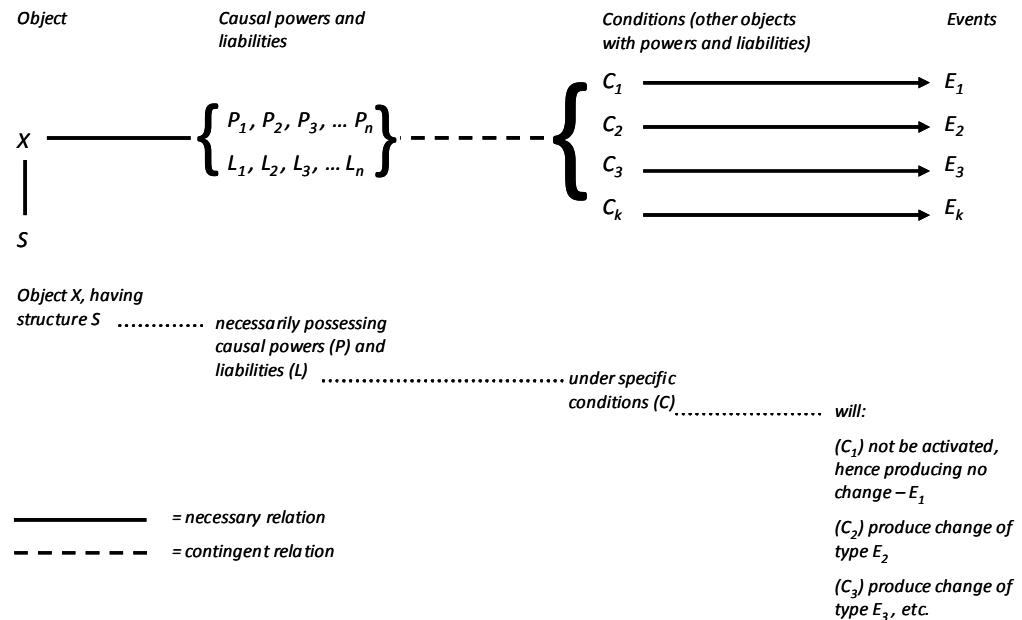


Figure 4.1 The structures of causal explanation

Source: Sayer (1992, p. 109)

Theoretically-speaking, we can understand the fact of a mechanism generating a particular event in terms of an 'efficient cause' (Collier, 1994) triggering one or more causal powers. In the context of intra-coalitional and inter-coalitional activities in the networked polity, we can point to several situational contingencies that function as 'efficient causes', thereby prompting policy actors to make use of the 'best practice' notion. These may include: demands for practically-relevant policy knowledge; dissatisfaction with problem conception or interpretation; demands for the acquisition and exhibition of 'symbolic capital'; demands for prospective or retrospective justification of actions; and demands for effective and efficient trans-frame communication.

Conclusions

Drawing heavily upon the empirical material set out in Chapter 3, this chapter has sought to offer a tentative explanation for the present ubiquity of the 'best practice' notion in the UK transport policy community. First, it has attempted to demonstrate that contemporary policy-making is not a rational, linear, value-free exercise in technical planning, but rather a complex and antagonistic process characterised by the presence of several competition, frame-orientated 'advocacy coalitions' existing across an institutionally-fragmented 'networked polity'.

Three such advocacy coalitions were argued to be particularly prevalent in the UK transport policy subsystem: the 'efficient mobility' coalition, the 'sustainable mobility' coalition and the 'balanced mobility' coalition. Second, within this institutional context, the notion of 'best practice' was argued to possess five 'causal powers' which, by virtue of their nature, are drawn upon by a range of policy actors in a diverse set of situational circumstances in order to realise particular policy objectives. Here, insights derived from primary research were supplemented with relevant contributions from secondary literature. Finally, the theoretical discussion was formally expressed in terms of the critical realist approach outlined in Chapter 2. Next, in Chapter 5, we shall assess the broader, long-term implications of 'best practice' thinking in the UK transport policy community.

Chapter 5

Balancing 'best practice': contextual implications

“Shrewdness is a limitation on the mind. Shrewdness tells you what you must not do because it would not be shrewd.”

—Samuel Hamilton

(from John Steinbeck's 'East of Eden')

‘Phronesis thus concerns the analysis of values—‘things that are good or bad for man’...Phronesis is that intellectual activity most related to praxis...aimed at social commentary and social action. The point of departure for classical phronetic research can be summarised in the following three value-rational questions: (1) Where are we going? (2) Is this desirable? (3) What should be done?’

—Bent Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 57)

In his influential text *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg (2001) draws heavily on the Aristotelian concept of ‘phronesis’, making a powerful case for a rejuvenated social science grounded upon a reflexive concern for value-rationality. This action-orientated, pragmatic intellectual virtue, Flyvbjerg argues, is not only qualitatively distinct from that of ‘techne’—technical knowledge predicated on instrumental rationality—and ‘episteme’—scientific knowledge predicated on analytical rationality—but, through engagement with social and political praxis, it can *redeem* the project of social science in ways that these other virtues cannot.

In describing and explaining the notion of 'best practice' as it is encountered in the UK transport policy subsystem, Chapters 3 and 4 have thus far sought to produce 'epistemic' knowledge, as have the existing contributors to the 'actor critique' (see Bulkeley, 2006; Vettoretto, 2009). Several of the contributions to the 'pragmatic critique' discussed in Chapter 1 are also 'epistemic' in approach (e.g. Stead, 2009). However, this latter critique is also grounded in instrumental-rationality, generating 'technical', goal-orientated knowledge concerning *how* practices can be successfully transposed between institutional milieu (e.g. Gudmundsson *et al.*, 2005; de Jong, 2007). Given the growing productivity of both critiques, it may be argued that scholars of the 'best practice' notion have made collective headway in addressing the first of the three questions posed in Flyvbjerg's epigraph, albeit in a value-free sense.

Conspicuously absent in this literature, however, are any *bona fide* attempts to address Flyvbjerg's second or third questions. To be sure, following instrumental-rationality, those in the 'pragmatic' critique have necessarily viewed naïve attempts at 'best practice' transfer as 'undesirable'. Moreover, such authors appear to have produced technical knowledge as an implicit response to the question of 'what should be done about this?' Yet, for all the benefits yielded by this approach—and indeed there are many—this critical focus fails to take any value-rational stance in relation to the notion of 'best practice' *per se*. The assumption that 'best practice' represents a valuable means of orchestrating policy learning processes goes completely unchallenged, with normative judgements made solely in relation to how this process may be instrumentally facilitated. While this may perhaps be understandable, if not altogether excusable, within the context of the 'pragmatic critique', the omission of genuine phronetic argument in the 'actor critique' is more disconcerting. Indeed, while certain authors have produced impressive theoretical accounts of the 'best practice' notion and its variegated, power-laden appropriation, they appear extraordinarily reticent to engage with the disarmingly simple question: 'so what?' As a result, conclusions are drawn solely on the basis of analytic-rationality and neglect to address the glaring implications of 'best practice' for political praxis.

Hence, while Chapter 6 will offer some overarching conclusions to this thesis as a whole, it is here in Chapter 5 where our *intellectual conclusions* are to

be drawn (cf. Objective C). Heeding Flyvbjerg's call for phronetic social science, the strands of argument developed in preceding chapters will be woven together and developed through the three questions posed in the epigraph. First, we shall examine where the notion of 'best practice' appears to be taking us in relation to UK transport policy. Second, we shall explore the value-rational and instrumentally-rational implications of this trajectory. Finally, we shall make a very brief plea for a more balanced approach to policy learning in relation to transport policy.

