Pre-print version of Power, A. (in press) Disability, (Auto-)Mobility and Austerity: Shrinking Horizons and Spaces of Refuge**,** *Disability & Society* (accepted manuscript: 13 January 2016)

Disability, (Auto-)Mobility and Austerity: Shrinking Horizons and Spaces of Refuge

Abstract

In Britain, many disabled people have access to a car through the Motability Scheme. However, with recent news of thousands of disability claimants losing their cars in cuts, it is worth reflecting on the cultural and symbolic importance of the motor car. The paper considers the car's ability to expand spatial and experiential horizons and offer a site of sanctuary for disabled people and asks what can be lost in the wake of the recent government reassessment of the scheme?

Keywords: disability, car, bus, public transport, austerity

Motability axe has fallen

In Britain, many disabled people gain access to the use of a car through the Motability Scheme. The scheme is delivered by Motability, a registered charity that is funded by the state.[1] This scheme was until recently available to people deemed eligible for Higher Rate Mobility Component of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA). However, this has been replaced by a new benefit called Personal Independent Payment (PIP) and eligibility is reserved for those on the Enhanced Rate of the Mobility Component. With this change, the scheme is now under significant threat.

One-third of recipients are losing their Disability Living Allowance (Wood 2012) through the PIP re-assessments. According to Motability (2015), 3,000 out of 8,000 of their customers who have so far been reassessed have lost their eligibility for the scheme and have therefore had to give up their vehicles. The Government said it needs to find £12 billion of savings from welfare. As a result, Motability estimate that the figure above could rise to more than

[1] The Motability charity is responsible for oversight and Scheme policy. It contracts out the operation of the scheme to Motability Operations Ltd, a private company.

100,000 (2015). With many disabled people losing access to a car as a result of these cuts, the question of what having access to a car means to disabled people takes on a new significance.

This question is also prompted from one of the findings in a recent study (reported in Power and Bartlett, 2015), which revealed the importance of a car for some adults with learning disabilities as a space of emancipation in their lives. This was interpreted by the participants as a 'place' in the community where they liked and felt welcomed in. Taking this idea of the car as a space of emancipation as a starting point, the paper widens out the scope of interpretation to examine the links between automobility and disability and asks what is being potentially at stake in the government's retrenchment of the Motability scheme.

Disability and (auto-)mobility: changing horizons

The 'driving body' is comprised of a set of social practices, embodied dispositions, and physical affordances (Sheller, 2004). When comparing the affordances of the car to other mobility technologies, it is important to recognise the physical, cognitive and affective 'effort' of different modalities of travel (Stradling et al., 2001). The car enables the expansion of horizons with much less effort. The idea of 'going places' geographically also connotes economic, social, and often experiential advancements – by increasing the range of things that people know about, are able to go to, and experience. The reasons for the low level of effort include less travel and waiting time and various 'soft attributes', such as 'directness of travel', 'comfort' and 'safety of travel from crime' (Schmocker, et al 2008).

In comparison, while an increasing share of buses are fully wheelchair accessible in the UK, with all buses having low-floor access in London since 2005, this is however constrained by many limitations which increase the 'effort' involved. Journeys by bus are limited by set bus routes, stops and schedules (Stern, 1993; Nitta 1998) and conditional on ramps working and availability of space (e.g., competing with peak time commuters or parents with prams) (Gaete-Reyes, 2014). Gaete-Reyes also found that attempting to navigate on and off buses with impairments often led to stares and condescension by fellow bus passengers making disabled people feel like non-citizens. She draws on Leder (1990) who suggests that in everyday life the able body disappears from awareness but in the presence of pain and illness

the body 'dys-appears' or it 'appears as a thematic focus of attention, but. . .in a dys-state' (Leder, 1990: 84).

In our study (Power and Bartlett, 2015), we found that the car offered some of the participants an easy way to expand spatial horizons, including travel to amenities such as gardens (where one of the participants' worked), a nightclub, and a college. Being able to pick up people for lifts was also a welcomed affordance. This was particularly cherished by Adrian in our study, as his life story revealed examples of how his spatial horizons had previously been curtailed when living in group residential services.

> *Adrian. I used to live, my old house was Ravenscroft [residential care setting with 6 other people] and we had to wait for when the car was free to go out in it.*
>
> *Q. How often did you go out?*
>
> *Adrian. Not much*
>
> *Q. So were you more isolated?*
>
> *Adrian. yes*
>
> *Advocate. Not on a bus route or anything were you?*
>
> *Adrian. Middle of nowhere, not many buses about was there, they have only got one car now so they must still be having the same problem... [Having a Motability car] has made me go to new places like college, and gardening and meet new people and friends, go and see Paula.*
>
> *Q. So where is the furthest you have gone?*
>
> *Adrian. Working for dimensions I have been to Birmingham*
>
> *Advocate. He goes to Birmingham regularly in his car*
>
> *Q. What would it mean to you if you did lose the car?*
>
> *Adrian. I couldn't do all the things I could do like my garden and that so and giving people a lift and my friends, so it depends what they say really [from the reassessment]… Especially my friend Mark, I pick him up, you know what I mean.*

This sense of autonomy expressed in the passage above resonates with Featherstone et al's (2004) introduction to *Automobilities*, "The promise here is for self-steering autonomy and

capacity to search out the open road or off-road, encapsulated in vehicles which afford […] speed and mobility" (1-2).

