

driving|cultures

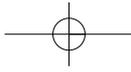
Cars, Young People and Cultural Research

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The car is a dominant feature of life in Australia. This enthusiastic embrace of cars is due in part to the vast distances and relatively low population size, but it is also due to a long-standing emphasis on individual privacy and mobility. The suburban sprawl around towns and cities has been made possible by cars and at the very same time facilitated their uptake and ongoing use. The car is more than just a means of transportation, however, and has increasingly created its own necessity. The number of cars on the roads increases by thousands each year, but particular concern is currently focused on young people as they gain access to cars and develop various 'driving cultures', since they are also involved in a high proportion of motor vehicle crashes.¹ Driving is for them part of becoming adult, seeking independence and venturing further from home for pleasure, work and study. The embrace of the car by young people, and often the resulting carnage, needs to be addressed from a number of directions, including the full investigation of contributing cultural factors.

Driving Cultures brings a cultural approach to an area dominated by psychological analyses of individual behaviour and frameworks of understanding that focus on rational behaviour and wilfulness.² Such forms of analysis, I argue here, are inadequate for a proper understanding of driving practice as they lack sufficient connection to the broader context of driving, the symbolic dimensions of the car and a detailed understanding of the social norms operating within driving as a cultural practice. There has been considerable focus on the individual, and individual driving behaviour, in advertising, research and enforcement, but there is a pressing need for more emphasis on the socially interactive nature of driving, as well as the cultural factors that shape it into the particular practice it is today.





In many countries in the Western world cars continue to be given priority in transport planning. At the same time, more young drivers are killed and seriously injured than any other age group. In New South Wales, for example, 17–25 year olds hold 11% of licenses and represent 16% of deaths in cars, and Australia-wide young drivers represent about 25% of the death toll. International and local research suggests that young drivers are more likely to speed, more likely to engage in risky behaviours on the roads, have a higher risk of crashing with passengers in the car, lack experience and have a tendency to feel overconfident and to over-estimate their level of skill.³ The young driver ‘problem’ is a phenomenon of Western countries that has become more apparent as more young people are able to gain access to cars and more are gaining their licenses as soon as they are old enough; this is also the case in Australia.

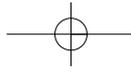
While road safety research has barely looked beyond the significance of the car in a functional sense, cultural research has begun to investigate the values and meanings that are attached to the car, enabling a greater focus on the car as a shaping force in contemporary culture, shaping not only the way we live but who we are.⁴ This perspective is crucial if we are to understand young people’s engagement with cars. Having access to a car and being able to drive contribute significantly to Western living, identity and independence. With cars increasing in power and acceleration and able to travel at faster speeds, many young drivers take to them with enthusiasm, embracing everything the car is purported to offer, but the particular values that have been promoted by and in turn promote car use, have not in any way been sufficiently investigated.

— EMBLEMS OF CONVENIENCE

The car is the emblem of convenience, independence and privacy, even though it is far more dangerous as a mode of transport than bus or train.⁵ Insufficient development of public transport in Australia has clearly contributed to the greater emphasis placed on the car. More importantly, however, is the powerful and persuasive ideology of freedom and independence which has developed around and given priority to the car. This symbolic dimension of the car—exemplified in appeals to privacy, comfort and insulation—helps to maintain the assumption that there is only limited danger in car travel.⁶

The car brought a new experience of time and space to the city, and allowed travel to places that had previously not been possible to reach. However, it also reinforced the suburban sprawl that has long been a feature of Australian cities. Traffic made streets noisy and dangerous in ways they never had been before, resulting in the separation of traffic and pedestrians, with priority, of course, being given to motor vehicles. Values such as safety, peace and quiet and individuality emphasised in suburban developments have been at odds with





the aggressive invasiveness of the car. By the 1970s the costs of both privatised mobility and privatised living, including isolation in suburbia, and related problems such as bored housewives and restless youth, began to be noted by many researchers. In *Car Wars*, for example, Graeme Davison gives a comprehensive account of the political manoeuvrings in Melbourne that brought about an increased emphasis on car travel there.⁷ Davison documents the rising appeal of the car and outlines the lobbying by motoring groups that emphasised the ideology of freedom, and the dominance of government departments related to roads and motor vehicle regulation, over those dealing with public transport. When combined with such political manoeuvring, both urban planning and suburban development, it is clear, made the car a necessary feature of modern life.

