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## **'Driven to distraction?': Children's experiences of car travel**

### ***Abstract***

Cars have become increasingly significant features in the lives of many children and adults in the UK and elsewhere. Whilst there is a growing body of research considering how adults experience automobility, that is the increasingly central role of cars within societies, there has been little equivalent research exploring children's perspectives. Drawing upon a variety of methods including personal diaries, photographs, in-depth interviews and surveys amongst schools within Buckinghamshire and North London, the paper contributes to filling this gap in existing research through exploring how cars are not only journey spaces for children, but are also sites for play, relaxation, homework, companionship, technology and the consumption of commodities. Using a Foucauldian analysis of power, insights into wider familial processes relating to mobility are provided by exploring how cars are sites of conflicting power relations between parents and children. The paper also explores how children's everyday experiences of cars were framed by wider sets of power relations, including car corporations which design and manufacture these spaces, and the role of capital which commodifies everyday activities in cars. In doing so, the paper challenges existing research on automobility for only focusing upon adults experiences of cars and begins to theorise a more inclusive account of automobility which incorporates children and young people.

Keywords: cars, children, automobility

## ***Introduction***

Cars have played a highly significant role in contributing to increased levels of mobility, accounting for 64% of all journeys in the UK in 2005, compared with 46% in 1975/6 (DfT, 2005). The work of Urry (2000), Miller (2001) and others (see Sheller, 2004, Bull, 2004, Featherstone, 2004, Dant, 2004, Merriman, 2004), as well as debates within this journal (see Laurier et al, 2008), have begun to theorise this transformational shift in western, industrialised societies towards the dominance of cars, a process Urry (2000) defines as automobility. Automobility refers to the increasingly central role of cars, as cultural symbols, manufactured objects, items of consumption, complex systems of distribution, significant users of environmental resources as well as a prime means of transportation within western, industrialised societies (Urry, 2000, Gartman, 2004, Featherstone, 2004).

One important strand of discussions regarding automobility has explored the role of capital in relation to the production and consumption of cars (Dant, 2004, Gartman, 2004). Cars are one of the most commonly manufactured objects, and Fordist modes of production have been replicated around the globe in countless industries (Urry, 2000, Dant, 2004). Cars are part of wider complex economic systems (incorporating garages, petrol companies, motels, and a wide range of other related services) driven by and for the benefit of capital accumulation (see Harvey, 1989, Dodgshon, 1999).

A second theme of work has begun to explore the different cultural meanings and symbolism given to cars by different cultures and social groups (Beckmann, 2001, Featherstone, 2004). Miller's collection of papers (2001) highlights differing cultures of automobility, exploring the differing symbolism of cars in Ghana (Verrips and Meyer, 2001), among Aboriginal Australian tribes (Young, 2001) and in Norway (Garvey, 2001). Automobility has created new types of contemporary everyday spaces, places of solitude, refuges from contemporary life (Urry, 2000), or alternatively places for conversation and debate (Maxwell, 2001), listening to music (Bull, 2001), making telephone calls (Beckmann, 2001), conducting business and spending time with friends or family (Sheller, 2004). Although cars are moving spaces which travel through public spaces, they are often experienced as private, domestic spaces, in which individuals reclaim time and space to relax from everyday social life (Bull, 2001, Featherstone, 2004). Cars insulate occupants, and windows are often seen as much as a barrier to the outside than a view onto them (Miller, 2001, Featherstone, 2004), offering two dimensional, 'heavily intermediated

representations' (Thrift, 2004, p51) of the external environment. Technology also shapes everyday experiences of automobility (Beckmann, 2001). Highly complex information and communication systems increasingly replace functions performed by humans in cars, such as regulating the climate, mapping preferred routes and operating windscreen wipers and lights.

