



Driving to save time or saving time to drive? The enduring appeal of the private car



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ABSTRACT

Use of the private car is often viewed as highly problematic. It is regularly associated with global physical, social and ecological harms such as climate change and the high incidence of lifestyle diseases, including heart disease. Attempts to address these problems generally include provision for day-to-day physical mobility based on alternatives to the private car. Labelled alternative transport, these modes include public transport, walking and cycling. Yet the private car continues as the preferred way to travel in many cities. A deeper understanding of this preference can reveal under explored sites of resistance to alternative transport modes.

This paper contributes to these understandings by examining the role the car as a time saving device plays in sustaining automobility. Its central proposition is that individual decisions to drive are not necessarily motivated by the desire to save time. The paper draws on empirical evidence on the journey to work in Australia's largest city, Sydney. Using a systematic process of trip substitution analysis, a group of people were identified who could use alternative transport to get to work in the same amount of time it currently takes them to drive. These people then participated in a series of in-depth interviews where deeper attachments and motivations for private car use were explored.

This approach has enabled development of the multi-layered understanding that informs the central proposition that individual decisions to drive are not necessarily motivated by the desire to save time. Instead, automobility is sustained by appeals to flexibility and autonomy, as well as the interminable pull of the sensory experience provided by the cocoon of the car. This way of thinking about resistance to alternative transport exposes a series of inconsistencies between the expectations of those planning for, and those anticipated to one day use, alternative transport.

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1. Introduction

The endemic use of the private car regularly engenders scathing critique for its relationship with global physical, social and ecological harms such as climate change and the high incidence of lifestyle diseases including heart disease. As a result, automobility is often situated as a problem that needs urgent attention.

Ways of being physically mobile without the use of the private car are increasingly promoted in multiple regulatory arenas as a solution to this problem (Docherty and Shaw, 2008). Collectively labelled alternative transport, these substitute

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modes include public transport (such as fixed rail, light rail and bus transport) and active transport (such as walking and cycling¹). Despite this endorsement, there remains resistance to alternative transport (Sheller, 2012). While there is evidence that some cities have experienced a plateau or even decrease in private car use (Millard-Ball and Schipper, 2011), in many urban areas private car use continues to dominate as the preferred way to satisfy requirements and desires to be mobile (see for example Australian Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE) 2012).

Successful promotion of alternative transport modes needs to be underpinned by better understandings of preferences for automobility. This paper contributes to these understandings by examining the role the car as a time saving device plays in automobility's ongoing appeal. Its central proposition is that individual decisions to drive are not necessarily motivated by the desire to save time. The role time plays in sustaining automobility is explored, and a number of alternative explanations for why car-use continues to endure are proposed.

The paper draws on empirical evidence on the journey to work in Australia's largest city, Sydney. As a low-density city characterised by a dispersed geography of employment, Sydney's 4.6 million residents are highly reliant on the private car for day-to-day mobility (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This reliance endures in the face of attempts to regulate and plan for the use of other modes, and, in some cases, the availability of time competitive alternative transport. Accordingly, this study has an intentional focus on those who continue to drive in the face of expedient alternatives. Using a systematic process of trip substitution analysis, a group of people were identified who could use alternative transport to get to work in the same amount of time it currently takes them to drive. These people then participated in a series of in-depth interviews where deeper attachments and motivations for private car use were explored. This approach has enabled development of the multi-layered understanding that informs the central proposition that individual decisions to drive are not necessarily motivated by the desire to save time.

1.1. Transport and time

Popular preference for the private car is traditionally conceptualised as motivated by rational and utilitarian factors, such as the desire to save time or increase reliability (for example Brownstone and Small, 2005). More recently, focus has trended towards the role of the psychological appeal of the automobile, with an emphasis on the way the car fulfils various symbolic and emotional needs (for example Steg et al., 2001; Steg, 2005; de Groot and Steg, 2007; Bergstad et al., 2011). The new mobilities literature has developed concurrent to these more conventional ways of understanding automobility's endurance (Cresswell, 2006; Hannam et al., 2006). This literature positions the car as instrumental to a socio-technical system, determining not only the way we travel and the spaces in which we travel, but also 'the formation of gendered subjectivities, familial and social networks, spatially segregated neighbourhoods, national images and aspirations to modernity and global relations ranging from transnational migration to terrorism and oil wars' (Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 209).

In traditional utilitarian approaches to transport behaviour, time is often regarded as a major barrier to the uptake of alternative transport in that walking, cycling and public transport use is usually positioned as taking more time than driving (see for example Newman (2003); on walking; Winters et al. (2010) on cycling and Corpuz (2006) on public transport). In this literature, the car dominates travel choice partly because it allows people fast access the destinations they want to access. It allows people to save time. Inherent to this approach is the idea that time spent on transport is time that is wasted and should be minimised. More recent transport research, however, presents a powerful rebuttal to this assumption by suggesting that the benefits people gain from automobility extend beyond simple accessibility. Time in the car, therefore, is not necessarily time that is lost.

Research exploring and demonstrating this suggestion comes from various fields, ranging from psycho-social approaches (Gatersleben and Appleton, 2007), to those that focus on driving as a practice that is politically and economically structured (Böhm et al., 2006) and culturally inculcated (Sheller, 2004; Thrift, 2004; Freudendal-Pedersen, 2009). At one level is research describing the multitude of ways people use their travel time in the car productively. An ethnographic study by Laurier (2004), for example, describes in detail the work a female executive undertakes to do in the car transitioning from one appointment to the next. This work was recently extended by Laurier and Dant (2012) who conclude that automobility is increasingly a practice of using the space of the car during travel time. This space, they claim, will become increasingly functional as technology renders the driver within the car progressively less 'preoccupied' with the actual task of driving and increases opportunities to undertake other tasks, such as making phone calls, scheduling appointments and paying bills. Bull (2004) explores the way people experience and use sound in the car, describing the car as "potentially one of the most perfectible of acoustic listening chambers" (247) with the sound from the stereo adding to the positive affect gained from travelling through changing landscapes. Edensor (2003, 2004), and Walsh (2010) describe similar situations. A study by Basmajian (2010) explores the way women use time spent in the car driving to and from work to catch up with children and prepare for the evening's demands. This work updates an earlier study by Dowling (2000) which examined the way time in the car supports practices of parenting. This notion was explored more recently in a similar study by Jensen et al. (2014).

¹ Public transport is often treated in health-related literature as active transport. The distinction of 'active transport' within the phrase 'alternative transport' has been retained in recognition that barriers to walking and cycling are often explicitly different to those articulated for public transport. Any reference to the collective of transport modes, other than the private car, is termed 'alternative transport'. Where relevant, distinction is made between public and active transport as alternative modes.

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