

Dangerous Gender Performances: 'Hydraulic Masculinity' as a Norm for Young Male Drivers

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses data from focus groups carried out as part of the Transforming Drivers project in partnership with NRMA Motoring and Services, focusing on the significance of gender in shaping young people's relationships to cars. Little analysis from a socio-cultural framework has been applied to the specific practices and experiences afforded by cars as they exist within a broader driving culture, especially for younger people. It is important therefore to link larger social categories such as gender with the ways in which gender is expressed through cars. Analysis of focus group discussions showed distinct differences in the ways in which young men and women 'perform' in cars and how cars are a significant aspect of their evolving identities. Employing the idea of 'hydraulic masculinities' from the work of Linley Walker, the paper will outline the concept, relating it to the focus group data and indicating the involvement of danger in this form of masculinity as it is expressed through cars. The importance of age and gender as a social norm significantly shaping young men's relationship to cars is emphasised. Suggestions are made in conclusion, as to how gender performance might be appropriately addressed in road safety.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper gender will be explored in its social and cultural dimensions as an aspect of driving as a cultural practice (Redshaw, 2006). Gender is regarded as formed within a context of social performance, and the particular ways in which gender performance is related to cars is considered as a social norm relevant to driving. In theories of driver behaviour (such as Parker, et al. 1995), social norms are considered as informing driver behaviour, however there is a need for greater in-depth exploration of those norms. Drawing on focus group studies the paper will explore the meanings and shape of gender performance in cars evident in young people's discourses on cars and driving.

Social psychological research in road safety has been based on the theory of planned behaviour with the aim of identifying behavioural characteristics associated with risk and the tendency to commit violations (Parker, et al. 1995). In one study it was concluded that 'violations are social phenomena which require explanation in terms of driver attitudes, normative influences and motivational factors.' (Reason, et al. 1991: 65) Social norm is considered to reflect 'the individual's perceptions about what others would want him/her to do' (Parker et al., 1995: 129). The theory reveals important elements of behaviour involved in driving accidents and infringements, however it is limited to an analysis of individual intentions and does not extend to the culture of driving as a whole, and the expectations and ideals that are operating there to influence the individual driver. It does not address behaviours that are implicitly condoned in the social context of driving.

There are likely to be a range of conflicting influences on a young person's behaviour, including parents, other drivers and peers, and broader social forces such as the various media. While social norms are not consciously chosen, they provide 'the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have' (Butler 2004:33) thus creating possibilities of who we can be. It can be seen in the ways in which young men and young women express themselves in and through cars that young people are actively producing their gendered identities through driving in important senses (Walker, et al., 2000). At the same time these performances of gender are produced within the context of social influences, particularly those of family and peer groups (Sarkar and Andreas, 2004).

The earliest stages of driving are clearly crucial for young people with statistics showing more crashes occurring in the first few months of gaining a licence. The pressures on young people adding to the inexperience already extensively noted in research (Ferguson, 2003) include developing the appropriate gender performance. For young men this is particularly acute as their gender performance involves acting in and through cars in ways that are more dangerous and risk related (Harré, 2000; Clarke, Ward and Truman, 2005). Young men have also demonstrated a greater self-enhancement bias whereby they consider themselves better drivers than their peers (Harré, Forrest and O'Neill, 2005, Gregersen 1996), and have been found to have a less positive attitude to traffic safety and rules than women (Laapotti, Keskinen and Rajalin, 2003). It is evidently an important part of the social performance of young men to demonstrate a willingness to take risks in cars and this is an additional pressure that needs to be carefully addressed in road safety. The idea that men are more likely to be able to control a car is a familiar claim even though men have more crashes and more serious crashes (Clarke, Ward and Truman, 2005). There are considered to be differences in the types of driving skills males and females focus on (Laapotti, Keskinen, Hataaka and Katila, 2001) but this is not so much an issue of competence and incompetence, as it is usually framed, but of different relationships to the car and the surrounding system of traffic.

Social researchers have drawn attention to the need to consider the role of gender in road safety for some time. Linley Walker in particular has outlined forms of masculinity associated with cars. Walker, Connell and Butland (2000: 158) warn against stereotyping boys as being a certain way and girls another, drawing attention to the 'diversity of masculinities'. It is important to stress then, that forms of masculinity are social and cultural and produce norms of behaviour that are not biological or fixed. As Malcolm Vick points out however, even though there are a range of masculinities in Australian culture, those that are most often emphasised are those that 'place a high value on risk-taking, bravado, skilled performance with machines, rule-breaking and other forms of challenging authority and convention' (2003: 35).