Yet, the ambiguous nature of the development of the car and related car systems, such as the convenience of faster travel and the consequent priority given to the car over pedestrians and other forms of transport, has been a feature of public discussion since the advent of the car. Davison, for example, documents some of the many battles over major roads and car transportation that occurred around Melbourne.⁸ Similarly, Sheller and Urry argue that the car must be seen as both flexible and coercive. It played a fundamental role in democratisation through the freedom of movement it facilitated and has permitted 'multiple socialities, of family life, community, leisure, the pleasures of movement'.⁹ However, it also coerces people to 'juggle tiny fragments of time in order to put together complex, fragile and contingent patterns of social life'.¹⁰ Communities have become so synchronized to the rhythms of the roads and car networks that a disruptive violence shapes the social environment. As Sheller and Urry put it:

Car travel rudely interrupts the taskscapes of others (pedestrians, children going to school, postmen, garbage collectors, farmers, animals and so on), whose daily routines are merely obstacles to the high speed traffic that cuts mercilessly through slower-moving pathways and dwellings.¹¹

Despite these very real and very diverse impacts of the car on public life, however, it is individual road users who are usually held accountable for road carnage, while the emphasis in road safety is on assisting drivers to be 'error-free'.¹² Mike Featherstone, for example, cites the WHO (2004) *World Report on Traffic Injury Prevention* that seeks to redefine traffic 'accidents' as a public health issue so that the traffic system is held accountable for failings resulting in death and injury. The psychological research that is central in road safety tends overwhelmingly to focus on the individual without really drawing on individual experience or attempting to relate individual aspirations back to broader cultural ideals. For example, there is a focus on those who rate high on sensation-seeking or adventuresome scales without any consideration of the cultural emphasis on using cars to fulfil a desire for



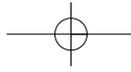
adventure, or on where this desire comes from or how it is reinforced.¹³ In other words, conventional road safety research does not confront mobility as a social system or consider the relations within it, and it does not connect the operating social norms to broader issues that relate directly to major stakeholders such as manufacturers and motoring organisations, as well as authorities and regulators.

One of the reasons for this focus on the driver, and not on the car, is that historically, cars have largely been regarded as neutral in that they are seen as dangerous only when they are not handled properly, rather than being dangerous in themselves. Moreover, legal processes brought about an emphasis on the fault of individuals such as pedestrians and—drivers, which meant manufacturers were not held accountable for questions about design and performance.¹⁴ This assumed neutrality of the car, however, has been recently questioned by social theorists among many others.¹⁵ John Sloop, for example, in a paper looking at performativity and gender in relation to cars, draws out the contradiction between the apparent gender neutrality of the car and the gender inscription of the driver.¹⁶ The sheer weight and ‘bullying’ power of a motor vehicle compared to pedestrians or cyclists suggests that with the growth of car use, others were simply bullied out of the way. Rather than the technology being removed or modified, or manufacturers held accountable for the damage cars could do, attempts have been made to exclude ‘problem individuals’ from using it.

Wilful lack of concern for one’s own and others safety, which is often the focus of road safety research, may reflect not only the type of moral norms associated with driving in the community generally and the relative weakness of norms assumed to be associated with driving, such as a priority for safety over speed, but also show biases related to the analysis of norms informing policy.¹⁷ The norms are not seen in the context of the social formations they are implicated in. At the same time, the risk associated with cars has been largely absorbed, and the emphasis placed on individual freedom. The danger that cars pose is overlooked in the discourses which now seek to restrict young people’s use of and access to cars because they are reportedly higher risk-takers.

— CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON DRIVING

Driving is an everyday practice, a lived experience characteristic of the modern world, but one that is largely taken for granted. Yet the question of how this activity is practiced, performed, and given meaning in the lives of different people is of crucial interest from a cultural perspective. The *Driving Cultures* research thus seeks to explore the experience of living with cars in all its complexity and ambiguity. Many recent examinations of car cultures focus on the types and uses of vehicles within different ‘subcultures’.¹⁸ In contrast to this concern with car cultures, the central concern of our program of research is with *driving* cultures, with the ways in which cars are articulated, and with the particular driving styles through

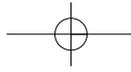


which relations to the roads and traffic are expressed. Cars are inscribed with particular meanings that are part of the very 'metal' of the machine, or could be said to be 'baked into' them.¹⁹ Cars have always been associated with freedom, independence and convenience, as well as status and sex appeal. How these are experienced can vary according to characteristics of the driver such as gender, location (whether country or city), and age. Drivers have had a shaping influence on the car while it has also shaped who we are. Scharff, for example, has demonstrated the influence of women in the shaping of cars amidst male control and domination.²⁰ Instead of this narrow focus, however, I want to invoke the car as both dangerous machine and vehicle of freedom, but with a particular focus on the ways in which the car is articulated through various driving practices, and the ways in which this relationship to the car is both enabling and coercive, restrictive and expressive.

The cultural research that we have developed here, therefore, is not so much concerned with systems of mobility as with the relations that constitute that system, that is, the relations between cars and people and between people in different cars. One major influence on our approach has been theories developed within cultural studies which have highlighted the 'constitution and working of systems of relations rather than the domains formed by these processes'.²¹ This approach is also concerned with relations in the broader context between drivers and the authorities that regulate driving, and the discourses that surround driving in various contexts, from magazines to road safety literature, manufacturers and advertising.

The mobile and home centred way of life in Western societies that I have outlined above has been usefully referred to as 'mobile privatisation' by Raymond Williams. Williams employs this term in order to denote the changing social formations occurring with the advent of technologies of mobility such as radio sets, motor cars and other home centred electrical appliances.²² Expanding on Williams' work, Margaret Morse situates television as a cultural form within the larger socio-cultural context of everyday life by relating television, the freeway and the mall through a 'fiction effect' she refers to as distraction.²³ This is a 'partial loss with the here and now' and related to split belief in which one momentarily sinks into another world knowing it is not real. According to Morse, a level of unreality involved in the freeway, the mall and television invokes feelings of both pleasure and boredom, in which each is considered 'a "vast wasteland" and a waste of time as well as a devotion allied with the American dream'.²⁴ The separation of home and work and the need to move between the two, usually in private cars, has contributed to the sense of distraction as a defining characteristic of 'mobile privatisation'. In the next section I will give an outline of driving as a cultural practice centred on three dimensions of that practice and illustrated with the views of young people in focus groups. Drawing on the lived experiences of people engaged with cars, traffic and systems of automobility, and using material taken from focus group





discussions, this analysis will show the ways in which young people become immersed in 'mobile privatisation' and the accompanying state of distraction as Morse outlines it.

— DRIVING AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

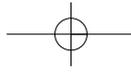
The focus in this paper is on driving as a cultural practice, and the 'cultural orders', flows, inequalities and asymmetries that are involved in 'culture' as the complex and uneven working out of power.²⁵ In other words, there is no unified driving culture to uncover but a range of disparate and complex experiences. However, within the irreducible individual differences that comprise driving culture, there are wider forces influencing that experience, including cultural formations of gender, age, wealth and location. Such cultural forces are not determining conditions, but can be seen as *limiting* conditions, forces that apply conditions to the type of experience that is possible in and through cars, depending on who and where one is.²⁶ Driving is regulated by norms that both create and restrain the forms of driving as a practice, though the practice is never fully reducible to the operation of regulatory power.²⁷ Driving practice, therefore, encompasses both discourses and the embodied, emotional and desiring dimensions of driving, both of which are given expression through the routinisation of driving itself.