5.1 Where are we going?

The notion of 'best practice' appears endemic in the UK transport policy community, liberally used by a diverse set of policy actors in an equally diverse range of policy-orientated activities. The core of this thesis, reflected in Objectives (A) and (B), has been devoted to understanding and interpreting this phenomenon. First, we comprehensively traced the manner in which the notion of 'best practice' is encountered within a closely-knit subgroup of policy actors specialising in active travel. Second, we explained the nature of such encounters through a detailed examination of contemporary policy processes and the notion's inherent causal powers. Four of these causal powers—discourse manipulation, egoistic promotion, affiliative justification and strategic articulation—were argued to derive from the 'best practice' notion's role as a 'rhetorical device'; and the fifth—heuristic learning—was argued to stem from the notion's function as a variant of the 'take the best' cognitive heuristic (Gigerenzer and Goldstein, 1999).

The fact that the 'best practice' notion appears to stem from this multifaceted structure poses a challenge at this point, as a truly comprehensive phronetic critique would have to recognise and respond, in kind, to the full complexity of the picture outlined in Chapter 4. This would be a vast undertaking, and although this certainly does not fall outside of the intellectual remit of this thesis, it perhaps lies somewhat outside of its practical scope. In light of this, this chapter attempts the less ambitious goal of directing a phronetic

line of enquiry exclusively at the power/structure relation of 'heuristic learning'. In its totality, this attempt may well appear rather naïve—not least because it largely disengages itself from questions of *context*. However, deferring such engagement does not necessarily preclude critical reflection. Indeed, it is perhaps reasonable to make a distinction here between reflections on the merits of 'best practice' heuristic learning *per se* (cf. Section 5.2) and reflections on the extent to which it *ought* to be employed (cf. Section 5.3). The latter is certainly a more naïve endeavour—given the arguments put forth in Chapter 4. Yet, for all the structural underpinnings of the 'best practice' notion, it must be recognised that there is still room for agency in policy learning. While rhetoric and egoistic promotion necessarily abound, there are those actors who, quite simply, feel that learning from 'best practices' is an instrumentally-rational approach to policy formulation, the benefits of which are self-evident (cf. Will, Case A). It is to such actors that this chapter is implicitly addressed.

With regard to the 'best practice' approach to heuristic learning, the empirical and theoretical material presented in the preceding chapters suggests that we can approach Flyvbjerg's (2001) first question—'where are we going?'—in terms of three 'focal variables', which we may respectively term: (X) 'practice'; (Y) 'performance'; and (Z) 'perspective'. By 'focal', we essentially mean that these variables correspond to that which actors may *concentrate on* in the course of policy learning. The 'practice' variable (X), as its name suggests, essentially corresponds to the *object of learning*; that which is taken to constitute 'practice' in a given learning endeavour. As noted in Chapter 4, our eight cases reveal four discrete forms of practice that have acted as the foci for instances of 'best practice' policy learning: policy interventions *per se*; policy interventions' design standards; social actualities indirectly related to policy; and the process by which interventions are implemented. The 'performance' variable (Y), relates to the *perceived quality* of such practices. Although a clearly continuous variable, actors tend to speak here of practices that are perceived as 'best', 'good' and 'worst' in relation to certain core criteria, such as effectiveness or transferability. Finally, the 'perspective' variable (Z) refers to the *judgemental perspective* against which practices' performances are determined. We can point to two discrete forms here: 'relative' judgements, where practices are appraised

against one another; and 'absolute' judgements, where practices are appraised against some preconceived 'utopian vision' (Table 5.1).

| Focal Variable | Associated forms | Form description |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--|
| <i>X. Practice</i> | (Discrete) | |
| | Intervention | Policy interventions <i>per se</i> |
| | Design | Policy interventions' design standards |
| | Actuality | Social actualities indirectly related to policy |
| | Process | Process by which interventions are implemented |
| <i>Y. Performance</i> | (Continuous) | |
| | Best | Practice superior to all others |
| | Good | Practice compares favourably to others |
| | Worst | Practice inferior to all others |
| <i>Z. Perspective</i> | (Discrete) | |
| | Relative | Performance judged against that of other practices |
| | Absolute | Performance judged against utopian vision |

Table 5.1 Focal variables and associated forms

Within this conceptual framework, it is clear from the empirical evidence in Chapter 3 that policy actors undertaking 'best practice' learning have a tendency to concentrate their efforts on particular forms of each focal variable. In answer to Flyvbjerg's first question, therefore, 'best practice' heuristic learning efforts appear to be 'going' in three particular directions.

X. Practice

With regard to the 'practice' variable (X), we can see a strong degree of convergence upon *policy interventions* and their associated design standards as the *object* of learning. Indeed, while Harry (Case E) and Keith (Case H) stressed the importance of examining the implementation processes underpinning such interventions, and Will (Case A) strongly implied that particular social actualities

can also be learnt from³⁶, the majority of the participants strongly viewed policy interventions themselves to be the natural foci for policy learning. Drawing on what we have seen in previous chapters, we can point to two major reasons as to why this may be the case. First, and most evident, it is policy interventions which tend to correspond to the ultimate '*end product*' that many policy actors undertaking learning activities must themselves produce. For example, when faced with the daunting prospect of developing demand-management interventions for Marlsworth—Collier's (1994) 'efficient cause'—Will (Case A) immediately looked to draw lessons from a range of other national and international interventions that had been developed for a similar purpose. We might draw an artisanal analogy here, where, tasked with producing skilfully-fashioned articles for the first time, a novice apprentice first observes a master at work, attempting to decipher those actions and techniques which lead to high-quality outcome. Similarly, in their respective roles within the networked polity, Sam (Case B), Martha (Case D), Harry (Case E), Graham (Case F) and Lisa (Case G) all seek to *disseminate* knowledge of effective interventions as a means of achieving their frame-based objectives; hence, in their learning activities, they correspondingly focus upon interventions.

Second, in centring policy learning activities on interventions, actors can benefit from such interventions' *tangibility*. Unlike the immateriality of their associated implementation processes, interventions themselves tend to be somewhat perceptible, possessing definitive spatial and temporal identities. As we saw with the study tour to Wallborough organised by Sam (Case B), for example, actors are often able to visit the site of interventions and witness first-hand how they function. Moreover, given the rapid developments in global telecommunications that have taken place in recent years and the decreasing cost of long-distance travel, the virtual and physical tangibility of such interventions appears to be steadily increasing (see also Rose, 1991).

³⁶ In his interview, Will argued that the Danish cycling *culture* is a 'best practice':

"One thing that you certainly can bring in from places like Copenhagen is that sort of chic culture [where cycling] is a trendy and stylish thing to do; you don't have to go out with your high-visibility jacket or cycle helmet... the Copenhageners look good doing it and it's part of their style and their fashion and I think it's 'best practice' that we could bring in."

Y. Performance

In relation to the 'performance' variable (Y), actors unsurprisingly demonstrate a predilection for learning from practices that are somehow perceived as 'best'. In terms of a 'relative' judgement, '*best* practices' are learnt from for several easily-appreciable reasons. First, often acting with constrained resources, policy actors undertaking learning activities have a limited capacity to search for, identify and evaluate the numerous 'practices' that may be of relevance to them (cf. Chapter 4); focussing on those that are 'best' is thus perceived to represent a means of maximising the '*return on investment*' from learning activities.

Second, by virtue of their characterisation as 'best', such practices are seen to be *proven approaches* for making a positive contribution towards a shared policy objective. In other words, 'best' corresponds to the very quality that actors are themselves attempting to attain and/or disseminate in the course of their policy activities. For example, 'best practices' for Will (Case A) were argued to be practices that had demonstrated a superior degree of effectiveness in improving the quality of active travel. Related to this, 'best' practices can thirdly be perceived as '*instructional guidance*' or as a 'recipe' for success (cf. Lisa, Case G). Following such 'guidance' is often perceived as advantageous, as free-riding on the back of existing policy research and investment can avoid expensive and risk-prone attempts to 're-invent the wheel'.

