

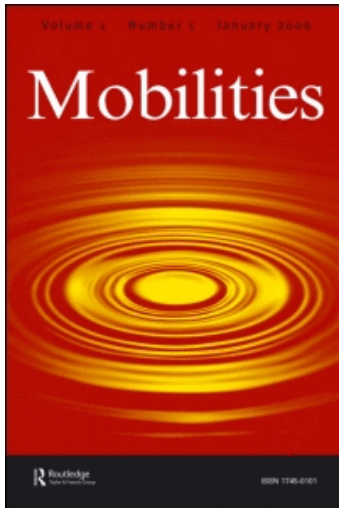
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### Driving and 'Passenger': Notes on the Ordinary Organization of Car Travel

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# Driving and ‘Passenger’: Notes on the Ordinary Organization of Car Travel

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**ABSTRACT** *We spend ever-increasing periods of our lives travelling in cars, yet quite what it is we do while travelling, aside from driving the vehicle itself, is largely overlooked. Drawing on analyses of video records of a series of quite ordinary episodes of car travel, in this paper we begin to document what happens during car journeys. The material concentrates on situations where people are travelling together in order to examine how social units such as families or relationships such as colleagues or friends are re-assembled and re-organised in the small-scale spaces that are car interiors. Particular attention is paid to the forms of conversation occurring during car journeys and the manner in which they are complicated by seating and visibility arrangements. Finally, the paper touches upon the unusual form of hospitality which emerges in car-sharing.*

**KEY WORDS:** driving, passengers, interaction, car travel

## Introduction

With the grand convergence and proliferation of multiple resources for and expectations of mobility, more and more of us are travelling, and making our homes in cars (Larsen, Urry & Axhausen, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Yet cars are not simply devices that help us get from A to B. The morning traffic jams that congest our cities have become for many the start to their working day. We eat breakfast in our cars, phone friends, talk politics. Journeys in them have become part of the routine occasions for our everyday talk and activity. Parked in a quiet spot the car is where many teenagers go

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to begin love-lives beyond the parental gaze back home. Cars have, in short, become places we inhabit without necessarily being places designed to be habitable.

If we rely on simply charting the increases in mobility and car use, or calculating and lamenting the environmental cost, we will miss the reconfiguration of many familiar social formations into the car: police work, for example (Pica, Sorenson & Allen, 2004). Perhaps because the car has become emblematic of the mass-produced object (Urry, 1999, 2000), the root noun of Fordism, we assume that as society briefly manifests itself there, it is in a state of suspended animation as it passes from A to B. This paper takes the lead of a number of theorists of speed and mobility who have turned this notion around, animating the suspension, as it were, and placing movement at the heart of how our societies and cultures are continuously organised (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2000). In our project we have been interested in following the ambitious routes laid out by Cresswell and Urry: re-specifying what have tended to become overly abstract theories and models of transportation.

This paper explores how it is that cars are made more or less successfully 'habitable' for us in our everyday activity.<sup>2</sup> Using video records of passengers and drivers we explore and document the many ways in which cars form a crucial part of our everyday lives (Brown, Green & Harper, 2002; Perry & Brodie, 2005; Thrift, 2004; Urry, 2002). The Habitable Cars Project from which the empirical materials originate examines a straightforward question: *what do we do in cars, and how do we do it?* The intention of this paper, then, is to swivel around academic armchairs so as to better view the backseat of the family car in all its banana-skinned, half-empty drink carton glory, and better attune ears to Wogan in the morning rush hour as a queue begins to back up on the sliproad.

In our project we have deliberately considered situations where people travel in cars *together*, or to give it a more praxiological ring, as 'a together'. Part of the Habitable Cars Project's *raison d'être* is that the one-person-one-car mode of travelling continues to be immensely wasteful of resources, and thus environmentally harmful. The project and this paper's interest is in routine practices of people who sometimes struggle and sometimes delight in travelling in a car together. The project has used the unfamiliar term 'collective private transport' to gather together the disparate situations where a number of people – be they friends, families, acquaintances or colleagues – find themselves sharing a vehicle more, or less, informally. We use the term to mark out a terrain that lies between and in various ways asks us to re-assess the usual contrast between an assumed communal 'public transport' and individualised 'private transport'. We would have preferred to talk of 'car-sharing' except that this phrase has become associated with formalised share schemes (which are nonetheless one of the instances to which we refer). The concept of *sharing* the tight space of the car and the routes that it travels with others being at the heart of the common situation in which car travellers find themselves (Blum, 2003; Raffel, 2006).

## Studying the Car

As Miller remarks, the car has been a surprising absence in our discussions of social and cultural life, though Miller's (2001) own edited collection alongside Featherstone *et al.* (2005) wide-ranging theme issue and book have begun to fill out our understanding of the car's role in the world. Indeed, there have been several recent

studies of the relationship between the city and the car, notably (Sheller & Urry, 2003), the family and the car (Sheller, 2005) and inequality and the car (Shove, 2003). Drawing on actor-network theory, the car has been used to examine how hybrids of vehicle and human create new forms of emotional agency (Michael, 1998, 2000). The pleasures and transformations of listening to music in the car have been studied by Bull (2005). Historical documentation of the gradual emergence of the motorway as a distinctive place requiring new codes of conduct has been examined through a Foucauldian lens (Merriman, 2006). Moreover there has been a long-running, if intermittent, collection of ethnographies of the road (Appleyard, Lynch & Myer, 1964; Juhlin, 2005; K. Lynch, 1960; Venturi, Brown & Izenour, 1988; Watson, 1999) and of transport and mobility more generally (Cresswell, 2006; Watts, 2005; Weilenmann, 2003).

In almost all of the existing literature what happens in the interior of the car remains largely unexamined, which is hardly surprising given the practicalities of doing ethnographic fieldwork there (there are rare examples such as Katz, 1999; Laurier & Philo, 1998). Of course, the fields of transport geography, economics, road policy, environmental science and the like have all taken the outside of the car – or more specifically its movements and infrastructures – as an important topic. The inside, however, is perhaps almost too trivial, as a space not of state, city and politics but one of family argument, refreshments and gossip (Morris, 1988).