A third strand of research regarding automobility has begun to make visible the differential access to, use of and experiences of automobility amongst different social groups, including different minority ethnic groups (Dwyer, 1998, Gilroy, 2001), older people (Goodwin *et al.*, 1999) and people with disabilities. For example, whilst automobility can represent freedom and enable women to contest patriarchal relations (see Garvey, 2001), many feminists recognise that cars have re-enforced patriarchal gender roles, requiring women to juggle additional paid employment, caring and household tasks (Law, 1999, Dowling, 2000).

However, existing research has largely focused on the experiences of car drivers (Dant, 2004). Although cars are often spaces in which more than one person travels, (23% of journeys undertaken in the UK are as car passengers, see DfT, 2004) there is little discussion of passengers' experiences of cars. Laurier *et al.*'s recent paper (2008) has begun to map "passenger" and calls for an exploration of "*the routine practices of people who sometimes struggle and sometimes delight in travelling in a car together*" p2. Although research has begun to explore different social groups' experiences of cars, of particular interest to this paper is the lack of research (see Marvin, 1995, Ashton, 2005, Laurier *et al.*, 2008 as key notable exceptions) to explore the experiences of children and young people.

The focus on children and cars is particularly timely, as one of the most current and vociferous debates regarding cars is their use for the journey to school. In the UK, in 2006, 41% of primary school children were driven to school, an increase from 27% in 1988, accounting for almost one in five cars at the peak of the morning rush hour (DfT, 2007). Whilst much research has focused on children's travel to school, less is known about children's escorted travel patterns outside of school, although it is suggested that non-school travel is also becoming increasingly car based (Joshi *et al.*, 1999, Mackett *et al.*, 2004). There are a number of complex and inter-related factors which help to account for the growing use of cars in children's lives, including increased danger to pedestrians through growth in traffic levels, parental employment

patterns, an increase in distance between key sites of children's lives, concerns over children's safety as well as growing preferences for car use.

Children have also become a growing focus of advertisements for cars. One recent commercial for the Toyota Corolla features a girl running across a playground towards her mother, waiting to collect her from school. She waves to her Mum but gets into a Corolla belonging to another parent. The parent turns and says 'Jenny isn't your mum over there?' to which Jenny replies 'shut up and drive'. Another features a teacher concerned that children's drawings show the world whizzing past as blur. The cultural expectations and aspirations to be driven to school are clear (see also Carrabine and Longhurst, 2002), and advertisements promote specific car models above other brands as status symbols for parents and children. In response, 'Safer Routes to School' (hereafter SRS) programmes, originally developed in Denmark and introduced by the UK government in 1998, typically focus upon a combination of street engineering, education and training, and initiatives such as the 'Walking Bus' (walking children to school in a group by trained and police checked adult volunteers, with strict adult-child ratios) to reduce dependence on cars for the journey to school (Bradshaw, 1999, Barker, 2003, Kearns et al, 2003).

Clearly, the political and cultural context surrounding children and cars is controversial. Children's mobility is a key strand of research within the broader new social studies of childhood and children's geographies. These new academic subdisciplines have explored contemporary spaces of childhood, recognising the ways in which children and young people are social actors who make sense of and interact with their environments (see James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, Holloway and Valentine, 2000). However, whilst cars are increasingly significant spaces for children, little research has explored children's experiences of cars (see Fotel and Thomsen, 2004, Ashton, 2005, Laurier et al, 2008 as important exceptions to this). Both Marvin (1995) and Laurier et al (2008) have provided ethnographic accounts which discuss aspects of children's travel in cars. Building upon these articles, therefore, there is a need for further investigation of how cars may be significant sites for the reproduction of family life (Hillman *et al.*, 1990, Buchner, 1990, Dowling, 2000). Furthermore, general discussions about automobility have not been specifically considered in relation to contemporary experiences of childhood, and whether childhood reshapes and reconfigures these wider processes in particular ways for children. It is these gaps in current research which this article seeks to fill.

## ***Methods***

This paper is based on applied research conducted in Buckinghamshire and London Borough of Enfield. Buckinghamshire, bordering West London, is a broadly affluent rural county with higher than average rates of car ownership and a low proportion of households from minority ethnic groups. Enfield is the most northern London Borough with lower rates of car ownership, very mixed areas of affluence and deprivation, and an ethnically diverse population. The research was undertaken in five primary schools across the two administrative areas.