Z. Perspective

Finally, in relation to the 'perspective' variable (Z), we can see that almost without exception, actors undertaking policy learning activities judge the merits of a given practice through a *relative*, rather than absolute, perspective. Again, like the overriding emphases on 'interventions' and 'best', this concern for 'relative' judgement is unsurprising. Specifically, we can point to two reasons for this. First, it may simply be the case that policy actors have no coherent 'utopian vision' against which the merits of particular practices might be judged. For example, although Graham (Case F) has a very strong sense of such a vision for UK cycling, Martha (Case D) and her Whitehall colleagues do not:

"I don't think 'best practice' is often used in that idealistic sense in a Whitehall department. It's used usually more pragmatically, so actually looking at something that has happened on the ground...Of course, the Futures Project looks a lot further ahead than Whitehall departments traditionally look...*our ideas are not quite so clearly crystallised as to 'what might the world look like if you got to such and such a cycling number', and we haven't had targets for increasing cycling for quite a long time now.*"

(Martha, interview, emphasis added)

Second, it may alternatively be argued that practices are judged through a relative perspective simply by virtue of the fact that this approach corresponds most pertinently to the perceived project of policy learning *per se*. In other words, although actors may well possess an ultimate vision for the nature of the UK transport system,³⁷ they may not consider this to be of immediate concern when undertaking policy learning activities. Specifically, it may be argued that such visions are *already acknowledged* in such activities, inherently reflected in given policy objectives. Learning, as 'the action of receiving instruction or acquiring knowledge' (OED, 1989, np.), is thus concerned with determining those 'relative best practices' that are considered to represent the most effective means of improving an actor's ability to realise such objectives through the procurement of concrete information. We can see echoes here of the sister notion of 'best practice', termed 'benchmarking', which, in the context of business management, can be defined as 'a process in which a business evaluates its own operations (often specific procedures) by detailed comparison with those of another business (esp. a competitor), in order to establish best practice and improve performance; the examination and emulation of other organizations' strengths' (OED, 1989, np.).

As a means of concluding and contextualising this first section, Figure 5.1 graphically represents the focal variables of 'practice', 'performance' and 'perspective' as the X, Y and Z axes of a three dimensional 'focal matrix'. In relation to each variable, the eight cases introduced in Chapter 3 are represented in this matrix as Euclidian points; placed in accordance with a rough

³⁷ Indeed, when shared, such visions represent the grounding loci for the development and coherence of advocacy coalitions (cf. Chapter 4; Sabatier, 2007).

approximation as to their respective learning foci.³⁸ Their exact positioning is, of course, highly questionable and should not be taken as overly significant.

Nevertheless, there is enough validity present in data behind the figure to illustrate the fact that the participants' principle learning foci tend to coalesce around the 'relative/best/intervention' (RBI) vertex.

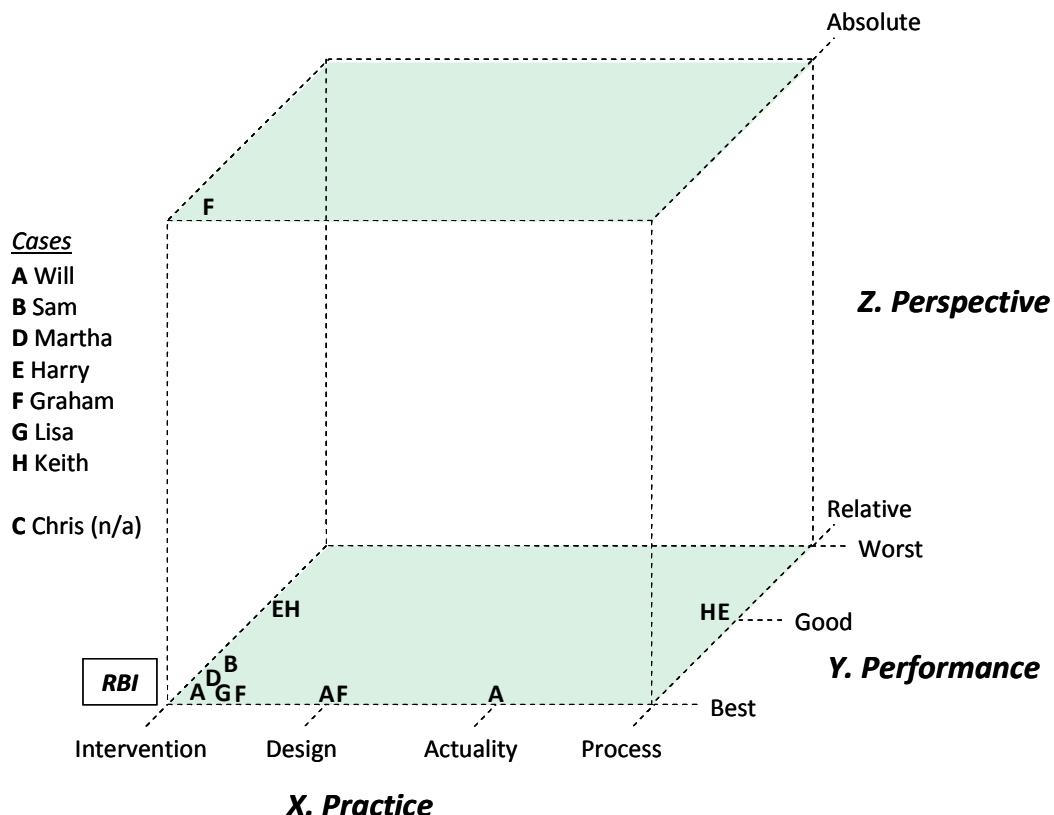


Figure 5.1 Participants' learning foci

5.2 Is this desirable?

As we have seen from the preceding section, and as evidenced by the empirical material contained in previous chapters, 'best practice' heuristic learning has a tendency to focus the attention of policy actors towards particular policy *interventions* that are perceived to represent the *relative best*, within certain

³⁸ This approximate placement may be considered as the answer to the hypothetical question: 'when you engage with best practice-led learning, what specifically do you focus on?' Hence, given his distaste for the notion, Chris is not present in Figure 5.1. In addition, Will, Keith, Harry and Graham are all represented more than once as they appear to focus on more than one form for one or more variables.

spatial and temporal parameters. Taking the saliency of this 'RBI focus' as our point of departure, we are thus now in a position to 'evaluate the extent to which the notion of 'best practice' represents a desirable organising principle for policy learning processes' (cf. Chapter 1; Research aim). Given Flyvbjerg's (2001) phraseology, however, it is first necessary to briefly reflect upon what we might understand by the term 'desirable.' There are, of course, numerous philosophical, moral, psychological and sociological avenues that could be explored here. However, for the purposes of our argument, we shall concentrate on a straightforward, two-fold conception of desirability. Specifically, in evaluating 'best practice' heuristic learning, we shall attempt to interweave a normative, value-rational aspiration for a fairer, more sustainable UK mobility paradigm, with a utilitarian, instrumentally-rational concern for effective and efficient policy-making.

At this juncture, it is perhaps good academic protocol to 'declare one's hand'. This is not because of the wildly misplaced, but nonetheless prevalent belief that 'subjective opinion' must be extricated from 'objective research' (cf. Chapter 2). Rather this simply reflects the need for transparency and clarity of argument in what follows. Specifically, in passing judgement on 'best practice' heuristic learning, I am clearly not, nor do I claim to be, an impartial, frame-neutral observer of events in the networked polity, attempting what Haraway (1988) famously terms the 'god-trick'. On the contrary, and as implied above, I write here from a position that is at once ideologically sympathetic to profound social and environmental justice, while politically sympathetic to pragmatic and democratic modes of governance. Clearly, although both of these sympathies are necessarily situated and doubtless would prove disagreeable to many, the latter is less immediately divisive. As a result, while the overarching sentiment in the following critique of 'best practice' heuristic learning is founded upon a genuine, value-rational aspiration for significant paradigm shift in the UK transport system, the attendant instrumentally-rational concern for the means by which such a shift may occur possesses a degree of 'trans-frame' currency. In other words, regardless of ideological persuasion or advocacy coalition affiliation, one may still appreciate the extent to which 'best practice' heuristic learning impacts upon the viability of decision-making in the UK transport policy subsystem *per se*.

