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Gender, Care, and Mobility: A Practice Approach

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Introduction

Mobility practices have been understood as practices that consume distance [1]. This research note investigates the gender dimensions of mobility practices and their components, as well as their links with sustainability issues. Particular focus is given to car commuting. The context studied is Belgium, a federal country comprising three regions – Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels – each of which has competence in housing, mobility, and other socio-economic matters. Regarding mobility, rules, signs and even city names can vary between regions, meaning commuters effectively commute between different mobility systems.

In Belgium, most people are mobile (making at least one trip on the reference day): in 2024–25, the average number of trips per day is 3.53 for men aged 18 and over and 3.30 for women of the same ages, with 85% and 82% of men and women respectively making at least one trip on the reference day (Service Public Fédéral Mobilité et Transports, 2025a: 6–7). Most round trips are made mainly by car, with little difference by gender (61% for men and 59% for women). However, women walk slightly more often (23% versus 20% for men) and use local public transport (bus, tramway, or metro) more frequently (6% versus 4%). Meanwhile, men cycle more often (12% versus 10%) and use the train slightly more frequently (3% versus 2%) (*Ibidem*: 11). Almost four-fifths (78%) of the total daily distance is travelled by car for both men and women (*Ibidem*: 12). This figure has remained stable for 25 years, despite the increase in cycling (*Ibidem*: 28). However, men spend more time on daily travel (69 minutes) than women (60 minutes) (*Ibidem*: 13).

Conceptual Framework: The Social Theory of Practice

As car is the main mode of transport, let us focus on the practice of commuting by car, with reference to the sociological theory of practice. Its main author ([2]: 89) defines a practice as both a performance and a coordinated entity. For him, practice as performance 'denotes the doing, the actual activity or energization, at the heart of action […] and reminds us that existence is a happening taking the form of a ceaseless performing and carrying out' ([2], 90). As coordinated entities, practices are 'open spatial-temporal nexuses of doings and sayings that are linked by arrays of understandings, rules and end-task-action combinations (also emotions and even moods) that are acceptable for or enjoined of participants' ([3], 15). A practice as a coordinated entity is thus a pattern for action. Understandings refer to the know-how and competences needed to carry out the practice, as well as the mental and bodily routines involved. Rules are explicit, such as 'principles, precepts, instructions, and the like [which] means that people take account of and adhere to these formulations when participating in the practice' ([2], 100). Previously, rather than 'end-task-action combinations', Schatzki writes about 'teleo-affective structures', which he defines as 'embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods' ([2], 89). [4,5], and the same later together with Watson ([6], 82) define materials as a component of a practice. As material arrangements and infrastructures are of special interest for mobility studies based on practice theory, they are included in this research.

When applying the practice theory framework, the practice under study – in this case, commuting by car – is considered the unit of analysis rather than the commuters themselves and their individual characteristics that could explain their behaviour. To understand the difference between a practice and behaviour (as studied in economics, psychology, and geography), it is helpful to make a comparison: behaviour (such as a car journey) is like the visible part of an iceberg, whereas the components of a practice – the understandings, rules, teleo-affective structure, and material arrangements – are the submerged part of the iceberg. Therefore, to understand and possibly change a practice, these components must be studied. The components of the car commuting practice are described in section 4 below. The data and methods used are presented in the following section.

Data and Methods

Along with published statistics, data come from two dozen in-depth interviews conducted with car commuters during the spring of 2022 and 2023. In spring 2022, fuel prices were high. The interviewees represented a variety of ages, genders, locations and car types, whether private or company-owned.

In-depth interviews resemble a conversation between familiar acquaintances, but the interviewer should not know the interviewee beforehand [7]. Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to express themselves, and many follow-up questions help to create empathy. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, with only a few conducted online by my appropriately trained students. The interviews lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. To ensure comparability between the interviews, a common, detailed interview guide was developed.

All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed. Based on a content analysis, they were analysed using a common framework based on the concepts of practice theories, particularly to describe and compare the four components that underpin commuting to Brussels by car, whether private or company. Parts of the analysis are derived from [8].

Results

Rules

The company car system replaces part of an employee's salary by providing them with a car as a form of payment in kind, which they can use for work-related reasons or otherwise [9]. The system has existed in Belgium since the 1970s, and since the 1990s, the company car has often simply been a 'wage car'. In practice, the company car system is a legal tax avoidance scheme from which both the employer and the employee benefit [9,10]. This form of remuneration is unfair, particularly from a distributional perspective, as neither the employee nor the employer pays tax on this portion of their wages, resulting in the state losing out on tax revenue. In 2007, 272,000 company cars were granted to 7.4% of employees, and this figure increased by around 5% each year, reaching 627,600 cars granted to 14.9% of employees by 2025. However, both figures remained stable between 2024 and 2025 ([11]: 3).

Company cars were more often provided to men in 2010 [9] and 2021 [12]. Among employees with the right to alternative financial benefits in 2023, 16.67% of women have a company car for private use, compared to 27.99% of men ([13]: 34). However, these figures should be adjusted for other factors. For example, it is well established that company cars mainly benefit higher earners (*Ibidem*, 36), raising issues of social justice [14]. Additionally, women tend to earn less than men. Controlling for income decile, sector of activity, age group, number of workers, and status (white- versus blue-collar), men are 1.85 times more likely than women to have a company car for private use ([13]: 77).

