

What do Experts Have to Say about the Social and Cultural Influences on Walking Futures?

Rodney Tolley, Karen Bickerstaff, Les Lumsdon

Abstract

For the WalkC21 conference in London in February 2000, CAST - The Centre for Alternative and Sustainable Transport - carried out a major project designed to gauge opinion and to predict trends in patterns of walking in Europe by 2010. Experts from professional groupings such as research, practice, policy, advocacy and planning were cross-referenced with their professional interest in walking, such as health, leisure and utilitarian. The panel was surveyed for its views on the likely levels of walking in the future, the nature of walking journeys and the likely impacts of transport policy on these trends.

The statistical results showed that there will be more walking for leisure and health, but less everyday walking. However, the survey also produced over 16 000 words of observations, comments and explanations that have been disaggregated and analysed to support and illuminate the statistical outcomes. For this international conference it was felt that it would be of greatest value to focus on the comments relating to broad socio-cultural barriers to walking as perceived from Europe, in order to facilitate contrasting or comparative perspectives from other areas.

The result will be an insight into the range, complexity and power of opinions on walking that will inform and enlighten our thinking on walking futures. From this position the paper seeks to draw out key conclusions; in particular on how this kind of qualitative insight can develop understanding of long term trends in walking, and the implications of this knowledge for better challenging current trends and improving walking policy.

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Introduction

'Walk21' was the first international conference on walking and was held in London in February 2000. The conference steering group was formed from a partnership of the UK's leading walking policy makers, researchers, campaigners and practitioners. In order to anchor the focus of the conference and to direct the discussion, the steering group wished to demonstrate an accurate and up to date understanding of local, regional and international opinion on walking issues and trends.

It was felt that this would best be achieved by co-ordinating a study to gauge opinion, place discussion in a broader context and inform and direct future walking initiatives. Accordingly, the partnership, funded by the Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions and the Countryside Agency, commissioned research in order to provide a judgemental forecast of the future of walking throughout Europe during the first decade of the 21st century. The focus was to be on walking futures, as it was felt that there was a lack of information in this area, yet there is a need to know the future to help to plan better for it. A traditional extrapolation of past trends would be of limited value if it took us in directions we do not want to go. However, the future is created by actions and views in the present, especially those of experts - people whose influence on thinking, attitudes and behaviour is powerful. If they can be interrogated to discover an aggregate expert view of where current actions will take us if we continue them, we have an opportunity to contradict the established view that, in William Gladstone's words, "You cannot fight against the future".

The outcome of the research was a report on what the most significant people in the European walking world think the future holds for walking. This output could be a vital resource for all of those concerned with the role of walking in future society.

Specifically, the results showed that, across Europe, by 2010, there will be:

- Less walking by everyone overall
- More walking for leisure and health, but less everyday walking
- More facilities, infrastructure, information and money for walking
- A consensus that everyone will see walking as being more important

The researchers identified *The Walking Conundrum*:

- There will be less walking but more talking about walking

And *The Walking Challenge*

- To cheat the predicted future ie. to create a Europe in which there is more walking and less talking about walking

The results were presented to the *Walk21* Conference and are available in the Proceedings (Tolley, 2000). There is no intention of repeating them here: however, there is great value in disaggregating expert views and interpreting their subtleties and complexities. Where experts' views resonate widely, they may be of interest to an international audience. Accordingly, this paper elaborates on one aspect of the conclusions, the effect of broad socio-cultural influences on walking trends, as interpreted through the comments of the experts.

Interpretation

The Delphi Technique was established in the 1960s and seeks to achieve a consensus between experts on a number of factors about any given subject, but in particular it concerns the prediction of future events or scenarios (Green *et al*, 1990; Linstone and Turoff, 1975; Witt and Moutinho, 1989). An iterative approach is adopted whereby first an expert panel is asked for its views on a range of subjects. A measure of average response (e.g. the mode) is calculated and the same questionnaire sent out a second time. If the panellist had provided a score which was different to the consensus of opinion as reflected by the modal response they were asked to consider changing their response accordingly in light of the feedback. The underlying assumption is that by adopting an iterative process the range of responses will stabilise and converge towards a consensus. The responses were collated on an SPSS file and analysed. The results represent a consensus of European expert's views on the future of walking in Europe until the year 2010.

Experts were carefully selected from all EU countries and from a number of professional groupings including Research, Practice, Policy and Advocacy. This was cross-referenced by selecting experts whose main professional interest in walking ranged from Everyday/Utilitarian/Transport, Leisure/Recreation, Health/Exercise, to Tourism. A series of statements of opinion were presented and respondents asked to indicate their view on the subject by choosing a point on a Likert-type scale.