Indeed, a constitutive feature of the phenomenon we have chosen to investigate is the generally unremarkable, anything but noteworthy, character of our ways of speaking about and during the routine activities of travelling together in the car (unless practical problems arise). It may sound odd to topicalise mundane, ordinary, down-to-earth, everyday activities under headings such as 'doing driving', 'doing passengering' or 'doing conversation' in traffic, the 'enormous work' it takes to produce the order of traffic, and other apparently 'obvious' car phenomena (Sacks, 1984). However, what we are proposing to attempt is to integrate the analysis of talk in and about cars with the description of the phenomenon; that is, the collective achievement of members of traffic cohorts. In an echo of studies of scientists at work the aim here is to describe how occupants of vehicles as local traffic analysts go about formulating, when and how it occurs, as a socially organised fact (Bjelic, 2004; Garfinkel, 2002; M. Lynch, 1993). Our focus is on the 'local availability' of what is happening and what might happen next: a hopeful reminder of the occasioned settings in which traffic talk, its variability or uniformity, makes sense – in commonsensical terms at least (e.g. in a driving lesson, stuck in a traffic jam). That is to say, the outside doesn't happen without the inside: without the local organisation and activity of the car, the external concerns of those who study transport, disappear.

An important question thus arises: does the idea of 'talking traffic', or for that matter 'talk in traffic', make much sense in an academic setting? From an ethno-methodological perspective, driven to naturalist perfection, it makes perfect sense. Indeed, a recent radical field of topical inquiry has arisen from the relationship between traffic and traffic talk: mobility studies. For many, naturalistic description generates a curious cluelessness as to why we would want to do such work. Of course, there are a number of reasons for doing studies of naturally organised ordinary activities, spelt out by others elsewhere (Livingston, 1987; M. Lynch, 2002; Watson, 1999). Very briefly, they return us to matters of research concern, but

re-specified by the ordinary. Rather than some of the more obscure issues that motivate social science, these are matters of daily concern otherwise overlooked because we are immersed in their familiar, routine and trustworthy appearances. Studies of how mundane car travel is accomplished locally provide descriptions that re-familiarise us with the centrality of the unremarkable and indispensable.

### Group Analysis of Video Data

For a piece of research rooted in the social sciences this paper is unusual in that its authors number 14. The analytic event and chosen method offer some explanation for such a large number of contributors. The authors worked closely with others in three groups on 24 video clips of between two and five minutes in length from a corpus recorded in six different vehicles with varying passengers. The clips were analysed in three two-hour sessions (and could have been analysed for much longer). The analysts came from a variety of backgrounds in social, cultural and technological research. What the video clips provided was more than a common point of reference; they supplied a point of regular return to balance our academic desire to find points of departure. As such we kept returning to the video footage to remind us what had actually happened during particular episodes of travelling together in the car (Heath, 1997). Much like a careful reading of a novel, advertisement or film, we viewed, and repeatedly re-viewed, each clip. Our aim was to describe what was happening during the recording, the ways in which it was made recognisable for those at the time, and for us later as analysts.

The paper's findings are presented under seven headings, namely: *driving together; the distinctiveness of talk-in-cars; visuality in the car; the interplay between being drivers and passengers and being family members; the hospitality of drivers and passengers; slow conversations in the car; and how the journey is used by occupants of the car for organising their talk*. This suite of notes on features of automobility is not intended as a rigid typology or set of definitions of the social life of the car. There are, after all, many more features besides the ones we have assembled here that were commented on during our workshop and in other studies of car-sharing (Balch, 2005). Rather, the findings represent those attributes of car habitation that our observations and preliminary analyses condensed around. In future papers we intend to deepen the analysis of particular topics that here are presented as a portfolio of empirical materials on a number of emerging themes. Our hope is that while we lose a unifying topic or argument, by way of compensation, we can offer the reader glimpses of how life is being lived on the UK's roads and how various activities of a non-transportational kind are undertaken there (Lyons & Urry, 2005; Mondada, 2004; Watts, 2005).

In presenting these seven themes we hope to open up and describe some of our common car situations: elements of what happens on a daily basis inside the car and how it happens during car journeys. Of course, our interest is not only in these themes and situations – we want to reflect on what they could tell us about collective private travel. As such, understanding even one situation in the car is of worth, whatever the generality of those findings. For many, who like to jump quickly from the fragment to the whole of mobile society, we ask for some patience; and the acknowledgement that the whole is always made from parts that never quite fit

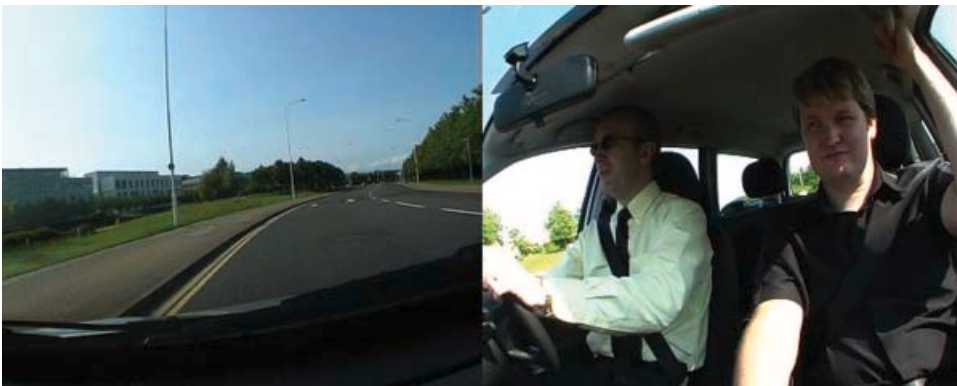
together. We ask that the reader be sensitive to, not just the generalities, but the routes marked out by our fragments. We do not claim to provide an overview or total explanation of automobility, but we do hope to offer insights that are sometimes reminders and sometimes novel findings.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a lengthy description of the Habitable Cars Project methodology; that is a task we will undertake in future publications. Nevertheless a few remarks will help put the video clips in context. For each of the 20 vehicles and their occupants studied during the project, the project researcher, where practical, travelled for a week with them learning about their lives, their daily journeys and more, before handing over a pair of camcorders with the request that the occupants record half a dozen or more of their typical journeys. S/he was present to add background details where appropriate during the video data sessions. Having two camcorders in the car undoubtedly led to various subtle shifts in the conduct of the car occupants. There were remarks from the participants to this end beforehand, during the recordings and afterwards. Comments were made such as 'the kids didn't fight as much as they usually do', 'I only swore three times because the cameras were there' and so on. At the same time, once we returned the recordings to the participants for their approval on DVD there were an equal number of comments on how routine and dull the footage was. From the outset we had made clear to participants that was exactly what we wanted – the routine. Moreover, clips selected for analysis were chosen on the criteria of the situation's typicality and familiarity. As we hope readers will realise, there is little in what follows that seems peculiar, suspect or all that extra-ordinary. As one of the paper's referees noted, much of the material describes in-car experiences that we already know.