Walker's research focused on particular types of masculinity amongst juvenile offenders in Western Sydney (Walker, 1998 & 1999). She was concerned with car culture as a form of 'protest masculinity' amongst young men who were marginalized in the labor market, deprived of material resources and failed educationally by society as a whole (1999: 178). 'Hydraulic masculinity' refers to the investment of sexuality, as a "naturally gushing force with an uncontrollable and addictive power in men's lives" in cars, which provide a medium for male admiration and the expression of competitiveness, performance, power, control, technique/skill and aggression (1999: 183). In this account, masculinity is structured in relation to cars which play a significant part in the formation of identities and the expression of aggression and competitiveness, an association that is socially constructed and popularly reinforced, but nevertheless excused as 'natural'.

In this paper it is proposed that 'hydraulic masculinity' is the standard by which young men are expected to approach cars and that their early experiences of driving are informed by this. Rather than being related to a particular class of young men, the pressure applied to many young men to indulge in risk-taking behaviours of varying degrees, crosses class and cultural boundaries, and pertains to the ways in which cars and driving are given meaning through advertising and other forms of media. Comments from focus groups illustrate the extent to which the identification of driving skill with masculinity has encouraged a particular approach of young males to driving that puts them at greater risk of injury and crashing than the approach of young women.

METHOD

The study consisted of a series of 10 focus groups with 65 15-25 year olds in Western Sydney, Wollongong, Goulburn and Wagga Wagga reported extensively in Redshaw and Noble (2006). Most (62) were in the age range 17-24 years.

There were 30 males and 35 females and four had learner licences, 38 provisional licences and 19 had their full licences. Two had been disqualified and two did not have a licence. Focus groups were used in order to draw on the social interaction involved in discussion of cars and their centrality for the young people. Focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed and then coded according to key themes using NVIVO software. Gender was a major theme and responses to all questions were analysed according to gender differences in meaning.

Focus group questions were open-ended and asked about access to cars, the importance of cars, how they are used in the young people's social lives, knowledge of cars, enjoyment of driving and characteristics of cars and how they should be driven. Discussions showed distinct differences between young men and women in how these experiences were described as well as how they were lived. The following discussion draws primarily on how the young men and women portrayed their driving and their relationship to cars.

RESULTS

The analysis of focus group discussions showed distinct differences in the ways young men and women talked about cars and driving and a tendency on the part of the men to deny that women have anything like the experiences with cars that they do, as we will see in the following. This paper will draw on comments and discussion that illustrate the way in which young men expressed their superiority as drivers and how that could lead to a higher likelihood of young men engaging in dangerous driving. In all focus groups there were young men who expressed a superior relationship to cars that they regarded as a need and as 'natural' to them as males. Not all young men in the focus groups however, expressed this superior relationship or implicit connection to cars and driving. A few men even commented that they did not like driving and avoided it and a few were quite reflective and insightful about their earlier driving experiences. The main themes to be discussed here are the perceived connection between men and cars as natural, differences between men and women in knowledge of cars, driving performance and young men's reflections on early experiences as drivers. The ways in which young men defend and assert their superiority as drivers is of primary interest in each of these themes.

Natural Connection

The men in the focus groups were more likely to talk about having a 'natural' and more authentic connection with cars and the experience of driving than were the women. In the Shellharbour group for example, two men described the open freedom of being alone in the car as a quality that they could especially appreciate:

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 associated explicitly with men in all the focus groups and was often regarded as a 'natural' way for young men to behave because of their implicit connection to cars. Young women talked about 'having time to themselves' and the independence of having a car. They did not talk about driving as 'you feel like' or doing 'whatever you want' in a car.

A younger man (18 years) from the Blacktown group stated the need for the correct image as well as noting the competitiveness involved in the kind of car a young man has and how he drives it:

Yeah, being a male it's a big thing to have a decent car. 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.

The connection with 'who you are' demonstrates on the one hand, that the car is related to identity in a significant way, and on the other that this connection is claimed as 'natural'. The right car for the right image relates to social esteem and the importance of adopting the image of masculinity that others appreciate, but needs to be seen as a connection that is normal and innate.