One of the advantages of the Delphi technique is that it is capable of producing valuable supporting contextual comment from the experts. Specifically, if experts wished to maintain a different position from the mode they were requested to comment as to why they wanted to retain their opinion. This enabled the researchers to augment the statistical analysis by the inclusion of explained reasoning by the expert and thus to extend the analysis by giving consideration to written comments rich in detail (Nelms and Porter, 1985). During both the first and second round, experts were also offered the opportunity to make additional comments regarding any aspect of the survey and this encouraged a considerable amount of comment which supports the overall pattern of decision making of respondents. One particular strength is the process of ongoing deliberation revealed by this material, with individuals thoughtfully reflecting upon their original responses in the light of the consensus view.

These comments are not presented as representative of the whole expert population sampled: they are purely the comments which respondents chose to make to support their responses. The importance of this material is in the qualitative detail it provides, with its potential to illuminate the patterns revealed through the survey. The researchers thus have at their disposal a large quantity of thoughtful, intelligent and relevant

observations from a group of people who can be thought of as the most knowledgeable Europeans on walking issues.

In terms of the broad pattern of comments, at the European level most participants in the first round believed that the trend in walking over the first decade of the 21st century would be downward. However, these aggregated patterns of change appeared to mask a much more complex picture - with considerable variation depending on a range of factors, such as national distinctions, social and cultural difference, the purposes of walking, the characteristics of the population, etc.

Although walking was widely expected to decline for utilitarian purposes there was an extremely strong body of expert opinion predicting an increase in walking for leisure and health. Health in particular (and often in association with leisure), was seen as a very strong source of motivation (personal and societal) for increased walking in the future. For some this reflected the desire for activity lost in daily routines, and thus a form of exercise substitution. Opinion was overwhelmingly that walking to school would increase and the link between school travel and health (as distinct from walking) was a prominent theme. On the other hand, with the exception of a few optimistic – almost hopeful – comments, the potential for increasing walking to work was seen in a much more pessimistic light.

Explanations of these views involved a range of issues which were seen as important barriers (and to a lesser degree prompts) to an increase in walking. Safety emerged as a prominent barrier to increased walking, and on environmental issues (and specifically air pollution) worsening conditions were seen as a likely disincentive. In contrast there was a good deal of optimism about the provision of transport infrastructure over the next ten years and experts identified any decrease in traffic speed, both in rural and urban areas, as an aspect of transport context that would be likely to encourage greater walking.

In all of these explanatory comments there is rich detail of observation that can be analysed to support and illuminate the statistical outcomes. This database - measuring over 16 000 words - can provide a deeper understanding of all of the major issues and trends identified by the Delphi. Most usefully, subsets of the material can be examined to throw light on particular issues of interest to different audiences. For this international conference, it was felt that it would be of greatest value to focus on the broad social and cultural context to forecast changes. This will allow a wide discussion to take place concerning issues which have an international dimension, in contrast to those such as infrastructure which may be more regionally specific. It is hoped that this discussion of socio-cultural barriers to walking as perceived from Europe will facilitate contrasting or comparative perspectives from other areas and thus allow the breadth and depth of the socio-cultural barriers that face us in promoting walking to be seen. From this position the paper will seek to draw out some key conclusions; in particular how this kind of qualitative insight can develop understanding of long term trends in walking, and the implications of this knowledge for better challenging current trends and improving walking policy.

Discussion

Four inter-linked aspects of social and cultural context were particularly commented on by participants - the car culture; the image of walking or walkers; lifestyle issues; and political context. These will be examined in turn, although it is important to bear in mind that the experts' comments often range widely across related issues and as a result resist precise or exclusive categorisation.

Car culture

One prominent impediment to an increase in walking was described by many in terms of the car culture:

Transport walking is still suppressed by the overwhelming car culture

I think our dependence on motorised transport is very deep as we live in a speed-driven society and so we'd probably have to be paid to take up walking (for transport) in a bigger way

In this context many considered the current and predicted rise in car ownership – widely anticipated across the expert group – as a fundamental barrier to increasing (or even stabilising) the level of walking:

I fear the majority are over optimistic. Every indication is that car ownership will continue to grow, which means that walking will almost certainly continue to decline. The efforts being put into promoting walking may have some effect – but only on slowing the decline

In some cases respondents saw contradictory trends at work with areas of increase in walking acknowledged, yet the balance of the two processes was invariably towards decline:

The single most important factor is car ownership levels. These are likely to increase with increased prosperity, and so walking is unlikely to increase in spite of measures to provide better facilities