## Analysis

### 1. *Driving Together*

We will begin with what always happens during car travel – driving. What happens once you have passengers? In contrast to the idea of the car driver as the individual consciousness – a 'ghost in the machine' (Ryle, 1949) – who looks out at the passing



**Figure 1.** Where's all the traffic?



'environment' (Watson, 1999) we found plentiful incidences of 'driving together' where front-seat passenger and driver were conjoined in their engagement with the road ahead. While we might want to assume the passenger is passive, and a great deal of policy and design assumes (or worse tries to ensure) that that is the case, this is, by and large, far from true. The common term 'back-seat driver' encapsulates the idea of the passenger that is not always passive in the car, and it marks the fact that their participation in driving can be morally dicey.

At various junctures and junctions, front-seat passengers displayed and accounted for their awareness of the car's relative position within evolving traffic formations, and of the driver's previous, current, and likely future, actions. Equally, drivers exhibited an awareness of their passenger's assistance, obstruction and evaluation of their (and others') driving. And as in the example below where the driver brought the road conditions to their passenger's notice.

Driver: Where's all the traffic?

Passenger: You have a valid point ((looks around)). Good sunny weather. Let's go home and have a barbecue

In the video clips, there were numerous incidences of front-seat passengers (and, less often, passengers in the back-seat) responding to the traffic: looking sideways at traffic lights, showing mild alarm on their face or tensing-up when other vehicles braked suddenly. Aside from these gestural involvements, they would comment frequently, as the driver did above, on the busyness and quietness of the roads. Although passengers expect the driver to get them from A to B comfortably and safely, unlike train carriage passengers they can, and do, become involved in the demands of driving the vehicle. Drivers called on the passenger for help in navigating, identifying and monitoring the proximity of obstacles in particular circumstances, and to execute certain challenging manoeuvres (Laurier, 2005). Passengers assisted in retrieving things from the interior of the car such as mobile phones, CDs, maps, documents, food and water, clothing and more. In response to incidents on the road, solicited by the driver or otherwise, passengers evaluated the actions, or intentions, of other drivers and their vehicles. In response to the driver's mood or energy we found passengers reassured them, calmed them down or helped keep them alert.

Given that the driver and front-seat passenger jointly experience the traffic conditions, that the passenger watches over the driver, does their bidding when requested, and that they work together at various stages of the journey, arriving at a destination can become a *shared* accomplishment. This is something that is more obvious in the extreme driving of rally cars but also applies to domestic driving. This leads us to redefine, in various ways, what car-sharing might involve, since in many ways the front-seat passenger becomes part of the 'crew' that drives the vehicle. To share the vehicle as a passenger is to become partly responsible for its driving and partly responsible for its driver. Passenger accomplishments in getting the car from A to B are not equal to those of the driver, of course, since the passenger only assists from time to time and back-seat passengers hardly at all. The passenger can be called to account – '*why did you not tell me I was going the wrong way*' – or equally in a tense

voice, 'yes I had seen the car jumping the light'. In studying various aspects of car transport what the passenger contributes remains overlooked by researchers with some notable exceptions (Ulleberg, 2004) even though it is frequently recognised by ourselves as drivers.

## 2. The Distinctiveness of Talk-in-cars

Alongside the central activity of driving, once you add a passenger cars become places of talk and places where the expectation, unlike an elevator, is that we will talk. Another key component of car passengering might then be an obligation to make passenger talk. What was remarkable in the video clips, and the corpus more widely, was how little extended silence there was; there were plenty of pauses and short silences, an issue we will return to later. There is, in fact, an avalanche of talk on a slew of topics. This very variety led us to formulate the question: is there anything distinctive about the way drivers and passengers manage to find their conversational topics? We are not sure whether we can confidently answer this slightly odd question, though the talk that happens in the car certainly offers us some material to work with. In fact it may not be that there are topics that are specific to drivers and passengers. Which is not to say that their way of getting to them, dealing with them and finishing them might well be specific to them.

By way of its bringing us into close proximity with others, the car provides a perspicuous setting where once we are there as the passenger or the driver we have to look for something (else) to talk about or sit in silence. Where this becomes particularly apparent was in the situation where there was a silence growing between passenger and driver. While it may seem odd to those who would say that a silence is merely the absence of conversation or more profoundly that silence is beyond language, silences are analysable phenomena and are analysed by those who hear them at the time (as well as by us afterwards) (M. Lynch, 1999). Needless to say, there are significant challenges for researchers in terms of *how* analysis of silences in the car is undertaken. Silences can be considered, variously: 'comfortable', 'uncomfortable', 'tense' or displaying attentive listening to the radio. Silences can be 'short', 'long', 'ambiguous', 'pre-occupied' (e.g. the driver says nothing for the journey) or emerge specific to a topic (where small talk is continued but the most pressing subject is left unspoken). Analysis of a silence can be informed by what is known already of the car co-occupants, by events on the road that have only just happened, by conversational topics that preceded silence, by their timing with a particular song on the radio, and more. Evidently much can be imputed to silence. But even though silence is mutually sensible, it is not necessarily mutually understood, nor agreeably produced.