The first stage of the research distributed a questionnaire survey to all families with children attending the five primary schools. This gathered data relating to current travel behaviour, attitudes towards alternative modes of travel and socio-demographic information. Out of 1956 distributed, a total of 1006 were completed, giving an impressive response rate of 51%. To complement the quantitative data, 23 families took part in in-depth research using a number of qualitative methods. Drawing upon the broader 'children as social actors' paradigm within the new social studies of childhood (see James, Jenks and Prout, 1988), the aim was not to provide an ethnographic account, but rather to make visible and place children's own accounts and understandings at the centre of the research (see also Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Mayall, 2002). Prior to participation, informed consent was sought from parents and children. Children were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures, over a week long period, of travelling by car. This was complemented by a travel diary and in-depth interview with children (once the photographs had been developed) and with parents (see Barker and Weller, 2003a, Barker and Weller, 20003b for further discussion of the methods and methodologies employed). Each location and participant was given a pseudonym.

### ***Children's experiences of the spaces of cars***

Many of the children taking part in the research clearly had lives embedded within automobility. Ninety five per cent (95%, n=956) of households taking part in the survey owned a car (against an 85% average level of car ownership for families with dependent children, see DfT, 2005) and over half the respondents (57%, n=573) lived in households with two or more cars. Ninety three per cent (n=936) of children participating in the research made at least one car journey during the week of the survey (undertaking a mean 9 car journeys) whilst almost one third (31%, n=270) travelled in cars everyday. The qualitative data also identified that cars were key

features of many children's lives. Children proudly took photographs of their own cars, and discussed, with detailed knowledge, the relative merits of cars:

**Figure 1 Photograph of the big car**



Sometimes (I like going) in the little car, but I like this big car when we have everyone going... it has more room. (Helen, 8, Country Wood, Enfield)

As many children lived in households with two or more cars, and many parents took part in car sharing, children had regular experiences of travelling in different cars:

Yeah, we go in the Beetle... or the van... we've got three cars... Well, the van is very fun to drive in, and you can put the dog in the back. (Charlie, 6, Rural Hill, Bucks)

These findings reflect other research highlighting that at least some children have knowledge of and aspirations for cars, and are embedded within automobility from a very young age (Carrabine and Longhurst, 2002). This illustrates that cars are indeed important contemporary everyday spaces of childhood, perhaps only surpassed in importance by home and school (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). The remainder of the paper explores three broad key themes which emerged from the children's accounts of travelling by car- the physical spaces of cars, the lively spaces

of cars and the bounded spaces of cars. Before doing so, it is necessary to state that children's experiences of cars were not constant but were also directly influenced by the journey purpose, length and destination (a finding also discussed by Laurier et al, 2008). For example, shorter journeys were often more enjoyable than longer journeys. Journeys to visit children's friends, or for children to access activities were more popular than trips to visit parents' friends or relatives.

### ***The physical space of cars***

The physical layout of cars was often significant in children's accounts of cars. Most children had a preferred location to sit in cars:

Yeah, (my favourite place)... mine's the middle... Our car's got an extra back seat, two in the front, three in the middle and then there's two at the back. (Stephen, 10, Country Wood, Enfield)

Individual seats were rated by the amount of physical space they offered:

I like the Saab because it's really wide and you get more space. (David, 7, Country Wood, Enfield)

...because (sitting) in the middle you're not squashed. (Rebecca, 6, Country Wood, Enfield)

This can be seen as part of what Laurier et al (2008, p12) have identified as the 'front-seat-back-seat geography of cars'. Whereas drivers have an assigned place, passengers' experiences of cars are distinct as they have several options of where to sit. Different seats afford different opportunities and limitations. For example, some children liked to sit in seats which gave them access to space to store their belongings, as one child's photograph (figure 2) shows:

