



Aging embodiment and the somatic work of getting into and out of a car



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the embodied realities and sensory experience of vehicle ingress and egress from the point of view of older drivers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 women and three men, aged 57–81, and followed by ride-a-longs whereby the researcher observed participants in interaction with their automobile. Using the perspective of phenomenological gerontology and the concept of somatic work (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012), older drivers are conceptualized as simultaneously sensing and making sense of somatic experience evoked by aging embodiment and the bodily movements required of entry and exit into an automobile. It is argued that older drivers acquire a sensory auto-biography of incorporated bodily memory regarding vehicle morphology and texture in their past and current life, which informs embodied capacities of movement, awareness, and response relative to practical knowledge about what is attainable (or unattainable) for a sensuous older body. Through reflective and reflexive engagement with the sensory realm and material world, participants report structuring their lives through the haptics of touch, adoption of somatic rules, consumerist practices, as well as, specialized bodily movements and footwork sequences to ensure safety and comfort when using their automobile.

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Introduction

Entry (ingress) and exit (egress) of an automobile is a complex, multi-sensory experience that involves coordination, balance, and bodily movement. For most people getting into and out of a vehicle is done without flourish or forethought; the body just knows how to enfold itself into the architecture of an automobile. Yet, changes in health, often associated with physical aging, can transform a previously trouble-free, humdrum movement into a challenging and painful task. At its very worst, vehicle entry or exit can precipitate a fall and serious injury. In the United States, 37,000 seniors are

injured annually transferring into and out of a vehicle, with over 40% of these injuries caused by falls (Dellinger, Boyd, & Haileyesus, 2008).

In response to the growing numbers of older drivers, gerontologists and engineers have begun to explore ways to improve automotive design for an aging population (Crizzle, Vrkljan, Kajaks, Gish & Fleisig, 2014a). To design features that will improve vehicle usability, research has begun to investigate the motions of ingress and egress using digital human models and adjustable vehicle mock-ups (Chateauroux & Wang, 2010; Menceur, Pudlo, Gorce, Thévenon, & Lepoutre, 2008). Such efforts have led to advancements in knowledge regarding the anthropomorphic, kinetic, and biomechanical properties specific to ingress/egress movement patterns for older drivers (Crizzle, Vrkljan, Kajaks, Coffin, Shacklady, & Fleisig, 2014b; Menceur et al., 2008). However, the phenomenological, embodied, and sensory experience of

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automotive ingress and egress remains largely unknown. While survey studies report that older drivers identify vehicle ingress (25%) and egress (33%) as a particularly difficult task (Herriots, 2005), we do not know what it feels like to inhabit a body that is out of sync with one's automobile when the bodily sensations of old age and disability impact vehicle usability.

This paper examines the embodied realities and sensory experience of vehicle ingress and egress. In recent years, a 'sensorial revolution' (Howes, 2006) has occurred across the social sciences and humanities that aims to explore the immediacy of lived experience (Classen, 1993; Howes, 1991; Paterson, 2007). This scholarship argues that while discursive approaches to the body reveal a great deal about the body/self as a site of social regulation, they are abstracted from the corporeal and sensuous reality of human beings in their embodied relations with others and the environment. Thus, sensuous forms of scholarship have emerged to embody social science (Sparkes & Smith, 2012) that includes methodological tools to apprehend somatic sensations (see, for example: Pink, 2009). While social gerontologists now regularly attend to the nexus of body, self, and society (Katz & Peters, 2008; Tulle, 2008; Twigg, 2004; Wainright & Turner, 2006), they have neglected to examine the varied, multi-faceted, and ordinary ways in which older adults engage sensorially with the physical and social world. The cross-fertilization of phenomenology, social constructionism, and materialist approaches to the body (Grosz, 1994) has begun to uncover the practical experiences of an aging embodiment in the diverse contexts of sport (Tulle, 2008; Wainright & Turner, 2006), dementia (Buse & Twigg, 2014; Kontos, 2010; Ward, Campbell, & Keady, 2014), and fashion (Twigg, 2013). Yet, little attention has been devoted to the ways older people make sense of physical and cultural contexts through a body that sees, tastes, touches, smells, listens, and moves. Emphasis on the sensory realm brings into focus how the senses are "fundamental to our experience of reality" (Bull, Gilroy, Howes, & Kahn, 2006: 5) and the perceptual standpoint by which we see, interact, and engage with the physical and social world. Gerontology that is attuned to the sensual dimension can highlight how aging is a multi-sensory experience that brings about new relationships to self/body, others, objects, and community. Using this lens can expose bodily sensations that characterize the biological "facts" of aging and uncover embodied forms of memory accumulated across the lifecourse thereby highlighting how aging involves attending with, and to, the body (Csordas, 1993). Furthermore sensuous scholarship infused with a critical gerontological approach reminds us that our senses do not uniformly fade with age, but shift and re-shift in relation to bodily change, technological mediums, cultural norms, and the physical environment.