Consider one of a number of clips in which a mother and grandmother (her mother-in-law) were travelling together in the front seats of the car as driver and passenger respectively (see figure 2). They struggled to generate more from the existing topic, retrieve an older one or find a new topic to talk about. There were 'long' uncomfortable silences, which were not long in terms of minutes on the clock. It was the grandmother, the passenger, who exhibited her discomfort, shifting around in her chair, glancing back and forth, looking as if she were starting to talk several times and then not talking. Meantime the mother could remain relatively





**Figure 2.** Triceratops

comfortably engaged in her duties as the driver. Up-front, with little to say to each other, it was the children seated in the back who mother and grandmother listened in to. From time to time, the children's chatter provided topics of conversation for the 'in-laws', and the children's squabbling provided occasions for their collaboration (or not) in keeping control.

Son:               And people were doing songs about dinosaurs and I got to be a steggasaw, I be a triceratops

Mum:             ((smiling)) were you? That's a very long word for a little boy

Grandmother: Oh gosh what's that tricer...

Mum:             Triceratops

Grandmother: Gosh

Alternatively, there were two office colleagues who fell into brief silences en route to work. Opening greetings and queries as to 'how are you today?' initiated news delivery sequences (Maynard, 2003) which took them sometimes as far as 15 minutes into their journey. Eventually a silence would arrive and grow and as often as not it was Terry Wogan's easy-natured banter that papered behind that silence; it was not that they were not talking to one another, they were returning to listening to Wogan. Not only did the radio throw a safety net over chasms of silence it provided topical resources. The BBC Radio 2 presenter's daily provision of national news, jokes, music and more provided them (and hundreds of thousands of other commuters) with a rich seam of topics for them to pick up and chew over.

Driving-in-traffic is one activity specific to the car that in itself initiates topics. The exercise of driving creates possibilities for talk about other cars and what they are doing, the daily appearance of traffic levels ('quiet today' – see Figure 1), recollection of past events on the road ('a guy almost hit me yesterday') and what happened and is happening to those present at that time, collectively *as* a car. As Sacks (1992) points out, we are ever attendant to local resources which can be brought into

conversation or indeed, should (or should not) be brought into conversation at risk of causing offence.

Rather like the telephone, although there is no predefined arrangement for *what* can be talked about, there are expectations about how drivers and passengers go about organising talk in the car (Hopper, 1992; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). While the telephone ordinarily connects just two persons at a time, in the car there can be three, four, five or more people involved in talk. In the arrangement of who sits where, beside whom and with their back to whom, expectations are produced of who will talk to whom. Without committing to a view of the physical structure of the car as deterministic or causative, our video clips highlighted the ongoing significance of the spatial arrangement of speakers and listeners. There are two features which Mondada (2004) alerts us to: first, rather than being arranged face-to-face, in the car we sit *side-by-side* and *front-to-back*; second, the lack of movement available to those in conversation. Picking up on the latter, the car's internal *immobility* is in contrast to the relative mobility of speakers inside houses and flats as they move around a room (getting up from the dinner table to bring food over) and from room to room (from hall into the kitchen where the other speaker is in the kitchen) (Mondada, forthcoming). In the car you cannot walk *away from* or walk *into* a conversation with another speaker. The person you are in the front of the car with is almost inescapably the person you are paired with, an issue with consequences that we return to later in the paper. In the car, co-occupants must find and deploy particular methods, in terms of taking turns, stopping and starting topics, speaker selection and so on, that deal with this unusual and fixed arrangement of speakers' bodies.

Having made these brief observations we would want to be cautious about comparing the car as a communication setting with an otherwise *generalised* notion of face-to-face conversation. The car is one particular framing of talking together amongst many others (such as the telephone mentioned above) which will also have their social and material framings. What makes this framing of significance is not that it is a particular instance of a general model, rather the car has become a conversational space that we can generalise to and from, due to its relatively uniform design.

### 3. *Visibilities of the Interior*

Related to the ways in which the rigid seating arrangements of the car create expectations about who will talk to whom, the fact of sitting together in particular arrangements also creates a distinctive regime of visibility. Unlike Bentham's panopticon, this architecture of visibility, which is as ubiquitous as the kitchen table, was not the manifestation of any particular disciplinary mechanism. Yet the car functions as a visibility device that makes certain groups recognisable and surveyable to those who are looking in from outside and in particular ways to those gathered together inside. Only a tiny minority of cars tint their windows to make their occupants invisible to other cars and pedestrians. Even with a still image, from a quick glance we tell ourselves what we see: 'a family' (Figure 2), 'commuters' (Figure 1).

In such apparently easy recognition, there are social typologies and categories being put to work (Hester & Francis, 2003). Think of observing others as they travel

on the motorway. We look across at passing vehicles and their occupants and see ‘a family’, ‘a couple’. Or, on witnessing a minor accident or an example of ‘road rage’ we may attribute more morally consequential categorisations such as a ‘boy racer’ or ‘Sunday driver’ (Katz, 1999). The car displays co-occupants as a unit ‘together’ in a way that is quite distinct from a bus or a train or even pedestrians on a pavement (Hester & Francis, 2003; Ryave & Schenkein, 1974). Indeed we may reasonably assume that there is a relationship other than that of co-travellers in the car.

This is how, in Figure 2, viewers of even the still image quite likely arrive at the conclusion, without the project researcher confirming the correctness of the conclusion, that what can be seen are two women, a grandmother (in the passenger seat) and a mother (driving) inferring justifiably that the two people in the back are the children of the woman driving. When, and if, the category ‘family’ is applied it collects these individuals together for the viewer (be they looking into the car from another vehicle or from this paper). As a collection of persons in one car of easily discernable ages they form a *gestalt* – with relations of mother–daughter, grandmother–grand-daughter and so on. A *gestalt*, of course, produces a set of analysable relations greater than the sum of the individuals visible in the car. The common categories such as ‘family’ can be mistakenly applied and it could be that that is not what we are seeing in the car at all. They might prove to be two social workers with two children in their care. Or a woman collecting her friend’s children while also giving her colleague a lift. Given that we are interested in being together in the car, what is of interest is not so much the correctness of any categorisation of the group seen in it, rather it is that this visual analysis of car occupants is so routinely accomplished.