Representations and Refuge

As well as the physical affordances of the car, it is also essential to consider the representations of mobility technologies. Car consumption is never simply about rational economic or geographic choices. The social value given to the hybrid car-driver 'body' is different to that comprised of other mobility technologies. According to Sheller (2004), car consumption is as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as patterns of kinship, sociability, habitation and work. For instance, automobiles endow their owners/drivers with significations such as being 'competent, powerful, able and sexually desirable' (Sheller, 2004: 225). In contrast, users of the wheelchair – understood as another travel modality – are perceived as incompetent, powerless, disabled, and asexual (see Gaete-Reyes, 2012).

Sheller's emotional sociology of automobility can contribute to understanding the aesthetic and especially kinaesthetic dimensions of automobility and car cultures (and their associated feelings). One such feeling is a sense of comfort with (using) the car. Miller in the *Comfort of Things* (2008) considers the importance of everyday, unspectacular and commonplace things in contemporary Western life, which quite often turn out to be material things: the house, the dog, the music, the mobile phone. Through this work, we can appreciate the 'muteness' of everyday 'mundane' objects such as the car in everyday life. This sense of comfort stands in stark contrast to the enforced dys-appearance of the body with other modes of travel. This comfort is valuable when considering that ongoing low-level incidents of violence to disabled people are widespread and as a result, they restructure their lives to minimise real and perceived risk (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2009).

One such avenue for restructuring one's life is by occupying and using spaces, routes and modes of travel that offer refuge. The car can offer a way of evading harassment and extending one's 'living space' outside the home as it can take a person to other areas of the city and beyond relatively safely. This was evidenced in our research (Power and Bartlett,

2015), where we found that one participant, Carla, wo was continually under harassment at home, took regular trips with a close friend Gavin in his car, down to a local marina (dock for yachts and small boats) which was near a flight path, to sit and relax.

> *If I don't look out the window I go and take some sewing with me and do some sewing or knitting … Normally I like to watch the aeroplanes go by, Monday not many aeroplanes go past, Tuesday there are a lot of aeroplanes I am counting them. (Carla)*

This sense of retreat resonates with Packer's work on the cultural history of the automobile in the US (2008). He argues that the car is a space of enclosure, which offers a mediating interface with the outside world. Despite being visible through the window screen, the car is still felt as a private space and offers somewhere to 'just be'; a 'space of licence'to kill time away from the threatening elements of the outside world.

Packer (2008) also reveals how the boundary between personal freedom and social constraint is continually renegotiated through a complex array of regulations about who can have access to a car, whom should drive, and how one should drive. These boundaries, as recent news of cuts to the Motability scheme have shown, are repeatedly under scrutiny, where questions over who can have access to the car is being continually renegotiated. The mobility of disabled people is shaped by a complex assemblage of different factors including social and attitudinal barriers, impairment effects, financial considerations, legal constraints and policy limitations.

This latest cut adds to an ongoing neoliberal crusade to embed ableism's ideals across the entire welfare state. The DLA had been based on an acknowedgement of the extra costs associated with having (and travelling with) an impairment. The recent PIP reassessment and its inherent cut to the Motability scheme reveals a narrow and caustic conception of the mobility of disabled bodies. It fails to appreciate the limitations and struggles disabled people experience travelling through public space on an ongoing basis. It also neglects the disabling experiences and violence many disabled people face and the need for auto-mobile spaces of refuge. Further research on the real impacts on disabled people of the loss of their cars would help shed more light on this issue.

References

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2009) *Disabled people's experiences of targeted violence and hostility*, Manchester: EHRC.

Sheller, M., 2004. Automotive emotions: feeling the car. Theory, Cult. Soc. 21 (4/5), 221–242.

Featherstone, M Thrift, N Urry J (2005) *Automobilities*, London: Sage.

Gaete-Reyes, M. (2014) Citizenship and the embodied practice of wheelchair use, *Geoforum*, 64, 351–361

Leder, D. (1990) *The Absent Body*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Miller, D. (2008) *The Comfort of Things*, Polity.

Nitta, Y. (1998) Transportation mode change model to special bus incorporating generalized time. In: Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Transport and Mobility for Elderly and Disabled People (TRANSED), Perth Western Australia.

Packer, J. (2008) *Mobility without Mayhem: Safety, Cars and Citizenship*, Durham: Duke

Power, A. and Bartlett, R. (2015) Self-Building Safe Havens: How adults with learning disabilities are reclaiming the welcoming communities agenda, *Social & Cultural Geography*, onlinefirst.

Schmöcker J-D, Quddus, M.A. Noland, R, and Bell, M. (2008) Mode choice of older and disabled people: a case study of shopping trips in London, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 16(4), 257–267.

Stern, S. (1993) A disaggregate discrete choice model of transportation demand by elderly and disabled people in rural Virginia, *Transportation Research A*, 27(4), 315–327

Stradling, S.G., Meadows, M.L. and Beatty, S. 2001 'Identity and independence: two dimensions of driver autonomy', in G.B.Grayson (ed.) *Behavioural Research in Road Safety X*. Crowthorne: Transport Research Laboratory.

Wood, C. 2012. For Disabled People the Worst is Yet to Come…Destination Unknown: Summer 2012. London: Demos.