Driving as a practice can thus be outlined by drawing on some of the dimensions through which it becomes routinised. There are three important dimensions that will be noted here: firstly, driving as a practice becomes routinised in relation to particular cars, which are experienced in particular ways; secondly, it is routinised through specific embodied experiences of driving related to where in the complex system of automobility they occur; and thirdly, through various demographic characteristics of the driver. It will be evident in the discussion that follows that the dimensions of driving practice drawn out here are inter-related, and are certainly not exhaustive. They merely help to flag the sense in which driving, although a highly individual experience, is routinised as a practice.

The study I will be drawing on consisted of ten focus groups conducted throughout New South Wales, for the Gender, Ethnicity and Control study which was a part of the Transforming Drivers Project. There were a total of 65 participants ranging in age from 18 years to 24 years. The aim of the study was to look at the different ways in which driving practices are articulated, experienced and performed, as well as how cars are both constraining and enabling. Focus group questions were predominantly concerned with how cars were used, and analysis of discussions showed strong gender differences in the ways in which cars were part of the social lives of the young people. The study clearly showed how young people in suburban and regional Australia construct their identities in and through cars.

The first dimension of driving as a cultural practice that I wish to focus on is the car itself and its variations. Focus group participants were asked whether they associated particular





kinds of people with particular kinds of cars and whether they drove differently in different cars. While many denied that the type of car you drove would influence who you were, as one woman stated, 'it can influence the way you drive, but not who you are' (Goulburn, woman, 21 years), many of the young people came up with examples where the type of car effected how they drove. It became apparent that particular cars require being driven in particular ways, or coerce the driver to conform to the specific meaning associated with the car. Acceleration or take-off power is often emphasised and is important in the articulation of larger cars. One young woman noted how she felt driving her father's car:

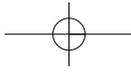
My dad has an XR6, right, and learning to drive on an XR6 was quite difficult because as soon as you hit the accelerator you're doing 50K already ... I get the worst road rage in that but I think it's because I know that I can beat that guy who's driving a little slow car, so why not? (Lawson, 20 years)

Similarly, some of the men said that being in a nice car makes them feel 'more confident' to want to 'try something' and gives them the 'incentive to go faster' (Goulburn). Even though they stated that the car encouraged them to drive in a different way, the young people on the whole denied that the car was influencing them and emphasised that they were in control, not the car. In this sense, young people's understandings of themselves as drivers could be related to a rhetoric in which 'the driver is subject, more real and present to him or herself'.²⁸

The young women in the groups were often more reflective about car types and their associated meanings than the young men. Many young women referred, sometimes in derogatory terms, to the kinds of cars they associated with young men. One woman referred to 'young guy cars which are the "look at me" type things' stating that 'the sort of car you have can reflect what sort of driver you are, especially with young drivers'. She said you could sometimes tell if a young man or a young woman is driving a car by what car it is, 'and you expect to know what sort of driver they are' (Blacktown, woman, 21 years). While the women were more reflective, they did not necessarily make an explicit reference to gender. A woman in the Bankstown group referred to one of the male participant's cars as 'a popular, young car'. 'It's one of those done-up cars. It's a fully sick car! (laughter) With a new paint job!' This was not the kind of car many women were likely to profess a desire for.

Sports cars 'require' being driven in particular ways that show off their handling and performance, and that of the driver. As one young woman put it, 'if you're a really sensible driver, you're not going to go and buy a fully sports car that's going to go out really fast' (Blacktown, woman, 21 years). Young men it was clear, were associated with and liked to associate themselves with, 'hot', flash and powerful cars that often involve 'modifications' to the original design, and were either big cars such as a Holden Commodore or sporty cars with a lot of





power. A young man from Wollongong stated: 'Even if you can't afford it, you'd still choose a nice car. Something sporty, because it says something'.