A second point in relation to the visual arrangement of the car is its internal set-up for drivers and passengers. In Figures 1 and 2 the mother and grandmother, and the two commuters, appear to be looking away from each other, and never directly at each other. Leaving aside the slight distortion of perspective that is created by semi-fish eye lenses, the mutual monitoring of faces in car-based conversations cannot quite happen in the same way it would over a dinner table, or standing talking in the local park. The side-by-side arrangement established by the car’s layout requires a different way of organising how co-occupants show each other that they are listening or not listening, use gestures for taking a turn to talk or listen, and so on.

Whether one is the driver or a passenger is surely important in how mutual monitoring is accomplished. The passenger is free to look where they like, whereas drivers really ought to be predominantly watching the road and traffic ahead.

Intuitively, there seems an obvious case for asymmetry between the two roles, in terms of the freedom found to look and move during conversation. That is, once the car is moving, the driver’s attention will be more closely oriented to driving than will those of the passenger. The passenger will have greater licence to turn to face the driver, use hands to gesticulate and so on. Somewhat surprisingly our video clips did not demonstrate this sort of asymmetry. What we found were solutions to the driver’s dilemma – they would look in punctual rapid glances across at the passenger when and if they could fit it in amongst watching the road ahead. There seemed to be a commitment to retaining parity and similarity in the mutual attendance of occupants of the car’s front seats.

Regardless of their status, people travelling in the front seats of the car predominantly look out of the windows. This may seem obvious but the point is that the car thereby re-arranges the geometries of our mutual monitoring in ways that can produce a different sort of togetherness. In the video clips we found some people being intimate and others less so, and that much of this was bound up with catching one another's glances. The timeliness involved is reminiscent of laughter and its relationship to intimacy (Jefferson, Sacks & Schegloff, 1987), the other's glance being so much harder to catch when it flits back and forth like mayflies in the car. Quite why the balance between driver and passenger's mutual monitoring might be maintained in difficult circumstances becomes more apparent if we consider what sort of social object is built when, and if, the passenger looks at the driver for much greater lengths of time. The passenger is 'staring' at, 'scrutinising' or 'monitoring' the driver. Of course, there are acceptable ways of a passenger looking at a driver under other sorts of category-generated responsibilities such as where one is a driving instructor and the other a pupil. In the car, for family members, colleagues and acquaintances, the geometry of visibility most obviously resembles sitting on the sofa watching television together.

Under patient examination, the visibility arrangements of bodies between front- and back-seats become apparent as a further oddity of the car as a space for friends, family and colleagues speaking to one another. Conversations between front-seats and back-seats of the car are versed through a spatial arrangement that has those in the rear seats looking at the backs of the heads of those in the front (Figure 3). Even worse, those seated in the front are not positioned to see those in the back at all, unless by uncomfortably craning their necks, or by customised use of the small rear-view mirror and make-up mirror (and eye-to-eye contact using the rear-view mirror was entirely absent from our corpus, though use of the mirror by parents and carers to monitor children in the back was not). Back-seat speakers commonly lean forward (Figure 3) and into the gap between the front-seat speakers to launch or participate in conversations with them. The closing of a conversation was often marked by returning to their previous relaxed seating position in the front. For their part, front-seat speakers would turn their head without actually attempting to secure eye contact



Figure 3. Dying

with back-seat speakers in ways that indicated listening, agreeing or otherwise participating in the conversation. Initiating or re-initiating conversations as often began with some sort of shuffling and a clearing of the throat.

Backseat passenger: ((moves head which becomes visible in gap between seats))  
... new lease of life shortly before they die

Driver: Yes it can be strange [can't it]

+

Backseat passenger: [You hear] that, I mean, you hear that with people that suffer from cancer

Specific variations in visibility accepted, the car's basic layout also does much to separate the front-seats from the back. This social arrangement is amplified by levels of ambient road noise during travel so that on motorways conversation between the front and back is almost impossible. On the other hand, driving in the city at 15 mph, it *is* quiet enough that mum and grandmother can be *with* the children in the rear, even if they are not fully involved in their talk (as in Figure 2). More accurately, those in the front are an audience to the conversations of children, friends or colleagues in the rear, but an audience with their back turned. One obvious consequence of this back-to-front set-up is that speakers in the rear find it hard to monitor whether those in the front are responding/listening to what is being said. And when a young family travels, conventionally, those occupying the rear seats are children. Children's place in the car merits specific consideration, certainly more detailed than can be attempted here. As passengers, they will find themselves cut off by the front-seat-back-seat geography. Smaller bodies and voices create a whole extra set of conversational limitations. Effective display of reciprocal gestures is harder for those in the back since those seated in the front cannot be expected to see them. We find them leaning into the middle of the bench seat at the back, relying on audible interventions. In these ways and many others, driver and passenger conversation is shaped by the ordinary architectural fabric of the car.

#### 4. *A Small Place of Family Play, Dispute and Learning*

Despite our comments in the previous section on the challenges for children and adults to talk to one another between front- and back-seats, the car is recognised by parents as a good place to talk to their children because you have their fullest – though perhaps not undivided – attention (Taylor & Swan, 2005). And children find the car is a good place to talk to parents. With no one else there to distract their parents or carers they get time with mum *as* mum, dad *as* dad, grandma *as* grandma etc. whereas in other settings they might be competing with, say, mum-as-friend-to-someone-else, dad-as-cook, dad-as-TV watcher or mum-as-homeworker. Even so, in the car children *as* passengers have to deal with their parents' responsibility as drivers. Children's desire to occupy the front-seat is thus all the more understandable, since in this position they have fullest access to the captive parent (carer or grandparent). When they do win their way into the front-seat it is noticeable in all our clips of young families how the

children use their access to ask questions, make pleas, tell troubles, recollect events, describe objects, plot stories and more. As much as they are answering questions, handling pleas, hearing troubles, parents in the front are instructing their children in how to form their questions properly, plead for things (e.g. a family dog, a new toy), explain why teacher told them off and so on.