Before addressing the desirability of 'best practice' heuristic learning in relation to each of the three focal variables identified in the previous section, it first must be stressed that the observed RBI focus is not, in itself, *undesirable*. Indeed, assuming that knowledge produced in relation to this focus is somehow 'warranted', it certainly represents a positive contribution to informed, evidence-based policy development. Rather than a direct assault on 'best practice' heuristic learning, therefore, the following critique instead aims to highlight some of the *opportunity costs* of the present RBI focus. Specifically, these opportunity costs may be considered to stem from actors' respective concentrations on: (1) policy interventions rather than associated policy processes; (2) 'best' practices rather than 'good' or 'worst' practices; and (3) 'relative' rather than 'absolute' judgements.

X. Practice

As we have seen, 'best practice' heuristic learning appears to have a tendency to focus policy actors' attention upon *policy interventions* themselves. Although it must once again be stressed that this is by no means inherently objectionable, we shall argue here that such an intervention-centric focus may inadvertently preclude important *procedural concerns* from actors' analyses. First, we can point to the apparent omission of learning efforts that genuinely address what may be termed '*ex-post causation*', relating to the extent to which identified interventions are causally responsible for identified 'outcomes'. Second, and as highlighted by Harry (Case E) and Keith (Case H), we can similarly point to the apparent omission of learning efforts that genuinely address what may be termed '*ex-ante causation*', which corresponds to the manner by which particular interventions come to be implemented.

In terms of *ex-post causation*, we can essentially posit that the intervention-centric focus of current learning approaches acts to crudely caricature the causal mechanisms that link policy interventions to their outcomes. As in Chapter 4, a useful perspective on this issue is provided through the lens of cognitive heuristics. In particular, there are two well-known decision-making heuristics

identified by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) that together illustrate the limitations of oversimplified, intervention-centric 'best practice' heuristic learning: the 'availability heuristic' and the 'representativeness heuristic'. Generally, we can understand the availability heuristic as a cognitive process that 'makes people pay disproportionate, excessive attention to especially proximate, vivid, striking, and memorable events' (Weyland, 2005, p. 23). Recalling participants' encounters with the 'best practice' notion in Chapter 3, we can point to several instances in which an intervention-centric and/or '*outcome*-centric' focus belies the usage of the availability heuristic, giving cognitive prominence to particular practices or social actualities.

For example, recall that during the Futures Project, Lisa (Case G) drew heavily upon her personal cycling history as a source of knowledge, focussing her attention upon several 'vivid, striking and memorable' (*ibid.*) interventions that she had experienced as a cyclist in Sweden, the Netherlands and the United States.³⁹ In addition, Lisa also focussed her literature review on certain geographical areas with 'striking' rates of walking and/or cycling, such as Freiburg, Germany. Sam (Case B) similarly appears to exhibit use of the availability heuristic in his campaigning activities, tending to view 'best' practices as desirable interventions that are prominent elsewhere yet strikingly absent in Marlsworth, such as highly-publicised cycling 'best practices' in Northern Europe. Indeed, the fact that Wallborough County Council employs a dedicated cycling officer—unlike Marlsworth County Council—appeared to characterise this measure as 'best practice' by default, irrespective of any formal evaluation as to its specific benefits. As in Lisa's case, the fact that Wallborough has a higher cycling modal split than Marlsworth was clearly a central factor in Sam's decision to organise the study tour for his local practitioners and politicians. Recall also that fellow practitioners from across the UK contacted Will and his team at Marlsworth County Council for active travel policy advice simply on the basis that, nationally-speaking, Marlsworth has a relatively high cycling modal share (Case A).

³⁹ Indeed, given the power of cycling's 'affective dimension' (Spinney, 2006), it is not altogether surprising that such personal experiences would feature prominently through the availability heuristic.

While the availability heuristic initially concentrates actors' attention upon such prominent policy interventions or high active travel modal shares, however, it is through the representativeness heuristic that actors make rapid inferences, rightly or wrongly, as to the causal relationships *between* policy interventions and perceived outcomes. As Tversky and Kahneman (1974, p. 585) note, two recurrent questions for individuals engaged in such knowledge-intensive tasks tend to be: 'what is the probability that event A originates from process B?' And 'what is the probability that process B will generate event A?' In approaching such questions, they argue that individuals often employ the representativeness heuristic in order to estimate such probabilities in accordance with the degree to which A is perceived to be representative of B or *vice versa*. In essence, this approach to problem solving can be considered as an informal method of inductive generalisation, moving swiftly from a premise to conclusion on the basis of limited data and without recourse to formal statistical analysis (cf. Chapter 2). It may be this representativeness heuristic, therefore, that partly explains why actors such as Sam (Case B) and Lisa (Case G) tend to posit a causal connection between the effectiveness of particular policy interventions and a geographically coterminous modal share. In other words, they tacitly reason that a high active travel modal share is representative of the influence of certain policy interventions and, *vice versa*, that prominent policy interventions are likely to result in a high active travel modal share.

However, while the availability and representativeness heuristics are biologically innate and often highly valuable, they clearly fall short of affording the comprehensive understanding of *ex-post* causation that is required if policy learning is to be a truly holistic endeavour. As a result, they thus offer a decidedly limited foundation upon which to base conclusions about interventions' true effectiveness.⁴⁰ The interpretation of statistical data is particularly salient in this regard, as noted by Will (Case A). To paraphrase his argument in terms of our theoretical understanding thus far, Will stated that particular policy interventions will sometimes gain recognition as a result of a widely-advertised headline statistic related to large increases in active travel.

⁴⁰ Indeed, in postulating causal relationships solely on the basis of co-presence between interventions and modal share, policy actors may be guilty of viewing causality in shallow, Humean terms (cf. Chapter 2).

Promulgated by local authority officials keen to derive symbolic capital from being associated with a 'best practice' (i.e. egoistic promotion; cf. Chapter 4), these statistics are invariably presented in percentage terms and rarely accompanied in the first instance by absolute figures. As a result, local authorities may justifiably claim to have encouraged a 50% increase in cycling, without the necessary caveat that this is an increase upon an exceedingly low base rate. The dangers of the RBI focus to policy learning in this environment are clear. The headline figure is striking and thus accorded particular significance through the availability heuristic, while the representativeness heuristic is liable to draw inappropriate conclusions as to the effectiveness of the interventions involved.

Even in instances where *ex-post* causation has been fully investigated, however, and the effectiveness of an intervention categorically established, an intervention-centric focus may also preclude due consideration of *ex-ante* causation. In other words, it may not pay heed to *how the intervention came to be*. If policy learning and lesson-drawing are to be fruitful and meaningful exercises, they cannot be restricted to simply attaining knowledge of policies' effectiveness; efforts must be made to contextualise interventions in terms of their antecedent causes. What political processes were at work? What barriers were identified and overcome? How was the intervention funded? Getting answers to such questions is vitally important if policy actors are to genuinely learn meaningful lessons about policy change.