Knowledge of cars

Knowledge is central to any convincing performance of social or technical competence and it was generally assumed in the groups that men have superior knowledge and mastery when it comes to cars. The young women in the focus groups sounded quite knowledgeable about cars at times and were keen to show their knowledge, yet the kinds of knowledge young men and women were concerned with were often different. Knowledge could mean knowing 'how fast a car is' (Male, Warrawong) or 'how to control it' (Female, Warrawong). Young women in the Bankstown and Blacktown groups talked about needing to know the capacity of their cars because they 'thrashed' them. For most of the women, however, knowledge meant knowing some of the basic things about cars in case anything goes wrong and knowing how to deal with unfamiliar cars. For the men it was more about knowledge of the power and ultimate performance of the car and how that could feel.

One young woman said she had been given a crash course by one of her friends and knew how to change a wheel, oil and indicator lights (Bankstown). She said that if she did have a problem she would have some idea of what it would be. Others in the group said their fathers had taught them to change tyres, the oil and fill the water. Knowing cars also meant knowing whether the car had power steering and how powerful it was:

But I think it's good to know what cars you can drive and what cars you feel comfortable driving, rather than, "Oh yeah, it looks good, I'm going to drive it." To kind of know which ones you're capable of driving. (Bankstown)

The women talked about 'flattening' the accelerator and what happened in different cars, and knowing the difference between different types of cars. Most of them acknowledged that having some knowledge was desirable, especially if they had an older car, but that they would not necessarily use the knowledge. A few said they would just call the NRMA or a family member or friend. One woman stated:

I'm happy, like I said, with the basics, but when it comes to the technical stuff I'm not really fussed. I don't want to get my hands dirty in the bonnet. I'll open it, but that's about it. I'm not really into that sort of thing. I'll call my dad or take it to a proper service person, a mechanic. (Bankstown)

Women in the Goulburn 1 group talked about knowing 'how the water squirter works' and how to put air in the tyres, and also expressed a lack of interest in touching anything under the bonnet. As one woman said, 'I know where it is...like, Dad comes out and gives me a quiz, where's this, where's that. And I'm like, "Yeah, there..."'. Some of the males were equally uninterested in knowing about how cars work or dealing with problems, but it was a more typical female response. One young woman demonstrated the extent and focus of her knowledge of cars:

So you have the two different sides of the blinkers (laughter), and you turn on the windscreen wiper! (laughs) That's annoying, too, so you need to kind of think...even my mum, who's been driving for ever, she still gets confused because the X-Trail and the Astra are on different sides. (Bankstown, 19 years)

Young men were highly unlikely to talk about where indicators and windscreen wipers are located and were more likely to demonstrate knowledge about performance and skill:

We talk about top-end and acceleration and stuff like that, and they get off the mark quickly, but we'll smash them once we catch up to them, and stuff like that. Just getting it sideways every now and then, taking off really hard, ... (Male, Blacktown, 18 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.

By maintaining that they had superior knowledge the men were validating their claim to have a closer relationship to cars that was more authentic than the women and this in turn validated the style of driving most associated with men – speeding, 'being a hoon', demonstrating skill and competing aggressively with others. Hydraulic masculinity is being defended as a necessity. This was clear in the defense of driving performance where men also maintained their superiority.

Driving performance

While performance is an often discussed feature of cars, it is not only the performance of the car that matters. The power of the car was significant for many young men as noted above, and this often had to be accompanied by a driving performance that matched the vehicle. Cars appeared to be significant for some of the young men in that they suggested important things about themselves as males, and this could also involve demonstrating a style of driving that is considered more fitting for young men.

The contrast in the way the young men and young women spoke about driving is evident in these comments about dealing with slipping tyres:

The other day I was turning off Clinton Street into Sloane Street, it was just raining a little bit and I was going round a corner and the tyres started to slip and I thought, stuff it! And I gunned it! Wooh! It was just sittin' on steel, and there were all these cars starting to bank up behind me, and I was just going, yay!! The tyres were going and I wasn't moving. I wasn't going sideways, I wasn't going forward. I was just sitting there.... (Male, Goulburn 1, 18 years)

In this account the young man expressed excitement and sheer pleasure in having to deal with a situation and a vehicle that was difficult to control. He described the wheels just spinning on the spot to the point that it felt like the wheel hubs were grinding on the road as the vehicle failed to move forward.