Boy: I'm BIG

Girl: You're *little*

Boy: I'm BIG

Girl: You're little

Gran: [Shoosh-shoosh-shoosh]

+

Boy: [I'm big]

Girl: [you're little]

+

Gran [Darlings, darlings]

Boy: I'm BIG (louder)

Mum: [>Shoosh:.....:<]

+

Girl: You're not a big brother to me. I'm bigger than you [aren't I]

Mum: Maisie's older than you my love

Boy: ((indecipherable)) and I'm big

Mum: But you're big for your age darling. Yes you're nice and tall. You're perfectly big for a three-and-a-half-year-old, it's just that Maisie's six.

As we can see from the transcript accompanying Figure 4, being consigned to the back-seats does not preclude children from securing front-seat attention. As we have noted earlier the front-seat adults are sometimes listening-in and sometimes not, so quite when attention is being paid it becomes harder to recognise. In the video clips a common pattern once young children in the back-seat have attracted the attention of adults in the front-seat was to become more and more boisterous. In the transcript above, the youngest boy present claimed that he was a 'big' brother to his elder sister, who was sitting alongside him. Their grandmother, the passenger in the front, is listening, and laughs (Figure 4). Aware of her laughter, both children sat up and the disagreement over big/little brother status became more animated. As their dispute escalated rapidly, the grandmother stepped in with a 'shushing' noise, before ultimately the mum-driver intervened in the argument between the children. She





**Figure 4.** Big/little

settled the argument with remarkable calm. There is, we are only too aware, a familiar routine in these outbreaks of rowdiness from young children in the back seats. A little bit of attention, once secured, leads to a performance which ordinarily ends with some form of calming down, reprimanding or telling off. Then relative quiet returns, at least for a while. What we should not forget is that there are opportunities here; the children are both imaginatively developing their skills of argumentation whilst also being instructed by their parents in the grammar of various concepts (Raffel, 2004). In the example above, of why, although the boy is 'big' for his age, that does not make him his sister's 'big brother'.

Cars are a setting for agreements and disputes over how a family works between family members and for others who travel with them. It is the very recurrence of similar situations in the car that makes them central to the ways in which hierarchies are re-established, rivalries emerge and are (sometimes) resolved, and explanations given for what children are allowed to do according to age, gender, illness and so on. In trying to settle disputes, parents instruct their children in the logical organisation of that fundamental social form, 'family'. They do so according to occasioned distinctions made between age, gender, what siblings should do for each other, what parents should do for children and vice versa. Simultaneously learning *when* and *how* to make relevant and use those distinctions is inseparably part of the lesson, and one about a much finer tuning than simply 'in' the car or 'not in' the car. And, of course, children learn about how a family should travel as a collective: from the simplicities of instructions for 'putting your seat belt on' to the pacing of toilet stops and snacking, choice of music to play, or sitting without bothering the person beside you. The car then is not simply a place for children to argue, get bored, or be transported from A to B; the car is a place for them to learn rules and rights, and how to use, bend, avoid, supplant or break them.

### *5. The Hospitality of Car-sharers*

Having dealt with how our notions of driver and passenger intersect with the daily enactment of the family we now turn to situations where work colleagues are

commuting together. Here we would like to shift focus slightly towards the situation where the car belongs to the driver which in certain ways puts them in the position of the host towards the passenger. For commuters, sharing the journey and the space of the vehicle can be a job in itself, all before paid work actually begins. In bracketed journeys, at the opening and closing of the working day, these relationships of host and guest, driver and passenger emerge, exist and end. Keeping this pairing a felicitous one requires a different sort of care and maintenance than the vehicle that transports them. Much like Balch's (2005) study of car-sharing, we found these special forms of acquaintanceship worthy of close scrutiny, not least because if the pooling of privately owned cars is to be encouraged, we have to understand what makes undertaking it appear such a perilous obligation. Sharing a car journey to work (or elsewhere) involves the unusual responsibility towards one another which we usually associate with those forms of co-habitation such as sharing a flat or an office. Although not quite a building, the car is, in some senses, a room that moves around, with, in the other sense of the word, very little living room inside.

However high the design standards, by its dimensions the car remains a small space and its confinement and proximity, as we have noted earlier, exert considerable pressure to speak. A particular type of private space, the car is where others are invited to be transported from one place to another, a place that it is notably unlike public transport where the social expectation of speech is reduced to the point of polite indifference. Car-pooling is an arrangement that at least in the UK draws upon, even as it threatens to erase or confuse, the private-public space distinction.

In limited ways, the driver, who is ordinarily the owner of the car, receives the passenger (in that they are in the car first) and becomes responsible for the welfare and comfort of their guest. From day to day, they may (or may not) offer a welcome to their vehicle, ask if their passenger is comfortable and so on. For whoever is the driver that day (many formal car-sharers and informal commuters swap around) they have some proprietary control over what are acceptable habits for shared travel. By the car's design for the driver's operation, the persons occupying the passenger seat might regard it polite and proper to ask before touching or altering cabin controls. Moreover, driver's are normally responsible for the entertainment, which is usually and simply the radio/CD player. They choose the radio station and it is usually their CDs that are slotted into the slim buckets at the bottom of the doors. Without trying to make the experience sound too painful, car-sharers tolerate one another's company, safe in the knowledge of the common good, or savings, they are making. In fact there are certain matters they can raise with car-share acquaintances precisely because they are not part of their friendship network: matters that might compromise loyalties or that might benefit from a disengaged perspective which owes no loyalty to shared friends.

