



The social context of informal commuting: Slugs, strangers and structuration

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ABSTRACT

Despite considerable interest in the role of social interactions and social context on transportation, there have been very few attempts to explore specific cases of social interaction influencing transportation systems. This paper explores the social practice of slugging, an informal system of carpooling in the Washington, DC area. Slugging emerged in response to the establishment of Virginia's High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes in the early 1970s, as single drivers picked up riders alongside the road (slugs) in order to meet the requirements for driving in the less congested HOV lanes. Drawing on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens, as well as the sociological insights of Georg Simmel and Stanley Milgram, we suggest that the practice of slugging highlights the processes of institutionalization and structuration. This paper details how the region's mass transportation policies and urban culture have combined to result in an institutionalized practice with particular norms and logics of behavior. We conclude that looking at specific cases where social context has affected transportation, like slugging, could provide useful insights on the impact of social context on transportation policies and systems.

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1. Introduction

While carpooling was once seen as a promising avenue for reducing congestion and strain on transportation infrastructures, the number of people carpooling, at least in the US, has fallen off dramatically over the past decade, largely due to the inflexible nature of pre-arranged or subscription carpools (Pisarski, 2006). Despite this trend, a new type of informal, or casual, carpooling has emerged in a few cities. This form of carpooling, often called slugging, involves impromptu carpools formed among strangers in order to meet the requirements of High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes. To date, the oldest and largest system of slugging has emerged in the Washington, DC region, with smaller systems also documented in Houston and San Francisco (Burris and Winn, 2006).

To a large extent, slugging has emerged and continues to function efficiently without any policy interventions. Rather, a system of norms has developed which serves to facilitate interaction among participants. In recent years, there has been increased interest about the impact of social interaction and social context on transportation, which are recognized as having a large impact on the effectiveness of transportation policy (see for example Axhausen, 2003; Dugundji et al., 2008; Paez and Scott, 2007). However, to date, there have been very few attempts to explore specific cases of social interaction influencing the operation of transportation systems. In this paper, we will explore the practice of slugging in the Washington, DC region

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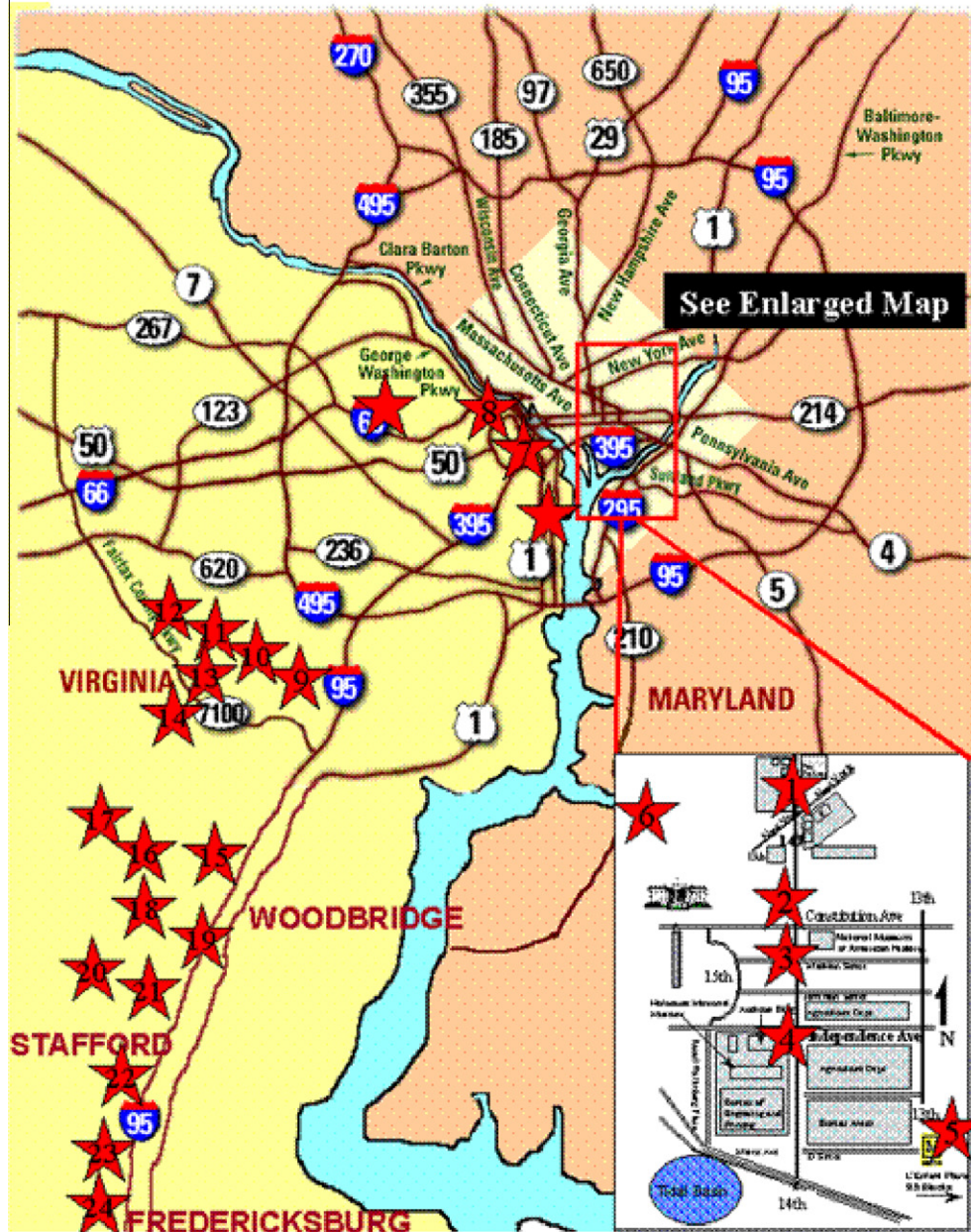
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and seek to gain some potential insights into the impact of social context on transportation systems and policies. Coming from the field of sociology, however, our approach will differ in many respects from the usual contributions in transportation research. Nonetheless, it is our hope to introduce some useful concepts from sociology to the transportation research community.

Slugging emerged in the Washington, DC region hand in hand with the ongoing development of HOV lanes. These lanes were first added to the I-95/I-395 corridor in 1969 but were originally designated for bus-only operation in order to increase bus ridership (Spielberg and Shapiro, 2000). However, the 1973 energy crisis prompted the opening of the HOV lanes to automobiles with four or more passengers. Originally, the HOV lanes on the I-95/I-395 corridor extended from Washington, DC to Springfield, VA. But since that time, HOV lanes have been extended on I-95 as far south as Fredericksburg, VA (over 50 miles from DC). In addition, HOV lanes were introduced on I-66 in 1993, which extended from I-395 to western Fairfax County.

Figure 1: Map of Slug Lines



Source: www.slug-lines.com, retrieved on July 6, 2009.

Fig. 1. Map of slug lines.

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