To draw on a subtle grammatical distinction, it may be argued that intervention-centric learning is liable to concentrate solely upon 'practices' (noun) rather than 'practises' (verb), whereby 'to practise' is to 'work at or perform one's business or occupation; to exercise the skills of one's trade or profession' (OED, 1989, np.). In this sense, then, 'practise' pertains to the deliberate and calculated actions of policy actors involved in realising a particular intervention. Currently, it would appear from the RBI focus that the majority of 'best practice' heuristic learning efforts are directed at policy interventions and only subsequently, if at all, is attention paid to questions of 'practise'. In failing to adequately consider *ex-ante* causation as an object of learning in its own right, however, well-meaning policy actors again risk making crude, erroneous assumptions on the basis of the representativeness heuristic;

assuming, for example, that 'best practices' and 'best practises' are spatially correlated. The city of Marlsworth, for example, has one of the highest rates of cycling in the United Kingdom, yet Sam (Case B) would argue that this is *despite* rather than because of associated 'practises'.

Too great a focus on 'practise' and controlled, deliberate acts, however, in itself risks obscuring the saliency of contingency, luck and external influences upon the materialisation of particular interventions. For example, while contemporary transport planners in the Netherlands are undoubtedly highly-accomplished professionals, the 'practice' we witness on the streets of Amsterdam and Utrecht remains a function of both intended and unintended interventions throughout history. In the 1970s, for example, the bicycle was appropriated by far-left, anti-capitalist movements as an icon of environmentally-friendly living and Dutch road safety groups such as Stop de Kindermoord had extremely strong political influence (Voerknecht, 2009). It must be recognised, therefore, that policy interventions are by no means the sole vehicle through which behavioural change occurs; the influence of institutional arrangements may be equally, if not more, significant (Rietveld and Daniel, 2004). Intervention-centric 'best practice' heuristic learning approaches, it would appear, thus undermine the importance and appreciation of this fact. They tacitly purport the image of a context-free world in which causal mechanisms are 'blackboxed' (Latour, 1999); becoming linear, dominant and deproblematised (Bulkeley, 2006). In reality, the relationship between policy and other institutional arrangements is complex and iterative; policy can influence settled habits of thought and behaviour, yet this can only proceed in an institutional environment which is amenable to change.

Y. Performance

As we have discussed, focussing upon 'best' practices in the course of policy learning is a natural tendency for policy actors. 'Best' practices are perceived to be proven approaches for realising effective outcomes and, like a self-help book, act as a guidance manual to those seeking to attain similar outcomes. To a large degree the existing literature on 'best practice' and the empirical material set out

in Chapter 3, illustrates that the terms 'best' and 'good' are often treated as interchangeable (see Bulkeley, 2006). Where qualitative distinctions are made, this tends to be in the context of the pragmatic critique, where authors deliberately refer to 'best practices' in order to illustrate the apparent naïveté of those involved in attempts to instigate policy convergence across diverse institutional contexts (e.g. Stead, 2009). It is an exceedingly rare event, however, when explicit mention is made of 'worst' or 'poor' practice. Indeed, the very concept of 'worst practice' appears to stand completely at odds with current approaches to policy learning in the UK transport policy community.

We can point to two major disadvantages with this status quo which together serve to illustrate the fact that an exclusive focus on 'best' practice is undesirable. First, and most obviously, ignoring 'worst practices' simply runs contrary to age-old wisdom that one can improve one's performance by learning from one's own mistakes and those of others. As noted in Chapter 1 and reiterated in Chapter 4, formulating and implementing effective demand-management interventions in line with 'new realist' transport policy is an extraordinarily difficult task. Indeed, as Nykvist and Whitmarsh (2008) imply, policy failure in such endeavours is arguably the rule rather than the exception. Hence, for each 'best practice' policy intervention or policy process that ostensibly succeeded in some meaningful way, there will be several others which did not. Regrettably, according to the 'take the best, ditch the rest' ethos of 'best practice' heuristic learning, this vast repository of strategically-valuable knowledge is deemed to be far less worthy of attention than a handful of analytically-dubious 'gold standard' examples—which, if evaluated at all, are often done so on the basis of opaque and situationally-specific criteria. Indeed, even following the same 'reinventing the wheel' logic noted in the previous section, those actors who truly desire to learn from 'best practice' would still find progress more forthcoming if such cases of policy failure were examined and analysed, as insights would be gained into those 'wheels' which one should avoid 'reinventing'.

Second, over-emphasis on 'best' practices can impose unnecessarily tight restrictions upon policy actors, obliging them to follow guidance and advice that may be narrow, inflexible or inappropriate. Clearly, this issue is a cornerstone of the pragmatic critique of 'best practice', with several authors railing against the

manner in which the notion is used to prescribe ‘one size fits all’ measures across a range of heterogeneous circumstances (see Stead, 2009). However, as Chris stressed, similar limitations of ‘best’ practice approaches to policy implementation are evident at the local level (Case C). Indeed, without formally expressing it in such terms, Chris’s argument against the notion of ‘best practice’—as recounted in Chapter 3—broadly accuses active travel practitioners of ‘anchoring’ their professional decision-making in officially-sanctioned, ‘best’ design standards, at the expense of factoring in basic considerations of usability or the contingencies of specific locations.⁴¹ In essence, generic ‘best’ practice guidance is thus argued to both lead and constrain decision-making to a damaging extent, as blanket, uncreative solutions are thoughtlessly ‘shoehorned’ into a diverse range of situations.

Z. Perspective

The third focus we have witnessed is the overwhelming tendency for ‘best practices’ to be judged in a ‘relative’, rather than ‘absolute’ sense. Indeed, with the exception of Graham (Case F), none of the participants in this research who undertook ‘best practice’ heuristic learning viewed ‘best’ practices to mean anything other than the best examples of certain practices already in existence. Of course, as we have noted previously, this does not necessarily mean that these policy actors do not have any sense of long-term policy ‘direction’. On the contrary, several do; particularly those in campaigning roles. However, if not altogether unknown, it appears that actors’ ‘ultimate visions’ for UK active travel are rarely articulated or communicated in a coherent fashion. For example, as Martha’s quote in the previous section demonstrated, there are no Whitehall targets for increasing the rate of walking and cycling in the UK at present, let alone a clearly-stated ‘vision’ for future active travel..

Given the central role that policy learning must play in moving toward a more sustainable mobility paradigm, however, this absence of ‘absolute’ thinking

⁴¹ Here ‘practice’ corresponds to interventions’ design specifications, rather than their existence *per se* (cf. Chapter 4).

and judgement is problematic. Specifically, while knowledge of relative 'best practices' is certainly useful, focussing policy learning endeavours *exclusively* upon such practices poses a genuine risk that significant policy change in the sustainable transport field will not be forthcoming. It may be useful to draw a sporting analogy here. At the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, the American athlete Dick Fosbury broke the world high-jumping record by an unprecedented 2.5 inches. Fosbury achieved this feat using a revolutionary jumping technique now colloquially known as the 'Fosbury Flop'. Prior to his achievement, the dominant jumping technique—known as the 'straddle method'—essentially represented relative 'best practice' within the athletic community. With his 'flop', however, Fosbury effectively demonstrated that such relative 'best practice', whilst popular and seemingly effective, did not necessarily yield the greatest outcome possible (i.e. absolute 'best').

The parallels of this situation with 'best practice' heuristic learning are clear. Collective fixation with policy interventions or processes that are somehow perceived to be the relative 'best', while advantageous in many respects, may result in situations of pronounced path-dependency, where learning activities perversely act to stifle innovation and 'lock-in' unsustainable travel behaviour. Indeed, as Graham (Case F) stressed in the context of Dutch cycle infrastructure, even the nature of highly-celebrated relative 'best' practices can leave a lot to be desired when viewed through an absolute perspective.

5.3 What should be done?

Let us conclude this chapter by briefly exploring how some of the undesirable consequences of 'best practice' heuristic learning might be mitigated. Rather than setting out an exhaustive model for policy learning, what follows is simply a plea for a 'rebalancing' of the current approach in terms of the three focal variables that have structured our discussion thus far. Given the huge complexity surrounding issues of policy development and implementation, there are clearly no straightforward answers concerning how actors might temper the 'relative/best/intervention' focus of current 'best practice' heuristic learning.

