

Negotiating change: A comparative examination of German traffic experiments

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Abstract

In an effort to reduce emissions in the transport sector, German cities are increasingly implementing experiments aimed at reducing car traffic. Many of these experiments are initiated by civil society actors and purport to test a redistribution of street space in a way that reduces the room for cars and gives more space to active types of mobility. In the face of advancing climate change, urban experiments have also gained popularity beyond the transport sector. More generally, they are considered small-scale and temporary interventions that hold the potential to initiate broader change. This transformative potential of experiments has been attributed to negotiations between the actors involved: By negotiating their expectations and concerns, social relations are reshaped, which can challenge the status quo. Despite the significance attributed to negotiations, limited research exists on this topic. Therefore, this thesis seeks to answer the question: *How is change negotiated in traffic experiments?* More specifically, the thesis looks at the *approaches* that different actors take to negotiate change, the *themes* that are negotiated, and the *agency* that emerges within and through negotiation.

To explore how different implementation styles and varying degrees of civil society and municipal involvement shape negotiations around change, this thesis compares two traffic experiments in Germany: In Giessen, two lanes of a four-lane ring road for cars were to be redesigned for cycling traffic as part of a one-year experiment. This experiment was initiated by a citizens' petition and was implemented by the city (top-down implementation). However, the experiment was declared unlawful before the redesign was completed and was terminated prematurely. In Leipzig, an experiment was carried out to test different traffic-modifying elements within a section of a road. The aim was to incorporate the findings into a neighbourhood-wide traffic plan. This year-long experiment formed part of a project introduced by a civil society initiative and was implemented in collaboration with administrative, political, and scientific actors (bottom-linked implementation). The city council resolved to perpetuate the experiment and expand some of the measures tested to the neighbourhood level.

This thesis finds that the two traffic experiments become arenas of negotiation. In these arenas, a number of actors attempt to advance, contest, or solidify changes. The way in which actors negotiate is shaped by the different implementation approaches (top-down vs. bottom-linked), by national law, and by external events. Although (or precisely because) the traffic experiments are primarily used as a means of legitimising change, a number of conflict themes emerge in these arenas. These themes are about more than just traffic: the legitimations, expectations, and resources associated with the experiments all become the subjects of contention. In addition, accountability, trust, and identity are also negotiated. Overall, the experiments seem to become both a funnel for social conflict lines and a trigger for broader conflict. Who ultimately influences the outcomes of negotiation, can be traced back to three forms of agency: institutional, individual, and relational agency. In this context, the thesis finds that changes resulting from traffic experiments are not only shaped by planners, but largely also by legal, civil society, and political actors. These findings emphasise the need to expand our understanding of professional agency to include other relevant actors.

Ultimately, the insights gained lead to a more nuanced understanding of experiments as potential instruments for urban future-making: On the one hand, experiments open up spaces for negotiation in which conflicts become visible. On the other hand, they inherit the risk of exacerbating these very conflicts, which may ultimately result in the status quo being maintained rather than changed.