I think that although the 'culture' relating to transport will start to change, there is still significant latent demand among women with children and the elderly for increased car ownership and use – primarily at the expense of walking and public transport trips

In this context, a prediction of 'no (net) change' by a number of respondents was, in itself, conceptualised as a positive and realistic goal for the ten-year period:

I would suggest that simply stopping the current decline in walking from continuing should be viewed positively and is all that can reasonably be expected in the next ten years

I don't think that the positive moves likely to promote walking will be enough to reverse the decline by 2010 overall - but could halt it

Image of walking

The poor image of walking (and indeed walkers) presented the converse side of the 'car culture effect', associated with affluence, social status and fashion, and was seen as a considerable barrier to a widespread increase in future walking. In this sense there was a genuine pessimism that little could be done to effect a change in the image of walking:

In too many circumstances, the car is seen as the preferred mode of choice for all journeys - I know people who make car trips of say 400 metres. This is reinforced by the attitudes of the media and public perceptions generally - walking (and other sustainable modes) is something that people do if they don't have cars

Style consciousness, image, desire to show wealth on increase - walking poor image statement

Changes in patterns of leisure: just walking in your leisure time is not trendy, better you visit a fitness-centre. Walking will be substituted by other sports

Walkers - people like the concept of walking not necessarily the people

Somewhat paradoxical is the number of comments that predicted an increase in sales of walking products over the ten-year period. Such evidence is indicative not only of the split in journey purpose (leisure as distinct from utilitarian) but also of walking products seen as fashion items rather than functional necessities and thus not an indicator of walking. The situation arises that walking products can carry a positive image but walking as an activity does not:

My view of a substantial increase in the sale of walking-related products is perhaps somewhat cynical but based on the fact that there seems to be an increasing range of products aimed at the 'walking for leisure' market, some of which are purchased by people who don't actually do much walking

People are making less distinction between work and leisure clothes

In some countries there appeared to be evidence of the general push to walking as a way to increasing the health of society:

People will eventually begin to question the 'status' value of driving and accept the status value of better health

The leisure purpose is the easiest field to increase the walking trips during the next decade because of their clear connection with new fashions in the way of life (healthy and sporty habits)

Indeed, walking was seen to fit into, and be part of, a wider 'environmental lifestyle' trend - with a shift to more sustainable, localised activity spheres:

I expect walking to shops to increase as these trips are combined with school journeys, and also because of a growing backlash against supermarkets. I expect people to buy more food locally because of concern about GM foods, BSE etc and because farmers markets make local organic produce available

Lifestyle

The previous comment leads to lifestyle issues as the third dimension of social context. A number of trends and themes were identifiable from the open comments.

A reduction in the need to travel (and the status of travel), linked to new technologies and patterns of activity:

Initiative at the local level including widespread use of virtual/IT services will see a decentralising effect to support local (urban/rural) communities

A computer and a mobile phone will replace a car as a status symbol

There are many changes in patterns of leisure - young people are spending more time in front of TV, internet etc. which means slight decrease in walking

Changing activity patterns also indicated quite contradictory patterns of walking:

New hobbies and ways to use leisure time take more often place far away from home, which means that a car and public transport are used more often

The growing pace of modern life produced contradictory views on the impacts for walking. On the one hand, some were positive:

I see a counter movement in lifestyle coming in this decade. In the Netherlands we already have a word for it: "onthaasten" which means about "dehurry" or "dishurry"

On the other hand, more were orientated towards a decline in walking, identifying a lack of time as a key issue:

Faster pace of life, lack of time, greater affluence will all reduce amount of time walking

Some respondents made broad connections between issues that relate to 'work time' and those connected to short-term, diurnal rhythms (family responsibilities etc), usually referred to as 'necessary time':

"Quality of life" as far as having TIME to walk is an important factor for levels of walking. All sorts of hard measures (Engineering, infrastructures^x) and even soft measures (information, education, publicity, awareness^x) will not work right if people do not have the opportunity to walk. Therefore, an integrated approach trying to take into consideration employment, and particularly speaking the daily working times (starting and ending hours that allow Europeans to have time) and schedules are vital. This aspect particularly applies for the case of Latin (and most of Mediterranean) countries where schedules get quite long into the evening/night hours making impossible the trip back home by walking for most of the working population (which includes that parents cannot pick up children after school and have a nice family evening walk)

Growing levels of stress and the strategies adopted to relieve them attracted comment. Some felt they would lead to more walking:

Congestion/frustration likely to push people onto foot

Others disagreed:

Stress frustration - could encourage people to stay in their own private space as much as abandoning their cars