However, in order to avoid a situation in which we are left 'peering at the entire universe through a drinking straw' (Hari, 2010, p. 1), it certainly appears that a change of focus is necessary.

In essence, drawing upon the arguments in the preceding sections, we can approach Flyvbjerg's (2001) third question—'what should be done?'—by suggesting that policy actors seeking to undertake 'best practice' learning ought to consider the following three points: first, in addition to concentrating learning efforts upon policy interventions *per se*, it is important to also focus upon their associated *ex-ante* and *ex-post* causal processes; second, while it is clearly advantageous to learn from practices that are perceived to be the 'best' in some respect, it is vital not to disregard the huge potential contribution to learning afforded by cases of 'worst' practice and instances of policy failure; finally, while appraising the merits of 'practices' in relative terms is certainly a valuable approach—not least as a means of 'benchmarking' one's own progress—judgements must also be made in absolute terms in order to realise genuine policy change.

In terms of practical approaches through which this 'rebalancing' might be facilitated, specific measures will naturally be highly contingent upon particular jurisdictional circumstances. Thus it would be inappropriate to recommend a universal 'toolkit' for a renewed approach to policy learning. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to two overarching approaches that may enable policy actors to move beyond the current focus of 'best practice' heuristic learning and approach policy development in a more 'open' manner. First, and as implied above, it is vital to recognise the benefits of having ultimate 'visions' for the UK transport system. Importantly, such visions must correspond to more than just platitudes or indicative modal splits. Rather, remaining sensitive to competing socioeconomic and environmental priorities, they must strive to offer coherent and holistic pictures of what transport systems in the UK could be like in the decades to come. Functioning as an *anchor point* for absolute judgements made in relation to active travel and sustainable transport more broadly, the Futures Project described in Chapter 3 is a fantastic example of this strategy. Through developing a series of comprehensive scenarios for UK walking and cycling, the project represents an ideal platform upon which to orchestrate the scope and character of policy learning activities. Of course, given the intractable nature of

disagreement in the UK transport policy community, actors' absolute visions will be markedly different in a host of respects. Nevertheless, if various advocacy coalitions made efforts to develop and articulate their respective long-term ideal visions for the UK transport sector, this would certainly aid strategically-informed policy-making and enrich the scope for policy learning.

The second approach for rebalancing the present focus of 'best practice' heuristic learning is somewhat related to visioning, but concentrates on identifying *strategic pathways* by which such visions might be attained. While visioning exercises encourage novel thinking and facilitate a degree of absolute judgement, it is through strategic, problem-orientated thinking that the benefits of a broader policy learning focus may be realised. A good example of this approach is the EU FP7 OPTIC project, which is currently developing a framework for 'policy packaging'—encouraging policy actors to approach policy problems in a holistic, pragmatic manner (see OPTIC 2009). Policy learning is recognised as being vital to such an approach; however, OPTIC strongly implies that simply focussing learning activities upon relative, best, interventions is wholly insufficient as a means of instigating genuine policy change. Indeed, emphasis is continually placed upon the need for policy actors to study *how* existing measures come to be implemented and to examine *ex-post* processes through detailed monitoring in order to trace the causal factors that explain why certain measures have succeeded or failed in effectively and/or efficiently meeting their objectives. Moreover, where policies have failed, or have produced adverse unintended consequences, these are noted and learnt from; all information is seen as valuable.

Two final points merit consideration here. First is the need to stress that the emphasis placed upon strategic thinking should not be read as a rejection of heuristic-based learning *per se*. As noted previously, the complexity and sheer quantity of potentially-relevant information available to policy actors is such that solely deriving lessons from 'rational' cost-benefit analyses is a complete impossibility. Rather, the tendencies of certain learning-orientated heuristics ought to be recognised and tempered so as not to preclude valuable information from policy learning activities. Second, there is clearly a need for policy actors to disassociate instances of policy failure from instances of incompetence. Of course, there may well be occasions where the latter gives rise to the former. Yet,

as Keith (Case H) discussed, sometimes policy interventions can appear effective even though significant incompetence was present in their formulation or implementation. It is thus hugely regrettable that the pronounced aversion to admitting policy failure, let alone publicising knowledge of such failure, effectively serves to embargo discussion of 'worst practice'. Given the complexity of policy-making, failures are inevitable. In order to think more creatively about policy problems, however, this knowledge must not be concealed.

Conclusions

Following Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) call for a phronetic social science, this chapter has sought to address the implications of the 'best practice' notion for the wider project of policy learning. Concentrating on the notion's first causal power of 'heuristic learning', it has drawn upon the empirical material presented in Chapter 3 in arguing that policy actors learning from 'best practice' appear to exhibit a marked tendency to focus their attention upon existing policy interventions that are perceived to be the 'relative best'. While not inherently objectionable, this overwhelming 'RBI focus' may preclude a focus upon other 'forms' of three key 'focal variables', representing a potential opportunity cost. First, it may lead policy actors to overlook both *ex-ante* and *ex-post* causal processes, both of which are vitally important sources of policy learning. Second, in concentrating predominantly upon practices that are 'best', actors may neglect to examine instances of policy failure; again, a rich source of strategically-valuable knowledge. Third, in framing 'best practice' heuristic learning exclusively in 'relative' terms, whereby existing interventions are appraised against one another and rather than against a preconceived long-term vision, actors may inadvertently limit the scope for significant policy change and thus jeopardise a genuine transition to sustainable mobility. Finally, in making a plea for a more balanced approach to policy learning, this chapter has briefly noted the benefits of visioning exercises and strategic policy analysis.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

‘Social scientists do not discover new events that nobody new about before. What is discovered are connections and relations, not directly observable, by which we can understand and explain already known occurrences in a novel way.’

—*Berth Danermark et al. (2002, p. 91)*

This thesis has sought to make a substantial and original contribution to academic debate in the field of policy learning. Specifically, it has aimed to critically assess the present ubiquity of the ‘best practice’ notion in the UK transport policy community, and evaluate the extent to which the notion represents a desirable organising principle for associated policy learning processes. Underpinning and structuring this aim were three distinct objectives: (A) how is the notion of ‘best practice’ encountered and understood within this community? (cf. Chapter 3); (B) what are the generative mechanisms and structures that explain the present ubiquity of ‘best practice’ within this community? (cf. Chapter 4); and (C) what are the broader implications of ‘best practice’ thinking with regard to policy learning and policy development? (cf. Chapter 5).

Given that the substantive, policy-relevant conclusions to the research have been set out in Chapter 5, this final chapter instead brings closure to the thesis with concise reflections upon: (1) the core contributions of this thesis to theoretical and practical knowledge; (2) the limitations of the chosen theoretical and empirical approaches and their execution; and (3) potential avenues for future work.

6.1 Core contributions

Policy actors presently involved in the UK transport policy community do not need to read a lengthy academic thesis in order to appreciate the fact that the notion of ‘best practice’ is extraordinarily popular. This much is self-evident. However, thus far, minimal concerted academic attention has been devoted to truly *understanding, explaining or appraising* this ubiquity in any real depth. Given the centrality of the ‘best practice’ notion to contemporary policy learning efforts, this omission is concerning; a fact compounded by the enormous scale of the sustainable mobility challenge facing the sector. In Chapter 1, two emergent critiques of ‘best practice’ in the planning literature were identified. The first of these, termed the ‘pragmatic’ critique, has gone to great lengths in order to point out the inherent limitations involved in efforts to transfer ‘best practices’ across institutionally heterogeneous contexts, while the second, termed the ‘actor’ critique, has made initial, compelling attempts to critically examine the manner in which policy actors make use of the ‘best practice’ notion. While both critiques have proved invaluable in subjecting the notion of ‘best practice’ to academic scrutiny, however, a number of opportunities were identified for additional contribution.