### **Figure 2 Photograph of Anushka's belongings**



Anushka, 10, Village Bottom, Bucks

The physical space of cars was routinely contested and fought over by children:

If they are both trying to sleep, they fight over how much space they have. (Charlie and Pete's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

These struggles indicate the significance of space in the 'front-seat-back-seat geography of cars' and how car passengers have to share space with others. For child passengers, these interactions with other occupants illustrate how mobility experiences are entwined with and mediated by other family members and power relations within families. Children's geographers have increasingly used a Foucauldian analysis of power to make sense of the micro-political geographies of families (see Sibley, 1995, Valentine, 1997, McKendrick *et al.*, 2000). Foucault states power is everywhere, embedded in all forms of social action (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Power is neither a given pre-existing resource nor stable, but is open ended, circular and continuous (Soja, 1996, Sharp *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, the multiple and numerous relations of power means that the dominance or hegemony of any one form of power is never complete (Lee, 2000). Power is productive, finding gaps and possibilities for transgressive acts, contestations, resistance and change (Soja, 1996). The children's accounts presented here indicate the ways in which 'power is expressed in family interactions and played out in the spaces of **(cars)**' (Sibley, 1995, p130, emphasis and word added). For instance, as examples of the front--seat-back-



seat geography of cars illustrates, sitting in the front passenger seat was seen, by many children, as an exercise of power over siblings:

Ritchie and his dad went down to Devon, so Ritchie got to sit in the front, and he thought that was really good, sitting in the front all the way down to Devon. (Ritchie's Mum, Village Bottom, Bucks)

She (sibling) sits in the front seat because she is older. (John, 8, Rural Hill, Bucks)

### **Figure 3 Photograph of the front seat**



John, 8, Rural Hill, Bucks

Figure 3 indicates the importance of the superior view from the front seat and the restricted view for children from the back seat. The front passenger seat symbolised status and age, and sitting there for the first time was seen as a rite of passage. Children routinely fought with siblings over who was going to sit in the front seat:

They used to have arguments about who was going to sit in the front, and you'd have to strap them in. (James's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

Seats were not the only sites for conflict over space:

They do get bored... It is boring. They chat... and argue... and argue.  
(Rebecca and David's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

Within these accounts, it is clear that whilst children as passengers had preferences where to sit and what to do in cars, parents often exercised power over children (as in many other spaces of childhood, see Mayall, 2002). In this case, parents regulated the spaces of cars, resolving conflicts between siblings or implementing their own wishes. Parents also used and adopted different aspects of the physical space of cars to enact surveillance. Some parents used mirrors, not for their intended purpose to focus upon external road conditions, but, as figure 4 demonstrates, to watch over their children in the back seat:

**Figure 4 Photograph of the mirror**



...Mum watching in the mirror. (Tom, 8, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

This finding of surveillance enacted upon children by parents in cars has also been identified by other research, both in cars (see Laurier et al, 2008) and in other spaces of childhood (see Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Smith and Barker, 2000). However, this is not to say that children in cars passively accepted parental exercises of power. For example, one child described sitting behind the driver's seat, so he could play games or make gestures at the driver whilst remaining unobserved. Although parents exercise power and control over children, this power is never absolute and can be contested. Children's transgressive acts exploit gaps, or that which Foucault (1977)

calls 'instabilities', in parents' exercises of power. Whilst children and parents are differentially positioned, each can exercise power. As Foucault discusses:

Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the inter-play of non-egalitarian and mobile relations. (Foucault, 1980, p94)

Children are not passive passengers who simply accept the power and dominance of parent drivers. These examples add to the growing body of evidence mapping the different ways in which children, as social actors, employ a variety of strategies to influence their lives (Valentine, 1997, Mayall, 2002). Children's actions contest symbolic boundaries relating to their lack of involvement within the micro-political geographies of families, and more broadly indicate the potential for the agency of passengers in cars. However, as Jenks (2003) notes, whilst transgressions represent rule breaking, they also serve to identify the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and open the possibility for reaffirming rules. Thus, although children contested the use of space in cars, in some cases this simply resulted in parents exercising their power to re-enforce rules and punish the transgressor, as Laurier et al (2008) note:

The car 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 (p14).