The experience for this young man is bodily and contrasts with the careful consideration of the young woman in the following:

I think knowing your car, as in exactly how it is. Knowing the grip of the tyres and things like that. I've got a few cars in my family and I just drive around whenever. And going by the different cars, you can tell when you take a corner. One flies out but the other one doesn't. So, just knowing the car, pretty much. And the roads. That's very important, because if you're in a place where you don't know the roads and you're speeding, there's no chance. You're gone, because if there's a blind corner, you're gone. That's how I feel. Know the roads, know your car, you should be right. (Female, Warrawong, 19 years)

For the young man the experience was exciting, he takes it as it comes, and enters into the moment with the car and the road. He remained in control in his merging with the vehicle, whereas for the young woman the over-riding sentiment was caution, getting to know the situation, the car and the road in a very deliberate sense. It is not just the way each speaks about their experiences that is of interest, it is also the experience itself and what each was inclined to do that was different. The young man 'gunned it', while the young woman preferred to exercise forethought and vigilance. The contrast is perhaps between enjoying the sensation of 'sittin' on steel' and knowing the car and the streets in a reflective sense.

A number of the young men wanted to make it known that they were better drivers. In all of the focus groups there were discussions where the relationship of men and women to cars was distinguished and clarified. Challenges to the superior driving and relationship to cars on the part of the men were taken up and dealt with convincingly enough for many of the young women to eventually agree with them. These challenging incidents were mostly initiated by women, whereas men tended to focus on maintaining the gender distinction. Women related stories about their involvement with cars that appeared to challenge the distinction between men and women in relation to cars and driving, but eventually the gender distinction was maintained.

When a young woman in the Warrawong group exclaimed that female drivers were safer, one young man responded; 'Not the ones I know mate! I don't really like going in cars with them.' When asked why, he said at first he did not know and then referred to 'their' braking strategies: 'they just brake at the last moment and go over the gutter.' A woman in the group countered by arguing, 'statistics say that males are the biggest problem.' The same young man responded that males are 'obviously stupid when they are in a car' to which a woman declared 'there you go'. The young man went on to outline the difference between men and women drivers in some detail:

Yeah, but I'm just saying that women don't know how to drive! Like, if I'm in a car and I'm speeding – it's stupid if I'm speeding, but say something happens, I can maybe control it, you get me? A woman, a girl, something that happens to her. I know a friend, a chick, she lost control and she smacked it into a pole. And one of my mates was speeding. He lost it and, like, he controlled the car. I'm not saying that women are worse drivers. How do you say it – a man knows cars better than a woman does. That's just what I'm trying to say.

In this statement the man who 'loses it' is regarded as remaining in control whereas a woman is not because 'a man knows cars better than a woman does'. At the same time he said he was 'not saying that women are worse drivers'. He was trying to find a way to express the 'obvious' gender differences in how men and women express themselves in relation to cars. In his example the woman crashed into a pole while the man only 'lost it'; even though he was speeding, he was able to regain control. The fact that men were 'stupid' in cars was not a problem for the men in the group, nor was the fact that they tended to speed or lose control. Somehow the crashes and 'stupidity' men were involved in were excused because men were seen as having a stronger affinity with cars. This affinity was part of how they engaged with cars and was demonstrated in their driving style, and this was regarded as part of being male.

The young woman who initially challenged the young man in this group then agreed with him stating; 'You could have a point there.' Neither she nor any other women or men in the group took him up on his statement that 'females just don't know how to drive'. He convincingly redefined driving to suit male styles and was encouraged to go on:

You see a woman there, she's got a flat tyre and she's just standing there at the side of the road! (laughter) And she waits for someone to help her. A male will know what to do.

The young women in the group agreed and he continued, defining male capacities:

I'm just saying we can react quicker. We know what we can do. A woman will just let go and hope for the best, and accelerate or brake.

He was not quite saying that women were incompetent but his comparison suggested that the difference between men and women was their skill and this stemmed from men's implicit and more intense engagement with cars. The gender distinction was kept in tact in this discussion with the men maintaining superiority over women in their driving. The male view that men 'react quicker' and 'know what to do' while women 'hope for the best' was not challenged even though the men's style of driving might be more dangerous because it involved speeding. A dangerous style of driving is thus equated with better driving.

Reflections on early driving desires

A few of the men reflected on their earlier driving and how that was crucial to their sense of themselves with one recognising the potential consequences. He related his desire for the kind of car that would adequately express 'hydraulic masculinity':

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 220 k an hour, so I want to see if it can do 200 k an hour! (Shellharbour, 24 years)

A powerful manual car would have allowed him to demonstrate his skill and mastery as a male and would also have facilitated the expression of the 'natural' gushing power associated with masculinity. The importance of identifying as a young male with a car like the Commodore was recognised by this young man who later became aware of the enticing danger it presented. The age of seventeen was clearly a crucial stage for him and he appreciated the fact that he was not able to indulge in the desire for a powerful car at the time.