First, existing empirical efforts designed to reveal the *nature* of actors’ encounters with the notion of ‘best practice’, while valuable, were held to be limited in depth. As a result, Objective (A) was addressed through eight, detailed case studies, focussed exclusively on a closely-knit active travel policy network (cf. Chapter 3). Drawing upon intensive primary research, the participants’ varied and often fascinating encounters with the notion of ‘best practice’ were traced in detail. Even within this small sample of participants, a diverse array of experiences and understandings of ‘best practice’ was evident. The intensive, case study approach adopted here was invaluable for revealing the complexities and nuances present in actors’ experiences. The semi-structured interviews undertaken with each participant were highly-informative and, although its merits should not be overstated, the cognitive mapping technique was a valuable tool for structuring the eight case studies and diagrammatically representing the key causal relationships postulated by participants.

Second, although existing attempts had been made in the literature to account for the various functions of the ‘best practice’ notion, Objective (B) sought to develop a coherent and penetrating explanation for the notion’s present ubiquity. Following critical realist ontology, it was argued that the notion of ‘best practice’ at once functions as a form of cognitive heuristic and as a powerful rhetorical device (cf. Chapter 4). In particular, this two-fold structure was argued to give rise to five ‘causal powers’: heuristic learning; discourse manipulation; egoistic promotion; affiliative justification; and strategic articulation. Correspondingly, the generative mechanisms responsible for actors’ various usage of the ‘best practice’ notion, whereby these causal powers are exercised, were argued to stem from the nature of contemporary policy processes in the UK transport policy community; characterised as ‘messy’ and fraught with antagonism, uncertainty and competition, within and across ‘frame-based’ advocacy coalitions.

Finally, noting that neither the pragmatic critique nor the nascent actor critique have sought to appraise the validity of the ‘best practice’ notion as a policy approach *per se*, Objective (C) concentrated on the power and form of ‘best practice’ heuristic learning, examining in detail the manner in which it appears to concentrate policy learning efforts upon certain ‘forms’ of three ‘focal variables’: practice, performance and perspective. Although it was stressed that ‘best practice’ heuristic learning was not inherently undesirable, it was argued that this focus risks incurring a number of opportunity costs. Specifically, it was argued that the current focus ought to be broadened so as to encompass a concern for *ex-ante* and *ex-post* causation, policy failure and sub-optimality and a judgemental perspective that considered the merits of alternative interventions in an ‘absolute’ sense.

The critical realist approach followed in this thesis has provided a constructive framework with which to approach these issues. Although not technically a ‘contribution’, it would appear that the realist ontological and epistemological platform set out in Chapter 2 is relatively compatible with current directions in transport research more broadly. Indeed, as an overarching logic of inquiry, critical realism appears to lend itself to both scholars working in the ‘mobilities’ school and those more allied with the policy-minded ‘middle-ground’. Moreover, critical realism may help to transcend much of the unnecessary and regrettable mud-slinging between proponents of qualitative and

quantitative research in the academic transport community, encouraging such ‘debate’ to move instead toward more fruitful discussions of ontology and epistemology.

Given that much of the existing academic literature on policy transfer, including the pragmatic critique, tends to ‘write out’ the messy, detailed aspects of the process and the experiences of the actors involved, and given that the nascent actor critique has thus far demonstrated a reluctance to take any normative stance on the notion of ‘best practice’, this thesis has also sought to make some tentative links between theory and practice. Simply put, academic theory cannot afford to ignore the insights of policy actors; and such actors, in turn, may benefit from academic perspectives on the issues they grapple with. Specifically, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 have together highlighted the need for caution and balance in policy learning. Of course, several of the participants involved in the research were highly attuned to the limitations of the ‘best practice’ notion before this research was even proposed. Nevertheless, in tracing their experiences and those of their peers, the formal explanation for ‘best practice’ ubiquity set out in Chapter 4 may afford greater insight as to why they feel so uncomfortable with the notion. Indeed, during a chance encounter with one participant subsequent to their interview, they proceeded to explain at length how their perspective on policy learning and ‘best practice’ had changed as a result of participating in the research.

6.2 Limitations

Clearly, there are limitations to every piece of academic work, irrespective of whether these are explicitly acknowledged. As far as this thesis is concerned, there are likely to be several theoretical, empirical and analytical shortcomings present. However, there are a number of immediate limitations to this thesis that are worth noting here.

First, it is worth reflecting more critically upon the critical realist stance that underpins this thesis. This is addressed here in the ‘limitations’ section for no other reason than the main body of the thesis has adopted a rather accepting tone

in relation to critical realism, perhaps neglecting to explore its broader ramifications and ontological limitations. Significantly, this is not the place to debate and defend critical realism as a philosophy of social science *per se*; existing work achieves this more than admirably (see, for example, Sayer 2000). Rather, with the advantage of hindsight, my intention here is to acknowledge that the arguments presented in preceding chapters may have been modified—and, indeed, strengthened—had they drawn more directly upon the canon of poststructuralist work concerned with interpreting and understanding contemporary policy processes.

Two poststructural theoretical frameworks, in particular, appear to warrant greater consideration as potential lenses through which one might critically examine the prevalence and implications of the ‘best practice’ notion: governmentality (Foucault, [1979] 1991; Miller and Rose, 2008); and Actor Network Theory (Law, 1986; Latour, 2005). In part, both of these frameworks have been touched upon in the analysis undertaken in Chapter 4—governmentality, explicitly (albeit briefly) and ANT, implicitly. Nevertheless, given its sustained focus on transfactual argumentation and the identification of causal powers, this thesis has arguably missed an opportunity to engage more deeply with these frameworks.

With respect to ANT, it may well have been profitable to explore the extent to which the notion of ‘best practice’ represents a non-human actant bound up in myriad semiotic and material relations with other actants. Of particular value here would be an exploration of what Law (2004) terms ‘modalities’—caveats first identified in STS that act to temper the truth value of particular ontological claims. For example, in their infancy, claims that certain practices ought to be acknowledged as ‘best’ (relative or absolute) may well be tempered and couched in cautionary terms by their proponents and others. However, as testified by the presence of the ‘pragmatic critique’ introduced in Chapter 1, these modalities can be ‘dropped’ or ‘deleted’ (*ibid.*) through particular inter-actant relations, leading to situations where ‘best practices’ cease to be tethered to their respective institutional contexts and, correspondingly, enjoy seemingly self-evident validity.

However, while ANT may provide a more fruitful and explicit platform from which to investigate the constitutive relationships that underpin the current prevalence and character of ‘best practice’ thinking, it is arguably Foucault’s

concept of governmentality that could shed most light upon the regimes of power that necessarily infuse such relationships. Drawing on Foucault and others, Bulkeley (2006) concludes that the notion of ‘best practice’ is at once a political rationality and a governmental technology, insofar as it embodies both normative political visions and a means of rendering certain practices governable. In hindsight, directly examining the empirical material presented in Chapters 3 through the lens of governmentality, and engaging more fully with Bulkeley’s emergent conception of ‘best practice’—as well as other governmental interpretations—may well have afforded a more comprehensive engagement with the ‘best practice’ notion with respect to its political nature and implications. Not least, this could have functioned as a productive means of engaging with more overarching debates relating to the political character and implications of contemporary policy processes, such as those pertaining to neoliberalism (Peck and Theodore, 2010) and urban ‘policy mobilities’ (McCann, 2008; McCann and Ward, forthcoming). This broader scholarship would have tied in neatly with the discussion of ‘new public management’ in Chapter 1 and would have offered a much greater platform from which to draw conclusions in Chapter 5.