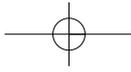
Young women were happier with smaller cars that used less fuel and did not see the need for fast cars when 'you still have to do the speed limits everywhere' (Goulburn). They nevertheless expressed particular, usually more cautious driving styles. One woman said she liked 'little cars, they're fun', but went on to say 'except everyone thinks that they can mess with you, and then they find out they can't!' (Lawson, 17 years). Her driving style, she suggested, made up for the way she felt she was treated driving a small car. A young man from Wagga felt he could make up for the fact that he was driving his girlfriend's small car, which had a pink interior, by 'hooning around in it'. He said he would only drive it if she was in it with him. Some car types then, required being driven in ways that were contrary to expectations, expressing qualities of the driver. Many of the men that drove small cars pointed out 'they've got power, you've just got to know how to use it.' (Goulburn)

Cars could be defined as male or female depending on a variety of factors including size, style and performance, but also whether it had been modified and how you drove it. Young men in their initial enthusiasm for cars put a lot more effort into them than when they are older, spending Friday and Saturday nights taking their cars to popular places to show them off by cruising around a block, displaying the modified body work and possibly their driving skill, stopping and lifting the bonnet to discuss the modifications to the engine with other young men, and playing their car stereos loudly. One young woman described her boyfriend's current interest in cars, which included displaying his car at The Rocks in Sydney, a popular hang out for young men and their cars:

My boyfriend has a hotted-up car as well, so we go cruising. He's down at The Rocks every Friday and Saturday night showing off his car. If not, he'll go to Wollongong, Bondi, Brighton. All the young spots for the young, because he's a young guy. All the hot spots where all the fully sick guys are! That's what his weekend consists of, and I hope he snaps out of it soon! (laughter). (Bankstown, woman, 20 years)

It is clear that gender and age are playing a part in the performance of driving recounted here, as it is more commonly a male preoccupation and many of the participants are under 20 years of age. The type of car is important, as there are particular specifications if participating in Friday and Saturday nights at the Rocks, and will involve particular styles of driving to go with them. Young people are certainly susceptible to the 'drivability' of particular cars and their ability to demonstrate it. If you have a flash car, you are going to drive it in ways that show it off since, as some of the young women put it, 'You don't want to kill the cred', and 'If you've got a fast car, you want to drive as fast as you can!' (Wollongong).





In this sense the car itself, with the particular meanings that are baked into it can be seen as a coercive factor influencing how it is driven.

The second dimension of driving as a cultural practice that I wish to highlight here concerns driving experiences of place and time. Comments emerged in response to focus group questions about how participants responded in traffic and whether they enjoyed driving. In terms of place and time, commuter driving can be experienced in quite different ways from pleasure driving or cruising, indicative of the pleasure and boredom of Morse's distracted state. For many of the focus group participants the experience of driving to work was coded as boring and often as frustrating. Driving for pleasure had the added dimension of driving in different places such as 'in the country', or to the beach and not in the everyday commuter traffic, making the experience of driving enjoyable in itself. This is where the car offers the apparent freedom to go anywhere, when you want and with whom you want. Young people's comments suggest they develop significant differences in driving experience between driving to work and driving for pleasure:

If you're in bumper-to-bumper traffic (laughs) then I don't like driving! But if you're out of the city, out in the country somewhere, it's quite enjoyable ... and who you're with, as well. (Blacktown, woman, 21 years).

For a younger man in the group even the traffic could be enjoyable, however, since for him it offered personal space, the company of others and an opportunity to look at other cars on the road. For this young man, who only recently obtained his license and a car of his own, driving everywhere was a pleasure. Many of the focus group participants, including women, noted that they really enjoyed driving of any kind when they first got their licenses. The difference between driving to work and driving for pleasure became very pronounced after a year or two of driving and some driving experiences were consequently classified as 'a waste of time'. The traffic as well as time could be a factor: 'You're just on the road, no-one's in front of you and you can just go and take your time. But if you've got to be somewhere, at a certain place, then time's important' (Fairfield, man, 23 years). Here, the imagined pleasure of the open road contrasts with the pressure of other vehicles as well as having to be somewhere.