Children's use of, or claim to particular seats was not constant, but was often fluid and flexible:

When he (brother) goes to cubs, I sit in the front so he can sit in the back with (his friends). But if we go and he doesn't have a friend, then we both go in the back. (Rebecca, 6, Country Wood, Enfield)

These points reflect that power relations influencing the use of the physical spaces of cars were not fixed, but reflected a Foucauldian analysis of power as dynamic and flexible, and spaces could be configured in different ways. In addition to the micro-spatial power relations between driver and passenger, other factors, including wider-scale legislation beyond the immediate spaces of cars, such as macro-scale legislation regarding the use of seat belts, child seats or air bags, also influenced

where children could sit. Parents not only controlled and mediated the use of space in cars, but were also responsible for implementing government safety legislation and advice for themselves and for their children. As one mum commented:

You can only go in the front in Mummy's car because it doesn't have an air bag. (Gill and Sarah's Mum, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Since 2007, children up to 135cm in height or under 12 years old have to have an appropriate child restraint (usually a child seat) to sit in either the front or back seats of cars. This also reflects the adultist nature of car design- safety features such as seat belts and airbags are designed for adults, are seen as dangerous for children and consequently determine children's access to particular spaces in cars.

Therefore, whilst literature often considers cars as individual or solitary places, as peaceful refuges from the stresses of contemporary life (Miller, 2001, Bull, 2004), this research indicates how this ignores the experiences of passengers, reflecting Laurier et al's comments (2008) how events in cars are radically altered with the presence of passengers. With multiple occupants, cars can be seen as spaces for exercises of power, involving negotiation and conflict between different occupants. For child passengers, these power relations, conflict and resolution, provide insight into the micro-political geographies of family life in cars.

### ***The lively spaces of cars***

Whereas adults often experience cars as solitary places, this is not possible for passengers. Indeed Laurier et al (2008) note that with the addition of passengers, there is an expectation of conversation. Similarly, in my research, the presence of friends was a particularly key feature influencing children's experiences of cars:

...if I'm (travelling by car) with a friend, it's fine, we talk. (Therese, 10, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

That friendships and conversations are important to experiences of cars is perhaps not surprising, since friendships are key to experiences of other spaces of childhood such as school and out of school care (Alderson, 2000, Smith and Barker, 2001). However, unlike the less private spaces of schools or streets where children have a degree of freedom to meet children and make friends (Alderson, 2000), access to,

and use of cars was most often planned and controlled by parents. Although children may travel in cars with their friends, this is rarely the result of children's own desires to spend time with friends in cars, but is rather mediated through parents, and often an unintended consequence of their plans to car share and move children together. Given authority both as parent and as driver, parents had the power to define who children travelled with in cars. The car sharing plans of parents resulted in children travelling in cars with other children whom they did not necessarily like:

Charlie (6, Rural Hill, Bucks): Sometimes it's a bit annoying, to have to (car share).

Charlie's Mum: To be honest, all four children would prefer not to car share, they'd rather go on their own, but it's convenient.

As well as friends, children also experienced cars as important spaces in which to spend time with other family members:

If it's me, Mum, Vicky and Beck, we just talk. Mum and Vicky talk, me and Becca sit there... in the back. (Tom, 8, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Best thing about being with my Mum (in the car) is that I have someone to talk to. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

This reflects other research also highlighting the significance of conversations in cars (Marvin, 1995, Laurier et al, 2008). Conversations in cars were diverse, including discussions related to school:

Kathy (9, Village Bottom, Bucks): We just talk about things, about school and stuff.

Lydia (9, Kathy's twin): We remind each other what we have to do in school...

Kathy: ...Yeah like homework and stuff.