Despite these omissions, however, I do certainly do not regret the deep engagement with critical realism. Although it may sound a little trite and clichéd, academic scholarship is a path of enlightenment and discovery, and this thesis has provided a wonderful opportunity to explore the nature of critical realism in great detail. Although this may sound naïve to more experienced ears, I find critical realism particularly appealing given the fact that my research falls distinctly along the ‘policy edge’ of social science; it categorically destroys positivism, prioritises explanation and yet manages to achieve this without succumbing to excessive introversion. In short, it ensures that social science is grounded in philosophy without becoming enslaved by it. The challenge I am faced with now is an enticing one. I must build upon my knowledge and experience of critical realism and explore the arguments of other theoretical paradigms in contemporary social science. Rather than paying lip-service to their ontological and epistemological arguments, however, or passing superficial judgement on their merits based on the reading of derivative texts, I aim to engage with such paradigms at the level of their deepest convictions. In sum, there will inevitably be a degree of constraint as to the respective theoretical paths we follow as

academics. We cannot ignore the formative influence of pedagogic environments, close colleagues, and even theoretical ‘fashions’. However, writing this thesis has affirmed the crucial need to be open-minded and critical about theory. Like most things, there is a balance to be reached. Finding that balance is ought ultimately to be a never-ending process, but the dedicated, full-time doctoral study that I soon hope to undertake will doubtless provide a first opportunity for much-needed reflection.

Second, although the research participants form part of a distinct policy network, this was perhaps not optimally reflected in the chosen sampling approach adopted in the research design. Clearly, as a result of drawing participants from the Futures Project, the participants were all relatively well-known to each other. However, it would have been perhaps more effective to have addressed the notion of ‘best practice’ through a web of definite, established professional relationships, thereby contextualising and triangulating key insights. In other words, rather than inferring certain relations between Whitehall and national campaigners on the basis of their discrete interviews, it would have been interesting to have concentrated on a specific project, gleaning multiple perspectives on the same issue.⁴³ Indeed, had this been the case, a genuine opportunity might have existed for the development of Bulkeley’s (2006) concern for power relations and governmentality. To be sure, Bulkeley’s insights have informed the content of Chapter 4—particularly with regard to the causal power of ‘discourse manipulation’—yet there are several avenues of potential enquiry into power relations which have unfortunately been left unexplored.

This seems an appropriate point at which to briefly address the issue of sample size. Although the engagement with the research material generated by the interviews was detailed and in-depth, it may be argued that eight interviews is too small a sample for the conclusions reached in this thesis to have much widespread validity. This question of sample size in qualitative research has been directly addressed in the literature (see, for example, Small, 2009; Sandelowski, 1995) where it is typically argued that sampling considerations in qualitative research ought to be judged in respect of thematic ‘saturation’ or ‘redundancy’, rather than against strict *a priori* standards inherited from extensive methods. In

⁴³ Although Cases A, B and C concentrating on LTP3 in Marlsworth did achieve this to some degree.

other words, the sample is deemed sufficiently large when additional interviews cease to yield any insights that have not already been accounted for. It is, of course, difficult to make such a judgement in practice. However, I would certainly not claim that saturation was reached in this research; while there were significant overlaps amongst the experiences of the various participants, there will doubtless be much ‘out there’ that is, as yet, unaccounted for. As a result, the findings are undoubtedly more tentative and emergent than they might theoretically be, had greater resources for research been available. Finally in relation to sample size, it is worth referring back to the discussion in Chapter 2 and Figure 2.1. Arguably, while concern for sample size is often valid, such concern can often belie epistemological misunderstandings. In short, there is a difference between inductive inference and retroductive inference. The former seeks to extrapolate conclusions derived from a sample to a wider population. Issues of representativeness and sample size are thus highly pertinent. The latter, however, makes no such attempt. Instead, it seeks to *explain* rather than to empirically generalise.

Third, there are two key perspectives on active travel that are missing from this research—those of elected politicians and those of motoring campaigners. In different ways, in-depth interviews with such actors would have undoubtedly yielded captivating insights into the manner in which the notion of ‘best practice’ is encountered within the UK transport policy community. Once again, this could have underpinned a more thorough engagement with issues of power and competing political rationalities, and would also have aided understanding of the ‘messy’ policy processes involved.

Finally, reflecting the nature of the subject matter, this thesis has perhaps struggled to find a comfortable disciplinary identity. Of course, there is no inherent reason why this should be problematic; geographers are perhaps more accustomed to inter-disciplinary work than most other social scientists. However, there is a danger that in drawing liberally and superficially upon concepts from political science such as ‘frame-based’ advocacy coalitions, or more pertinently those from cognitive psychology, such as heuristic decision-making, analytical insights may have been erroneously concluded on the basis of crude, non-specialist interpretation.

6.3 Future work

As is customary, we shall conclude this thesis with a brief overview of those themes that appear to warrant further examination. This final section is labelled ‘future work’ rather than ‘future research’ in order to reflect the fact that while certain themes pertain to academic investigation, some instead relate to the practical need to rebalance current approaches to policy learning.

First, and most immediately, the tentative understandings of the ‘best practice’ notion generated by this thesis would be greatly complemented by both additional intensive and extensive empirical research. Not least, it would be highly advantageous to undertake a detailed ethnographic study of a particular ‘best practice’-led policy learning exercise in its entirety. For example, one could imagine the potential insights that may have been gained through participant observation of Transport for London’s recently launched cycle hire scheme, which drew heavily upon the experiences of similar schemes in Paris and Montreal. In terms of extensive research, both high-level discourse analysis of policy learning materials and the development of a survey tool would also be highly beneficial, affording a far greater understanding of the scope and character of the ‘best practice’ notion and facilitating meaningful inductive generalisation as a result.

Second, given that much of the ‘best practice’ notion’s causal power appears to stem from the psycholinguistic properties of the term ‘best practice’ itself, it would be fascinating to undertake similar research in countries where English is not the primary language of policy-making. In drawing attention to the role of supra-national ‘best practice’ thinking in European Union spatial planning policy, Vettoretto (2009) has already laid some conceptual foundations for such an endeavour. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to develop this further and attempt to discern the extent to which the ‘best practice’ notion—regardless of its linguistic manifestation—is traceable within informal policy learning approaches overseas.

Finally, it may be argued that while additional research would be academically interesting, a more pressing agenda concerns the need to practically

address the limitations of ‘best practice’ heuristic learning identified in Chapter 5. Specifically, the ‘relative best intervention’ (RBI) focus that ‘best practice’ heuristic learning appears to engender must be tempered with a concern for absolute judgements, sub-optimality and attendant policy processes. Such concerns ought to inform updated user-friendly guidance materials aimed at policy professionals such as that produced by Rose (1991), drawing attention to the need for balanced, creative policy learning.

Appendix (i)

‘Case A’ Interview Schedule

Role

What is your role in MCC, where do you fit in the planning/policy process? Formulating policy, implementing policy, evaluating policy?

Main objectives in your role?

In terms of communication in your role, which are the primary audiences are you have to ‘listen’ to, and which are the audiences that you have to ‘speak’ to?

What are the material inputs and outputs of your job? Documents, plans, reports, physical infrastructure?

Experience of BP

Do you hear/read best practice a lot in MCC ?

When you encounter BP, is it in terms of overarching policies, or specific measures?

How does this impact on your work? Do you advocate the approach, or ‘go with it’, or resent it?

How involved are you with selecting, disseminating or implementing examples of ‘best practice’?

If so, what are the processes that you typically go through for selecting/disseminating/ implementing?

If someone in Lancashire CC asked your advice as to how to go about developing a policy using a ‘best practice’ approach – what would you say to them?

How do you address the issue of transferability? Rule of thumb or formal appraisal of how appropriate a ‘best practice’ would be for Marlsworth.

Are there common patterns within local government re: foci of BP national vs. international/ sharing with each other?

General thoughts

How would you define ‘best practice’?

What are the limitations you see with best practice and policy learning more generally?

Are there any ulterior motives for advocating a best practice approach?

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