Another sense in which place and time could influence driving practice was in driving in the city and driving at night where familiarity became the determining characteristic. There were varied responses to these experiences, with some being quite used to driving in the city and comfortable with it, and others not liking it at all, especially when they were unfamiliar with where they were going:

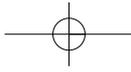


I don't like driving in the city, because I don't do it a lot particularly, and I just sort of find it a bit intimidating, but when I know where I'm going, I'm a lot more comfortable to when I'm going somewhere I've never been before. (Blacktown, woman, 22 years)

A young woman from Goulburn would not drive in the city ('no way', she said), and others from Bankstown found taxis more convenient when they went to the city. A young man from the Fairfield group did not like driving in the city at night whereas during the daytime it was a different matter. The surroundings can be an influence in other ways such as the slow speed appropriate for 'lapping' around the streets in specific locations such as the Rocks or Brighton, in contrast to the displays of fast acceleration, lane changing and speed on highways and motorways.

Comfort and familiarity appeared to be a significant part of the routinisation of driving practice. Many of the young people thought about their driving from the perspective of their own familiarity with their car and their surroundings: 'You get to that point where you've been driving it so long that you just know every inch of it ...' (Wollongong, 20 years). Their awareness of social space, however, did not always extend much beyond their own vehicle to other road users. Disengagement from the world outside accompanies the 'intensely private' comfort of the inside of the car.²⁹ This is significant for many young men who see the road as a site for their peer sociality, but not necessarily as a space involving interactions with others beyond their peers. One young man described his driving from the perspective of his mother, contrasting it with his own sense of control: 'My mum's constantly on my back, telling me to slow down ... she thinks I drive too fast, but really, I just drive to what I feel comfortable.' (Goulburn)

This young man focused on whether he was driving fast or slow enough for his own comfort and not whether he was driving to speed limits or traffic conditions. He insisted that being too concerned with speed could have consequences for concentration, suggesting that the real problem was distraction, not speed, and that he knew what speed he could handle. He stated, 'if you worry too much about the speed and where you're going, it's taking your mind off other things and you end up having a crash'. This statement highlights an incongruity between the desire to maintain the idea of freedom the car is meant to embody, and the restrictions of the actual driving experience. Admitting to a lapse in concentration appeared less threatening to his sense of control than acknowledging that his choice of speed could be questionable. For many young men demonstrating their ability to handle speed is an important part of their social development and their sense of control. Some young women also noted the significance of familiarity with their car and their surroundings in how they drove.



Another dimension of driving practice that is routinised is clearly the drivers themselves. For example, there were clear differences between men and women in how they related to cars. Men have long felt a stronger connection to cars and the experience of driving, and express that connection as more authentic and 'natural'. The men in the Shellharbour group described the freedom of being alone in the car:

Man 2: I love driving. I love ... like, when you're driving to and from work, it's usually only you in the car. And you can just do whatever you want! And you just cruise along and you can be as much of a hoon (as you want) or have a nice cruise, whatever you feel like.

Man 1: You're in your element.

Man 2: You just go ... yeah, it's natural.

Driving 'like a hoon' was defended as a right that young men are entitled to. A younger man from the Blacktown group stated the need for the correct image:

Yeah, being a male it's a big thing to have a decent car. I always before I got my car, I was always pretty embarrassed saying, 'I'm driving Mum's car.' It's a big thing. Not necessarily status but just kind of who you are. If you're driving a little car ... like me and my mates were very sarcastic about it. We kind of looked at them as though they're lower on the food chain, shall we say. It also does something for your ego, too. You say, 'My car can do this, my car can do that,' you feel bigger and better than everyone else.