Whilst some parents saw spaces of cars as opportunities for parents to talk to children about homework, perhaps reminiscent of the way in which some workers use their cars as spaces to conduct business (Laurier, 2004), most conversations were more informal and relaxing:

There are plenty of times we have an enjoyable time together... travelling to school together is just one of the ways to have an enjoyable time with them. (Jane and Rachel's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Therefore, these findings support those of Dowling (2000) and others (e.g. Sheller, 2004, Laurier et al, 2008) that cars are places where families interact in different ways. Children stated that one positive feature of travelling by car was that it was possible to take part in activities with other occupants. Children described their favourite activities:

Yeah, sometimes we have the radio on, and have a singalong. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Sometimes you can have a sleep or play games... or we listen to music on our headphones. (Kathy, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Therefore, whilst much of the automobility literature identifies that adult drivers value cars as peaceful refuges from everyday life, for children, cars are important spaces for playing (Laurier et al, 2008). Parents explained that providing children with activities was another strategy to 'keep children quiet' and prevent conflict and dispute:

Mum usually gives us a bag of things to do. (Rachel, 7, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Although children may enjoy specific activities in cars, these may actually represent strategic exercises of power by parents through which they pacify and control children. It indicates, once more, how children's experiences of cars are mediated through parents and parental control.

Many of the activities which children enjoyed in cars, such as games consoles and other toys, card games, CDs and mobile phones, involved the purchase of commodities, suggesting many children experience cars as significant sites of consumption. This commodification of childhood is not unique to cars but is a wider process identified in relation to other spaces and activities, for example commercial playgrounds, schools, and children's toys and clothing (McKendrick *et al.*, 2000, Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Several children described ideas for new activities for cars:

...(to Mum) Can we have a car that has a TV in it? (Ritchie, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Without wasting the battery, (I'd like) this thing, (where) you can plug your Gameboy Advance into the car. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Since these interviews three years ago, these features have now been introduced into some car models. Perhaps cars are becoming more children-centred spaces, as designers incorporate more features to improve children's experiences of cars. Alternatively, this represents the dynamism of capital, constantly searching for new markets of consumption to increase profit (Harvey, 1989). Parents with children are increasingly important niche markets, as Sheller (2004) notes how cars are increasingly designed with accessories such as video consoles, cup holders and extra space for children's luggage as a way of marketing cars towards parents who drive children. Adult designers in automobile corporations influence and structure children's experiences of cars, designing and promoting cars as spaces of consumption.

However, not all activities in cars were commodified, with children identifying other activities, such as singing or word games, and playing 'eye-spy':

Sometimes with (my sister), we do 'eye-spy'. (James, 9, Country Wood, Enfield)

We sing 'she'll be coming round the mountain' and I like to draw. (Ritchie, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

These could be seen as activities undertaken by those unable to afford to consume often expensive commodities such as game consoles. However, that these activities were also undertaken by affluent families who also participated in more commodified activities suggests that children's experiences of cars are neither entirely commodified nor entirely structured by capital.

Central to many children's accounts of activities in cars was the role of technology:

Dad's car, he's got satellite navigation and stuff, so we can type in where to go. (Pete, 9, Rural Hill, Bucks)

We normally go to Wales, or Bath. So when we go there, I normally listen to my CD Walkman. (Jane, 10, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Since it is increasingly well documented that technology plays an increasingly important role in other key spaces of childhood, such as home and school, its role in cars is perhaps not surprising (Hutchby and Moran Ellis, 2001, Holloway and Valentine, 2003). Whilst many social theorists have identified how experiences of cars have increasingly become mediated through and by technology, for example the use of satellite navigation and air conditioning systems (Latour, 1993, Urry, 2000, Hutchby and Moran Ellis, 2001), these discussions have focused on drivers, and have not considered in detail how passengers engage with technology. Laurier et al (2008) discuss how passengers can assist the act of driving, through, for example navigating or changing radio station. Similarly, children, as passengers, can engage with some in-car technologies, such as entertainment and climate control, rather than those associated with driving. Technology was often the site of conflict in cars, and children's access to technology was often mediated or controlled by parents:

John's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks: We have a battle with the radio (between Capital and Magic).