Using in-depth interviews and field observations of vehicle ingress/egress, this paper explores how older drivers, some with chronic illness and mobility limitations, make intelligible bodily sensations during their interaction with an everyday material and technological object: the automobile. Exploration of sensory experience at the body-vehicle interface provides a unique opportunity to uncover how the aging body both creates and produces life experience as well as stimulates adjustments to the material world (Katz, 2011). Sensory receptors act as an interface between the internal workings

of the body and the world external to us; in essence the body-world/object interaction. While sensory perception is externally directed through the 'classic' organs of eyes, ears, nose, skin, and tongue, the haptic dimension extends beyond cutaneous contact to include what Paterson (2007) refers to as the "somatic senses." The haptic system, comprised of kinaesthesia (movement), proprioception (felt muscular position), and the vestibular system (balance), is another way in which individuals experience the body, as internally felt bodily sensations are evoked by the external world (Paterson, 2007). Of interest here is how older drivers, through the sensory experience of kinesis and haptic perception interact with their environment and acquire adaptive strategies that facilitate use of their personal automobile. As others (Lund, 2005; Paterson, 2007) have done, this research looks at how touch, and other interactions between the senses of touch and vision emerge through bodily movement to affect how people perceive their environment.

The first part of this paper outlines the distinctiveness of phenomenology, drawing primarily upon the work of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to highlight what phenomenological insights reveal about the embodiment of vehicle ingress/egress, as well as, the sensual experience of getting into and out of an automobile. Next, we outline how a phenomenological, gerontological approach is well-equipped to depict reflexive and reflective engagement with the sensory realm. Here, the concept of "somatic work" (Vannini, Waskul, & Gottschalk, 2012) is introduced to contextualize how older drivers sense and make sense of their internal carnal sensations during interaction with material and technological things. Empirical findings describe how the lives of older people are structured in relation to their sensory experience and embodied movement of vehicle entry/exit.

Phenomenology and sensuality of vehicle ingress/egress

The study of the lived body, everyday life, and the intersubjective connection between people, the world, and mundane physical (and technological) objects has long been a topic of phenomenological discussion and investigation. From this perspective, subjectivity is not viewed as an inner, private state that is "set back from the world" (Crossley, 1995: 61), but a quality that entails "sentient engagement with and openness to the world, which assumes an embodied and cultural form" (Crossley, 1995: 61). The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1962) is central to this approach, as it erodes popular Cartesian mind-body dualism, which sees the body as a passive object secondary to the consciousness of the mind. Instead, Merleau-Ponty (1962) conceptualizes bodies as "sensible-sentient, communicative, practical and intelligent beings" (Crossley, 1995: 60) and the medium by which human perception is based. Moreover, how the body perceives, understands, and knows the physical and social world is made possible by way of sensual experience, a body that relates to the corporeal sensations of pain, arousal, movement, and so on.

Phenomenological reflections on the body in motion bring into view the intentionality of the body, as it inhabits space. For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the spatiality of a situation directs how the body will move and position itself relative to the requirements of the task in question. The confluence of body,

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