It seems that growth in congestion and conflicts between different travel modes drives many people into their cars rather than out of them - to get away from the unpleasant, dangerous and noisy walking environment. The feeling of taking personal space with them, shelter from the elements, the convenience etc. seem to be more important than the time lost sitting in traffic jams or looking for places to park. This would only change if the real and perceived cost of each car trip would increase substantially

Still others saw ALL transport as increasingly stressful:

Growth in stress amongst transport users will on the other hand make also walking less pleasant and people will search for other ways to help their stress

The growth in stress amongst transport users will probably encourage them to change the behaviour and the motorised vehicle, but probably not to change to non motorised transport

Once again the issue of substitution of leisure walking for utilitarian walking was raised:

Although undoubtedly the growing pace of modern life has meant that walking has decreased in recent years, we believe the climate is now changing and any decrease caused by this will be offset by an increase in walking as a result of increased environmental awareness/ improved infrastructure etc

Changing pace of life would change the type of walking from utilitarian to leisure. Overall there would be little change, if any

Political context

The fourth dimension which we have termed 'political context' is concerned with the perceived views – and the implications of these views for walking - of politicians, different stakeholder groups and in particular the public at large. The influence of these groups permeated many expert comments about current constraints and future prospects for walking, revealing the political undercurrents which affect current and future trends in walking. Detailed analysis reveals some of the complexity and difference in these patterns: the next section considers the nature and policy implications of the attitudes of politicians (national and local); professional stakeholders and public opinion.

Politicians: for some respondents the current attitudes of decision-makers emerged as a major barrier to more walking, if not a cause of the current and predicted decline. Secular trends for overall walking have declined consistently in the past decade, public policy has not supported different modes of walking promotion

My sceptic answers reflect the consistent lack of political awareness among decision makers in education, economy and finance

Walking does not have strong political voices (cycling does)

Many comments indicated that the revival of walking would be a long-term process. Whilst there were positive attitudes among certain groups in relation to walking, this would not be matched by a shift in political attitudes (or at least the necessary policy) within the ten year period of a magnitude sufficient to halt or reverse current trends:
The other [i.e. utilitarian] purposes need a more radical change in urban and traffic policies, and therefore needs more time to implement

Their (policy makers) views will strengthen but not greatly affect policy for another 10 years or more

Politicians were seen to be out of touch with public opinion:

Local politicians - I think across Europe they will still be out of step with public and national views

Political will appears to lag behind changes in public opinion

For some the apparent political apathy and reluctance to take action was inextricably tied to vested interests:

Power of motor lobby unlikely to be diminished by 2010 and so the power of their advertising

I would still argue that politicians' (both national and local) concerns about the motorists' vote will limit the amount of pro-walking policy

Other stakeholders: the view of walking by other professional groups involved in health, leisure, and environmental management was considered to be already high and thus significant increases in influence were felt unlikely:

Health practitioners - They regard walking as important now - so a little change perhaps

We believe that a great deal is being done already by health practitioners to promote walking. Similarly by environmental managers and recreation and countryside managers – we feel it will be an increasing awareness amongst politicians and a subsequent increase in awareness amongst planners and engineers that will now have a greater impact

These professional groups were presented as a pro-active force – an image which contrasted strongly with that of politicians. There was however some scope for improvement, reflecting uncertainties and confused health reports. In other words there was seen to be a lack of consensus in the messages being presented to the public about the benefits of walking. The need for partnership in these fields becomes strongly apparent:

In the UK, I feel that health services have not promoted the health benefits of walking as much as possible - there are conflicting reports about this - e.g. some people say walking as exercise is not beneficial until you break sweat. Therefore I think there is a need for a coherent, correct, message

Environmental managers already have begun understanding. Transport engineers are a problem - car- orientated and slow to change

Public opinion: as earlier comments indicated, public opinion was seen by a number of ‘experts’ to be the critical factor in influencing likely trends in future walking. For many, public opinion was conceptualised as a critical barrier to increased walking, with politicians keen not to appear anti-car. So whilst the attitudes of politicians were seen to be crucial in encouraging walking, this was very much contingent on changes in public attitudes.