John (8): We never manage to persuade her to listen to Capital.

Parents used a variety of strategies to control technology and to use technology to exercise power in cars. Whilst parents spoke of technology such as the use of seatbelts, childseats and child-proof locks as safety measures, they also spoke of 'strapping their children in' as a form of control and restraint, to contain children. The physical layout of cars, designed by adults in automobile corporations, position drivers close to technology, such as climate control, heating and entertainment, enabling them to access and exercise power and control over these systems.

Once again, however a Foucauldian analysis indicates that power is not unidirectional. Technology was also a key site for children to contest the power exercised over them by parents:

Pete (9, Rural Hill, Bucks): We have the radio on or a CD...



Charlie (6, Pete's brother): ...yeah, we like to have it on rather loud...

Charlie and Pete's Mum: ...yes, far too loud for me...

Charlie: ...I like that.

A more visible strategy employed by children to contest power in the spaces of cars was through 'pester power' (Bradshaw, 1999), repeatedly asking for certain outcomes:

They (parents) don't get a go at choosing music. If they do, they just choose horrible, slow music, without any words... so we moan. (Helen, 8, Country Wood, Enfield)

Once more, these examples identify children as social actors and their ability to transform experiences and spaces in cars. Spaces of mobility such as cars can be sites of contestation and conflict, with complex, shifting patterns of power, control, negotiation and resistance between children and parents (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Gender was also highly relevant in mapping the everyday micro-political geographies of families, as women were predominantly responsible for organising and escorting children. Therefore, in most instances, it was specifically mothers, and not fathers, who mediated and controlled children's experiences of cars. Cars with children were 'women's territory' (Sheller, 2004), spaces for the performance and reproduction of gender roles. Whilst complex power relations exist between children and parents, it is also clear that gendered parental roles placed individual adults in different positions *vis-a-vis* the division of travel labour.

### ***The bounded space of cars***

Another key feature of children's experiences, like many other social groups travelling in cars, was the separation cars provided from the external physical and human environment. For example, children liked the protection offered from hostile weather:

In the car, your legs rest, it's nice and warm in the winter. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Yeah, specially in the winter. It's too cold to be walking, and you've got the heater in the car, you can warm up. (Ritchie, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

As well as insulation from the weather, children also liked privacy and separation from other sensations:

I like the smell of the car... it smells of nothing... I like that. (Rebecca, 6, Country Wood, Enfield)

These accounts suggest children, like drivers or other passengers, experience cars as enclosed spaces, separated from undesirable features of external environments. This emphasis on spatial separation has been defined by Maxwell (2005, p199) as the 'automobile sanctuary', Social life is increasingly individualised and privatised, exemplified in mobility in the shift from public and collective forms of travelling to more individualised forms, such as cars (Urry, 2000). Privatisation is also a particularly significant feature of other contemporary spaces of childhood, such as home, school, commercial playspaces and after school activities, which are created, structured and organised by adults, and segregate children from the wider world (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997, McKendrick *et al.*, 2000). Cars are a pertinent example of these segregated spaces and a particularly appropriate way for children to travel between institutionalised environments. However, some children spoke negatively of the spatial separateness of cars, critical that cars sometimes isolated them from friends, which, as discussed earlier, was important to children:

...and in the car you haven't got any friends to chat with. (Helen, 8, Country Wood, Enfield)

It's quite boring, because I don't have a brother or sister to talk to. (Therese, 10, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Although cars were sometimes seen as bounded spaces, children discussed how the view of external travel landscapes were often important to their experiences of cars:

(I like travelling by car because) you can see better. You can see better behind you... you can see all the places you are going to pass. (Charlie, 6, Rural Hill, Bucks)

And I like being in the front because you can look out of the windows. (Rebecca, 6, Country Wood, Enfield)