Another young man related the memory and significance of his first car being small and powerless:

I seriously attribute it to me still being alive, because I know when I was 17 I was an absolute hoon and I wanted to get myself a VK Commodore, and I had to have a manual car because, you know, I can drive a manual so why drive an automatic ... and I know I would have wrapped myself around a tree because the speedo says you can do 220K an hour, so I want to see if it can do 200K an hour! (Shellharbour, 24 years)

A number of young women in the focus groups seemed keenly aware of being excluded from what was seen as a 'more authentic' experience of driving because they were women. One young woman in the Bankstown group recounted how she had learned to fix her car because it kept braking down in the traffic. She referred to being able to 'treat' the problem when her car overheated. Immediately following this story a man in the group commented, 'The difference sometimes with guys and girls: see, girls don't want to give it a chance. They don't want to get all dirty.' Another woman in the group retorted, 'I love getting dirty!' The man continued:



But with guys, if my car breaks down, I'll try to fix it before I take it to someone. If I can't fix it, then I'll take it to someone else to fix it. But girls sometimes, they don't want to take that chance.

The young woman responded by saying that many men, such as 'businessmen with their suits and their computers and clean fingernails' would also not want to 'get their hands dirty'. In this exchange the young man, as with men in other groups, seemed to want to invalidate the claim of the women to any authentic car experience exemplified by 'getting your hands dirty', purely on the basis of gender and in the face of evidence to the contrary.

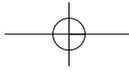
The young people were quite aware of the difference between what were regarded as 'guys' cars and 'chicks' cars. One young woman explained that the car she wanted was considered a 'butch' car. This was partly related to the power of the car whereas colour, she pointed out, can be indicative in other ways:

My dream car is a Ford GT. My boyfriend said, 'That's not a girl's car! You can't! It's too butch for you.' I said, 'No, I can drive it, if I could drive that, I would drive that!' But he's like, 'It's not a girl's car.' What's a girl's car? Pink (laughter)? When anyone sees my car they go, 'Oh, that's such a chick's car,' because of the colour. (Bankstown, woman, 20 years)

Both young men and women were keenly aware of the demands to conform to gender appropriations in terms of car type. Age differences were also considered important. A few men in the focus groups said that they were 'into all that modified car stuff' when they first got cars but when they got older they were more interested in comfort and convenience. There were young men who were the exception and had carried on a strong interest in modified cars into their twenties. While cars offer the pleasure and freedom of movement, then, they are also implicated in shaping and restraining those engaged with them. In many of these accounts it is apparent that there is an evident coerciveness in the way young people feel they need to relate to cars. This was not necessarily troubling to many of the young people, but it clearly has consequences which are evident in the higher representation of young people, especially young men in accident statistics. Driving then, can be seen as a distinct practice, which at the same time intersects with a range of other practices, including consumption practices and regulatory practices. The specificity of this practice is demonstrated in the experiences of people engaged with cars, and there are important ethical and political implications to be considered in these varied experiences.

— YOUNG PEOPLE AND DRIVING CULTURE

For young people, having a license and access to a car is an enormous boost to their independence, mobility and freedom. In this sense it symbolises emerging adulthood, and in its



particular forms, the car itself gives expression to identity. It is seen as a source of both instrumental and symbolic power, and it is flexible in its meanings and uses. The adult world immersed in car use is not exemplary, however, and over-representation of young people in motor-vehicle accidents shows the problematic place of the car, and particular practices of driving, rather than merely a lack of development or skill in young people.

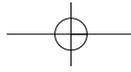
Popular television, radio and printed news have a great interest in the topic of road safety, especially regarding young drivers, and are decrying the waste of young lives one moment, and drawing attention to the 'hoons', who display their cars through loud exhausts, driving displays and street racing, the next. Young drivers are considered the problem and the cause, both vulnerable and menacing, ensuring that the issue is not broadened to consider the ways in which Western consumer culture creates these costs. Consequently the focus in popular news stories is often on extreme behaviours such as extreme speeds and other 'hoon' activities, especially where young people are gathered in numbers such as at The Rocks in Sydney. Risk is emphasised in relation to young people and their use of cars while it is downplayed in the everyday proliferation of cars.