I think that the attitude of politicians could be a very important factor in encouraging walking but as their attitudes are so much swayed by public opinion and they will not wish to be seen to be ‘anti-car’ they will not do as much as they could to promote walking

Policy decisions would only be taken to encourage walking if public opinion was favourable. In this regard an important role was suggested for campaigns to effect a change in public attitudes/awareness:

I think there is a big potential if public awareness will rise. When decision-makers feel, the public opinion is on their side, they are much more willing to decide

Experience has shown that education and awareness, especially amongst the young, can lead to significant increases in pedestrian numbers

However, concerns were raised in relation to the utility of this kind of education and information provision approach (particularly in isolation):

These don't tend to influence behaviour. Public awareness will not change much

In a number of cases the efficacy of education/awareness was linked to consideration of target audiences and in making links with other areas of policy (and vice versa - linking other policies with awareness raising):

Different groups will be affected by different (education/awareness) programmes. Again, it is action at a number of levels that influences change - advertising campaigns alone do not change behaviour

In this regard, for many the role of hard infrastructure measures was a much more important (or the only important) consideration in changing public opinion in relation to walking:

My thinking: physical measures are much more effective comparing to educational and awareness campaigns WITHOUT physical measures. People then wish to walk, but they are saying: Walking is not attractive due to car-parking, safety, lighting and so on. A high quality supply is the only condition of use

Conclusions

A number of key conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the discussion that has been presented here and they have implications for walking policy. Overall, and on a methodological level, the comments made by the expert panel help us to understand and interpret the surface findings revealed by the main Delphi survey. In other words the broad trends tell us only a small part of the story and can mask more complex processes occurring at a finer level. One notable example was the consensus that walking for leisure and health would increase against a background of general decline (focused on utilitarian walking) - and perhaps more importantly why this trend was predicted to occur. We also see in many spheres of action or policy conflicting trends in predictions (or in what is already happening), at the same time promoting and diminishing walking. Decline was usually the net outcome of this balancing act. But again a focus on the outcomes alone can mask a more complex situation on the ground.

This qualitative insight not only develops our understanding of prompts and barriers to walking but raises questions for future inquiry. Are the increased leisure walkers the same people as the declining utilitarian walkers? Or are new leisure walkers appearing, masking the decline of established walkers on daily activities? It is only by exploring the issues and questions raised by this kind of analysis that we will be able to develop improved walking policy as well as more effectively promote behaviour change.

In terms of the findings of this review, many current impediments to walking were inextricably tied to the wider cultural context, in particular the values and attitudes associated with different modes of transport. The 'car culture' was seen to be all-pervasive and to overwhelm any progress being made – or anticipated - in provision for walking. There is a marked contrast between a negative perception of walking and walkers, linked to issues of social status, and a background of increased walking for leisure and the growing popularity of walking products as fashion accessories. Our discussion also underlines the crucial importance of lifestyle issues – revealing the contradictory processes shaping current travel behaviour. Clearly anti-car and pro-walking messages at the exclusion of broader issues are less likely to be effective than joined up thinking and implementation which weaves walking messages within a cross section of policy frameworks.

On a political level there was a general feeling that the fundamental policy decisions needed were not considered likely within the next ten years. Although attitudes (public and political) to walking have become more favourable, there was a danger that action would be tokenistic and partial and thus inadequate to tackle the strong trend of decline. Only if political awareness is raised will there be resource commitment to tackle the decline of walking and the quality of life in urban areas. The research did not explore the links between walking and healthy living in this context, but they are obviously of considerable importance.

On the basis of analysis of the open comments of experts participating in the Delphi study, the general outlook for walking and walking policy is not optimistic. Increased

walking for leisure and health and progress in provision of infrastructure appear fairly insignificant against a background of growing dependency on the motor car and a more general penetration of the values emblematic of the 'car culture' within society. These survey findings exacerbate the known in-built demographic time-bombs which will systematically depress background levels of walking, as today's sedentary children become sedentary adults and today's car-driving adults tomorrow become the first generation of elderly car drivers.

More detailed analysis of the broad pattern of comments does, however, reveal some finer level trends which offer cause for optimism, suggesting a number of areas with potential to challenge the walking futures forecast by the expert panel. In terms of turning around current trends and predictions a more concerted approach by politicians was seen to be needed and is very much contingent on a shift in public opinion in favour of walking. The socio-cultural barriers revealed in this discussion also demand a much fuller understanding of lifestyles and of the often contradictory processes driving current transport patterns. In this sense blanket awareness-raising or educational campaigns are unlikely to be effective and a much closer targeting in relation to issues of health and quality of life, leisure, work patterns etc will be essential to progress.

Efficacy here will depend on progress in two principal areas. First, it is necessary to achieve a better understanding of the complex 'reasoning' processes (and the motivations and barriers involved) by which different target groups make decisions about walking and to build this knowledge into awareness-raising campaigns and policy delivery. Secondly, there is a need for a more co-ordinated and consistent programme of action by all professional stakeholders involved in walking. Soft measures (awareness-raising) have to be spliced together with hardware, or infrastructural measures. In this sense it is not the individual policies that are key to challenging current predictions of 'walking futures' but the combination of the two. This reinforces the need for co-ordination across disciplinary and professional boundaries.

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