Since 2019, the mobility budget has set new rules to correct the fiscal advantages of company cars. It proposes alternatives to employees in the form of in-kind benefits, such as a budget for public transport, electric scooters or bicycles, smaller and less expensive company cars, and, under certain conditions, a housing cost contribution. The mobility budget can also be used as a wage supplement for the remaining part, if any [15]. Although the adoption of the mobility budget has been slow, it is increasing. Most beneficiaries choose other benefits over a company car. In 2022, there were 4,865 beneficiaries of a mobility budget who did not receive a company car. This figure increased to 9,592 in 2023 and 17,157 in 2024 ([11]: 4). In 2023, 60% of all beneficiaries of a mobility budget were men, enjoying an average financial advantage of €7,263, while 40% were women, enjoying a lower advantage of €6,660 [13]: 46). Thus, among employees granted a company car or a mobility budget, women are more likely to choose a more environmentally friendly option.

Material Arrangements

As [8] describe in detail, there are some significant material differences between commuting by private car and commuting by company car: the characteristics of the car used – company cars are generally larger and more powerful than private cars ([16]: 8), places for refuelling and repairs (specific garages for company cars). Although the same network of highways and roads is used, commuting with a company car involves longer journeys. Company cars are often granted a 'free' petrol or diesel card. To the best of my knowledge, there are no gender-specific statistics for any of these aspects.

Company cars offer better protection in the event of a road accident [17]. Women are less likely to be involved in road accidents than men at all ages below 65. As ([16]: 15) shows, men driving company cars are much more often involved in road accidents than men driving private cars, especially between the ages of 25 and 59. The figures are more similar and lower for women, except after the age of 55, when there is a higher incidence of road accidents involving women driving private cars. Regarding accidents involving bodily injury, 3.8 deaths occur among occupants of company cars compared to 8.8 in private cars. However, company cars cause more serious damage to third parties: 6.8 deaths as opposed to 5.0 deaths caused by private cars ([16]: 16). There are no gender-specific statistics regarding injuries.

Understandings

No difference in driving or navigation skills was found among our interviewees of different genders. Among those who commute by private car, men may have more knowledge and practice of economical driving, although our sample is too small to be conclusive in this respect. Those commuting by private car are more familiar with public transport alternatives than those travelling by company car, but there is no gender difference in this regard.

Some pragmatic versatility – taking the train once in a while for example – is shown by several women of all ages among our interviewees and by a few young men, whether they use their private car or a company car. Women thus seem to have more environmentally friendly practices than men, but this should be confirmed, or not, with a larger sample size.

Teleo-affective Structure

Autonomy, social success, efficiency, and safety are the four values structuring the practice of commuting by car. All are enhanced if commuting by company car.

Women place greater importance on flexibility and time-saving when using a car. In particular, the mothers in the sample consider the car to be essential for fulfilling their responsibilities, such as taking the children to school or their activities. [18] also highlight the dependence of mothers on cars for childcare-related tasks. Therefore, gender roles also structure mobility practices.

In addition, women attach greater importance than men to the fact that the car provides a sense of security, particularly at night and/or in areas deemed insecure, such as near large train stations.

Concluding Discussion: Gender and Environmentally Friendly Practices

As this research shows, women are less likely to have powerful vehicles or SUVs than men because they are less likely to benefit from

a company car. Furthermore, when given the option of a mobility budget, women are more likely to choose this than men. Additionally, women appear to demonstrate greater pragmatic versatility, such as occasionally taking the train, than men, although this result requires confirmation with a larger sample size. Thus, women appear to engage in more environmentally friendly practices than men. However, in order to fulfil their gender role as mothers, women rely on cars, which are seen as a necessity. According to [19], representations of gender roles relating to obligations towards children and family are stronger for mothers than for fathers.

MacGregor analyses the increased gender differentiation in institutional and individual responses to climate change both as 'a masculinization of environmentalism' and what she calls 'ecomaternalism' ([20]: 128, 136). For her, "[i]n so far as consumption is a private sphere activity, and women tend to be principally responsible for household consumption, it is likely that exhortations to 'live green' are directed at (and will be received primarily by) women. Men may hear them, but expect women to do the work" ([20]: 134). Her examples are conserving energy, taking public transportation, recycling waste and avoiding flights.

[21] in the UK and [22] in Belgium found that women engaged in more 'green' practices than men. Men use more energy than women, particularly in terms of mobility and meat consumption [23]. When it comes to changing practices, [24] notes that 'the lifestyle changes were gender-biased, with the women as driving forces but also bearing most of the extra workload'.

More sustainable mobility practices, by train or by cycling for example, were also found to be 'compensatory practices': some mothers reported that they could only compensate the lack of environmentally friendlier actions of their family members by changing their own practices, here for their daily trips. [25].

Overall, a practice-based approach to car commuting, combined with a gender analysis, has yielded significant findings. While women may exhibit certain mobility practices that are slightly more sustainable than men, even in the case of car commuting, for care-taking trips, cars remain a crucial necessity. The apparent conflict between caring for children and caring for the environment is thus a salient concern.

In the future, more statistics on mobility should be published by gender. Further research on a larger sample would be necessary to investigate knowledge of and practice in economical driving, pragmatic versatility, and the material arrangements and policies governing compatibility between caring for others (namely children) and caring for the environment [26,27].

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