Another 23-year-old man from the Fairfield group referred to the 'old days' when he was younger and more into cars:

So you just get a normal, decent car, but back in the old days I used to like knowing how your car performs and all the dynamics and that sort of stuff, but these days I'm starting to forget everything because there's just no time to keep up with it.

A number of male focus group participants stated that they were 'into all that modified car stuff' when they first got cars but now that they were older they were more interested in comfort and convenience. The modified cars many of the younger men are interested in take quite a bit of effort to keep on the road in their characteristic uniqueness so that they are eventually less inclined to make the effort. This could also have some effect on the way they drove:

I do drive like an idiot sometimes, but I think I've settled down a lot now. When I first got my P's I was just an idiot. Now when people are in the car I think I drive a lot better, but when I'm by myself I still give it a little bit just to feel the G's or something. (laughter) I don't know. When people are in the car, now, I drive a lot safer than what I used to, and I've had my licence for two years now. (Male, Goulburn 1, 19 years)

There was still a need for the young man to express himself as a male in the car when he was alone but he was now prepared to be more conscious of passengers in the car at least.

The young man from Shellharbour went on to talk about the first car he did end up with, and its lack of power:

And we've been out and looking a bit, me and Dad, to try and find a car for me, and we went to the auctions, and the week before they had a whole heap of VK and VL Commodores, and they were going for under three grand. So, it was like, 'Right. If we go there, maybe we'll get lucky this week.' They didn't have any there but they had the Bluebird there, and it was something completely different and it was just very basic. It had 22 horsepower, and if you had a tailwind and you were going down a hill, I think that had got it up to, like, 75 miles an hour, which is about 120. So it was one of them cars that you really couldn't drive fast, and it just suited my needs at the time.

The car was lacking in power but suited his needs to get himself where he needed to go and he clearly appreciated this at 23 years of age. His friends nevertheless found a way to code the car he had as male by invoking animal power:

It was just it was my car and all my mates saw it and they were like...instead of calling it the piece of crap that it probably was, they were like, 'Yeah, that's Dazza's beast!' It was something completely different. (Shellharbour)

In this case the masculinity of this young man could say something about the car even though it was not the most masculine car or the kind of car that was regarded as typically male, like the Commodore. It became a 'male' car in being claimed as such by his mates who thereby made it socially acceptable. The Bluebird could not respond to the desire for gushing power with its limited speed and power. Commodores are also limited but their limits tend to be well beyond what is acceptable and manageable on the roads, and this is part of their appeal.

CONCLUSION

The cars and driving performance that are considered appropriate for young men could be extremely costly for them. It is not just the power of the car that is significant, it is the ways in which the power must be demonstrated and mastered amongst young men. Not only is risky driving considered acceptable amongst males, having a male passenger in the car makes it more likely that the driver will take risks (Simons-Morton, Lerner and Singer, 2005; Ulleburg, 2004; Harré, Field and Kirkwood, 1996). It is not only knowledge of cars and their willingness to get their hands dirty that makes men different in their relationship to cars. It is also the association of particular masculinity with cars and that it has to be expressed in particular forms. The investment of masculinity in cars is strongly defended as 'natural' and efforts to exclude women were evident in order to maintain the apparently more 'natural' association of men and cars.

Hydraulic masculinity, it has been argued here, is strongly age related though it appears in other age groups and women may also demonstrate it. A large number of young men feel drawn to express hydraulic masculinity when they first have access to cars. For many this later changes, but hydraulic masculinity remains the standard for the expression of masculinity through cars and to some extent for driving generally, fuelled by car advertising which constantly employs images of hydraulic masculinity. It could be said to be the dominant ideology of driving and therefore informing social norms in significant senses.

It is important then that masculinity in the forms related to cars is regarded as socially constructed rather than as a fixed biological characteristic of men. In order to change the way young men take to cars, the forms of masculine expression through cars need to be addressed and considered. It is not popular to associate maleness, cars and caution but it could become more acceptable if advertising is approached differently and there is greater acknowledgement of the constructions of masculinity and the associations with cars and driving.

Taking some of the emphasis related to ‘good driving’ from skill in handling corners fast and putting more emphasis on caution and regard for the social environment inside and outside the car could help to change the desires expressed through cars by young men. The desires that are encouraged socially are the free expression of youthful exuberance and demonstration of extreme handling. This needs to be modified to emphasise the planning and thought needed in driving as well as concession to other road users and impact on the social environment. Social and cultural influences need to be recognised and addressed and not merely treated as innate drives.

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