For the passenger who becomes a guest in a car-sharing relationship they ought to reciprocate in some manner. Generally – though not always – by not only reversing the role regularly but by being a welcome guest. However, in some of the commuting cars we studied, the passengers were always passengers as they either did not drive at all or drove only as far as their host's house before transferring to their car. In this less reciprocal situation what constitutes a good guest, or good car pool passenger, is all the more crucial to the arrangement of sharing. Different kinds of conversational

and spatial formation matter here. For guest as much as host, hospitality was concretised in inquiring after and listening to personal news, stories and views (see also Balch, 2005). In some cars acquaintanceships appeared assured and relaxed, even well-tuned, the host–guest pairing seemingly dissolved, or perhaps it’s better to say, evolved into easy camaraderie. However, amid the distractions of traffic, we found misunderstandings and misheard conversation required frequent repair and consequently we found that guest–host pairings were at times precarious and tense. Car-sharing sometimes involved three or more people with changing numbers present depending on holidays, mis-matching logistics, swaps between cars and, therefore, who assumes the role of host. In the longer run the division of labour can become complex in terms of who did what for whom, who owes what to whom and who ought to be driving their car each week. Thus, while guest and host are background categories to driver and passenger they do not cause car-sharing patterns – they are resources for moral assessment of each person’s conduct during the journey (Sherlock, 2001).

Importantly, lift-giving, like gift-giving, is an anticipative arrangement. We found car-sharers planning ahead, trying to keep to an ongoing worked-out timetable of pick-up and drop-off points, and calculating their share of fuel costs. Folded into seemingly logistical concerns were anticipative assumptions. Outside of the daily concerns of the next lift, just what and how various topics were discussed were also oriented to the future journeys together and those topics’ re-appearance. For the drivers and passengers we studied, who liked to avoid confrontation, car pool talk was not so much circumscribed or curtailed, rather, it was an ongoing search for ‘safe’ topics (Sacks, 1992) such as, classically, ‘the weather’ or ‘holidays’. Their ways of speaking were characterised by open-ended questions, tentative, rounded-off sorts of answers and, from time to time, quietly bitten tongues. Alternatively, for those pairs of drivers and passengers who liked nothing more than a heated debate the car was the perfect setting to try and start one.

Driver: I was feeling really sorry for these Muslim families in Leeds, I mean

[imagine]

+

Passenger: [Mhm]

Driver: discovering that your son had been, you know, away learning to be a terrorist and you thought he was doing some extra religious ((change gear and slow down))

Driver: But was doing, they were doing religious instruction and things like that ‘n’ (1.0) you know those guys ((looks across to passenger))

Passenger: Yeah, how are they so sure about it, I never [really, you know]

Driver: [because they have been abroad] have been abroad and on, on training

Passenger: Oh I see

Accommodating a hitch-hiker provides a useful point of comparison with car-sharing. Picking up a hitch-hiker (today an almost forgotten practice) is a *one-off* act of hospitality that does not undermine the driver's freedoms. Should the shared journey be found boring, uncomfortable or even scary, it does not have to be repeated. In contrast, a driver agreeing to a car-sharing arrangement opens herself up to a regular commitment, one that has, at the very least, the potential for the awkwardness of small talk and the even greater awkwardness of big talk. Yet that is also the exciting potential of car-sharing; your passengers or drivers really might be, if not fellow travellers, equally as worthwhile sources of stimulation, valuable stories, advice and more.

### 6. *Slow Conversation Inside the Fast Car*

Returning to the nature of driver and passenger talk, where in section two we emphasised both the abundance and expectation of conversation and some of the anxieties over the emergence of silences, here we would like to turn our attention towards the pause-fullness, and slowness, of car conversation. The long pauses taken between turns at talk are an unremarkable and ordinary feature of conversations in the car. For the driver there is driving, for the passengers looking at the landscape, listening to the radio or to chattering children in the back. There are, then, a number of background absorptions available to those present as a safety net to fall back on. 'Difficult' conversations generate breaks, extended pauses and other sorts of silences.

Notably, travelling together in the privacy of the car, away from home, away from the workplace, is an occasion enabling conversations on very serious topics. That is, the car becomes a good place for certain sorts of conversations: the very kind that might generate pauses, need pauses, and yet want those pauses not to become too uncomfortable. By way of comparison, think of how Freud sat with his back to his patients, or of the importance of walking for certain kinds of slow, contemplative conversing. On long car journeys, the physical confines of the setting are thus a useful place to raise difficult issues. Individuals cannot walk away from the conversation, and the stretched out silence that the car enables allows for slow and considered responses to complex or difficult issues.

Passenger: I was overhearing a conversation and I butted into the conversation so she was right to tell me that, you know, I shouldn't have. But the way she said it, it was just like, you know 'why do you think you're talking to me now!' And I just said 'well okay you know I just thought I'd help' and then went away. And you know the way she said it, it was really, you know, sticking a knife in your heart and turning it round

Compared to a telephone conversation, car-bound intimates and strangers can leave long gaps and take extended and broken-up turns to tell their troubles and tell stories, and tell troubles as stories. For workmates on their way home from work, the car is a place where they are allowed to launch into confessionals as well as voice complaints about other colleagues.

### 7. *The Uses of a Car Journey*

Up until now we have made much of the interplay between the space of the car and organisation of talk. A crucial feature of travelling together for the drivers and passengers we were studying was the routine nature of their journeys. They were travelling along the ways that they knew well; to inhabit the car was also to inhabit its routes. During these daily journeys, the world around the car moves towards and past it, in and out of it, and is more or less present in conversation. Sometimes the world around the car forms part of the responses of those sitting inside (either in talk or gesture), other times it is ignored. For its co-occupants, the car provides a shared intentional space. They have a common project in mind, of leaving somewhere, travelling without accident, injury or serious dispute, and arriving somewhere else. The commutes and school runs of the video footage shared qualities of repetitiveness and repetition: as each journey unfolds it drew upon the habits, routes and conversations of the however many journeys that had happened previously and was in anticipation of those that lay in the future. For instance the troubles told in Figure 5 on the journey home were taken up again the next morning, after the passenger had spoken to her husband. They were taken up with her colleague and driver to help plan how and whether she ought to make a complaint about their shared colleague at work.

There are temporal dimensions to the activities undertaken in each and every mutually intended journey. To rehearse an old travelling aphorism, each journey must have a beginning, middle and an end. These analysable, recognisable and quite mundane features of the journey provide an organisational structure that framed what could possibly be accomplished during a trip by car. On the well-trodden paths recorded in the video clips the driver and passengers initiated talk about a particular matter with a shared sense of how long they had to complete their conversation. They were not conversing ‘in general’; they were always doing something specific like delivering news, telling troubles (Figure 5) or commenting on the conditions of the roads etc. When initiating requests, long or short stories, sharing a joke and so on, they knew how it would likely fit the stage of the journey they were in at the time.