The goal of cultural research is to understand different perspectives and experiences as they contribute to a cultural phenomenon, and to highlight injustices that exist within or through them. The injustice for young people is not just that they are killed and injured in greater numbers, but also that they often become the target when weaknesses in the system are exposed. Dick Hebdige noted some time ago that young people become visible when there is a problem.³⁰ A recent example is an article in *The Australian*, 'The Dark Side of the Hoon', in which a shooting at The Rocks tourist area in Sydney is used to lead into a story complaining about the presence of 'hoons' in the area.³¹ The article includes a picture of colourful and stylish cars lined up in the streets with young people in groups gathered around them. While the display of the cars is relatively harmless, the gathering of young people in 'hotted up' cars is clearly denoted as threatening.

The demonstration of car handling skills has long been regarded as a mark of mastery by men. When young men display these skills through 'hoon tricks' such as doughnuts (losing traction to create wheelspin, smoke and screeching of tires), burnouts (accelerating in circles) and blockies (circuiting the same block), not to mention racing on the streets, it can be regarded as threatening, and of course it can be unsafe. Young men, however, are encouraged to display their masculinity in such ways.

Cultural research can situate the apparent wilfulness of individuals within the context of dominant understandings of control, and how young men are expected to demonstrate control. For many young men, risky driving is wilful in a desirable sense, and is a necessary expression of maleness and mastery in the environment. Appeals to a reckless masculinity in advertising are used to draw young men into the world of consumption and 'mobile pri-





vationisation'. Such framing of male driving is reinforced in many areas of the broader culture where skill in handling a car, allied with dangerous unpredictability, is regarded as superior and as more desirable than driving with caution. Putting more focus on the cultural context of driving does not mean that individuals should not be held accountable for their actions. It does mean, however, that producing any real changes in driving practice requires confronting key aspects of the cultural context, particularly those that promote associations between risk-taking and cars. These associations need to be theorised and highlighted through social and cultural frameworks in further research.

— CULTURAL RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Angela McRobbie has argued that cultural studies has not been able to engage in policy debates due to the dearth of concrete, empirically grounded research. She suggests that the 'three Es'—empiricism, ethnography and experience—be 'reconceptualized in the light of the anti-Es': anti-essentialism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis.³² This means, as she outlines it, doing more empirical research, and ethnographic research, informed by an anti-essentialist and post-structuralist awareness of diversity and plurality, in order to 'expand the political potential of the field and to enter into a dialogue with those other strands which appear to occupy the high ground'.³³ Being able to strategically speak the language of empirical research, she says, is not to endorse it as the only mode that is appropriate, rather it is to take it up and extend the perspective of cultural research beyond its own domain into other disciplines and policy areas.

There is the potential for cultural research to have a real impact by engaging with other discourses in meaningful ways, even though these may be opposed to its own perspectives. As McRobbie argues:

The particular authority of the empirical mode can be occupied now with greater complexity. It can be both used where appropriate and deconstructed elsewhere for its narratives of truth, its representation of results. [...] awareness of this and of the structures and conventions which provide a regulative framework for doing cultural studies research brings not just greater reflexivity to the field, but also demonstrates cultural studies to be a field of inquiry that is aware of the power which its competing discourses wield.³⁴

For policy implications to follow from research such as *Driving Cultures*, it is necessary to engage with the dominant discourses in the field and to challenge the underlying basis of those discourses. The *Driving Cultures* research requires 'reading' the discourses (representation of young people, advertising, car manufacture) central to road safety interests as well as engaging with government policy. The position the cultural researcher takes is not one of superior understanding, however, but of being able to highlight operations of discourse and



culture that may be invisible. At the same time it requires interaction with those who are being 'researched' and an attempt to understand alternative positions and perspectives through the addition of a variety of voices.

Cultural research has sought to draw on the lived experiences of people in their everyday lives as workers, consumers, participants in leisure activities and so on. Including 'other' perspectives, both from 'within' and 'outside' dominant culture, including those of young people, is thus vitally important. Young people have enthusiastically embraced the opportunities for dialogue about driving issues through the *Driving Cultures* project, enabling them to explore the demands and requirements of driving as a cultural practice. One young woman highlighted the contradictory demands of driving cultures noting that you don't have to 'let the traffic force you to go faster', though for many this is what being part of the traffic flow demands.

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