Children discussed how some cars were better designed than others to do this:

Yeah... well. Dad's car is a lot higher so it feels different... better. It makes you feel bigger, and you can see lots more things. (Kathy, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

The trooper is nice because it's big, but they can't see so well out from the back because the windows are so high. (Charlie and Pete's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

That children liked to watch external landscapes contests the notion that, when in cars, children are completely disconnected from the external environment. At least some children are attentive travellers who can produce vivid accounts of the travel landscapes through which they pass. Children also discussed how they circumvented the spatial separateness of cars by using forms of technology, particularly mobile phones, to keep in contact with their friends. Cars can therefore be seen as paradoxical spaces which are simultaneously experienced and elevated as privatised and enclosed but are also 'spaces of flows' (Mol and Van den Burg, 2004, p319) which are connected to external environments and have numerous entry points. This connectivity is selective, as car occupants choose whether to watch external environments or to connect with people outside by taking or making calls, resulting in what Featherstone describes as:

...a sense of control, of the communicative world and comforting refuge zone as something which can be opened, closed and blended at the touch of a switch. (Featherstone, 2004, p9)

However, for children, this communication is more complex, since, these experiences are further mediated by parents, who, as discussed earlier, often controlled children's behaviours.

## ***Conclusion***

This paper has explored how cars are increasingly important contemporary spaces of childhood. Cars are more than simply functional spaces for children's travel, and are important sites for multiple activities including play, relaxation, homework, the

consumption of commodities, as well as spaces for companionship and family life. Therefore, the paper contributes to children's geographies and the new social studies of childhood by exploring children's perspectives of cars, which are increasingly significant spaces of childhood. In many ways, children's experiences (focusing upon cars as spaces of conversation, activity and technology) are broadly similar to those experiences of drivers and other passengers. One striking difference is children's preferences for play and interaction compared to adults who prefer cars as solitary and peaceful places. Further, in many respects, cars were not unique spaces of childhood. The evidence suggests everyday activities, processes (such as privatisation and commodification) and power relations have been displaced from other everyday spaces of childhood into cars (as also discussed by Laurier et al, 2008).

However, whilst existing research (such as Miller, 2001, Bull, 2004) prioritises individualised forms of automobility, conceptualising cars as solitary places, and assuming car travellers are autonomous and independent, this paper shows this is not always the case. Children are one of many social groups who travel as passengers in cars. A Foucauldian analysis of the findings show that, with passengers, cars can become sites of complex, contingent and slippery power relations. The paper identifies two parallel strands which overlap and intertwine within these accounts- those relations between driver and passenger, and those between children and adults. These two processes combine in particularly complex ways to influence children's experiences of cars. Firstly, passengers experience cars differently (experiencing, for example, the flexibility of the 'front-seat-back-seat-geography of cars' unlike drivers who are assigned a particular place). Passengers' experiences of cars are always mediated, shaped and reconfigured by car drivers, which can result in contestation and conflict.

Secondly, power relations between children and parents configure children's experiences of 'passenger' in particular and specific ways. Whilst parents draw upon technology to exercise power and other resources to control and regulate the spaces of cars, their power was not absolute. Children demonstrated their social agency by contesting the power of adults in a variety of ways to influence and transform the spaces of cars. At a wider level, children's everyday experiences of cars were also framed by wider sets of power relations, including car corporations which design and manufacture these spaces, the role of capital in commodifying

everyday activities in cars, and legislation determining where and how children can travel in cars.

Therefore, children's experiences as passengers are fundamentally distinct, since, unlike many other passengers, they never have independent and autonomous access to cars, are unable to drive and are embedded within specific micro-political power relations within families and also subject to broader restrictions regarding their age. Whilst focusing specifically on children, the paper illustrates a need for broader and more inclusive research to consider how other passengers also experience mediated automobility or what The paper adds to what Laurier et al (2008) call 'a sociology of passengering in the car' (p20) and in doing so, to explore relations of power and control between different car occupants.

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