Figure 5. Trouble



Our footage of commuters who travelled the same route every day showed this awareness in action. Passing known-in-common features commuters projected that there were five or ten minutes left until arriving at work or home or, more subtly, arriving at sections of the road likely to demand the driver's attention. For instance, certain kinds of question – sometimes open, sometimes closed – were posed at appropriate slots for being responded to by the other in relation to what stage they were at in the journey. In the middle of the school run one child discussed what dogs do in a hypothetical manner with her mother, switching artfully to a serious request when they approached the end of the trip. 'So, how was your weekend?' was not asked just as the commuters turned into the office car park, though 'what time are you leaving today?' was. Of course, not all journeys are commutes or school runs with a known, anticipatable course. In leisure time, car travellers explore new areas and sometimes just go for a run. The open-endedness of these journeys means they can last longer than anything the travellers could possibly plan to talk about.

### Closing Remarks

In traditional economic models, journey time is formulated in terms of cost and is, broadly speaking, 'lost' (Lyons & Urry, 2005). Regardless of who is with us, travel time is time *spent*; it is not time savoured, hated, shared, enjoyed or recollected. The diverse social activities we have sketched out here that occur during ordinary journeys are, therefore, to a monetary way of thinking, of little or no value. By documenting the everyday activities of people travelling together as families, colleagues or friends as we have done in this paper what we hope is becoming apparent is that the time we pass in the car is of value in other significant ways beyond, or parallel to, the necessary reductions of traditional economic models.

We hope from the paper it is apparent that what happens in the space of the car should not be seen in isolation from other places. Given that the 'Habitable Cars' Project concentrates on the journey, and, in methodological terms, only asked its subjects to record while in the car, it has that located and partial view of how travelling together is organised. From many quarters in the social sciences we have come to understand that there are only ever located and partial views of society (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Latour, 2005). Moreover we would argue, in tune with others (Urry, 2000), that there are all manner of social phenomena occurring during the journey that are worthy of the attention of those interested in how life happens while in motion. The clips we have commented on here show, to an extent, the car as a *translation and displacement* of the office or the domestic spaces which the drivers and passengers also shared. For instance, we have two colleagues from a financial services company talking work on the commute – the family units adapting aspects of the life they lead in houses, schools and parks into the car. In these ways, what might be thought of as the travellers' lives 'outside' the journey are thoroughly folded into it. Given the particularities of cars as small-scale architectural spaces, they offer occasions which disrupt and demand the re-assembly of whatever the social relations and the politics of the office and the house are. Cosseted in the car,



there is a chance for an intimate yet interrupted exchange: the child asking parents for things or asking awkward questions; the office workers talking through an issue.

The connecting thread running through the paper has been one of what happens once we have passengers in the car. What sorts of possibilities emerge once the space of the automobile is being inhabited with others? How might we rethink and understand features such as the interior architecture of the car, mutual visibility and so on? What sorts of implications does being a passenger have for the organisation and daily workings of the family? How might the presence of passengers be not only an additional responsibility as a host but also bring benefits such as being an audience for our daily troubles? In sketching out some answers from our video records there might be the outline of a tentative sociology of passengers and passengering.

Through the seven themes in the paper we have re-examined, if only partially and tentatively, the value and practical logics of a number the daily activities that take place within the car.

1. Against the conceptualisation of the driver as a lone Cartesian self contemplating an external road, driving can also be understood as a socially ordered activity with passengers as *legitimate* and *illegitimate* participants in particular tasks.
2. Conversations that we typically imagine taking place over dinner or breakfast tables have been shifted into the space of the car. While the car does not determine what can be said there, in making conversation in its unusual setting *as* drivers and passengers we have different resources and problems.
3. Specific *arrangements of visibility* are manifest in the car in terms of how any vehicle is seen by those outside it, and how those inside it are able to watch, monitor and display what they are doing to one another.
4. For families, in particular, the car is a setting where, as passengers and drivers, parents and/or carers and children are assembled tightly together. It has become an unexpectedly significant place for parents to learn about and dialogue with their children, and for children to learn from their parents.
5. For commuters, sharing a car brings them into a relationship of responsibility and care for one another that is located somewhere between friendship, neighbourliness, house-sharing and office-sharing. With these curious mixes of host/guest and driver/passenger come new expectations, obligations towards and values for one another.
6. By virtue of the pause-full, interruptible conversations we have in the car, while much of it is trivial, equally it can be a good place for some of our most serious conversations on matters of life, love and death.
7. Just as the car offers us a resource as a particular sort of space, so the car journey has features which are realised and utilised by persons, be they colleagues, families or friends travelling together. The idea of the 'Sunday drive' is the beginning of such a notion.

Quite how these initial sketches of a sociology of passengering in the car are detailed and elaborated will be the concern of future papers that will closely analyse the video fragments that we have only been able to cite in passing here. Nevertheless, we hope

this paper has served to open up the interior of the car, as it journeys, as a place of import for society and substantial interest for social science investigations. Moreover the idea of the passenger and the practices of passengering extends beyond the car, and it would surely be of interest to contemplate other forms of mobility in which the idea and actuality of the passenger plays a central part.

## Notes

1. Note though that we are not, on average, spending more time travelling per day than we did before. It is our mode of travel that is changing. We walk much less, we cycle less, we boat less, we bus less, we train less and travel by horse, almost not at all.
2. More details on 'Habitable Cars: the organisation of collective private transport' at [http://web.ges.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/Habitable\\_Cars/](http://web.ges.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/Habitable_Cars/)

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### **Appendix – Transcription symbols**

[hi]  
+ overlapping speech  
[hello]  
(3.0) pauses in seconds  
it was today speaker emphasis  
((hand goes up)) non-verbal actions  
= latched speech  
(sauce/source) uncertain transcription of words