

CONVENIENCE, COMFORT, AND CAR MOBILITY

Abstract

Convenience and comfort are considered to be important motives for car mobility. But what does convenience mean in relation to car mobility. And how could comfort grow into a key asset of cars? In this article convenience and comfort, and the dilemma's they can create, are analysed. The analysis is broad in orientation and scope ; convenience and comfort are result of growing prosperity, and at the same time key elements in the arrangements and practices of modern prosperous societies.

Keywords ; modern societies, practices, dilemmas, car use, growth towards prosperity, flexibility

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article two notions are central: convenience and comfort. These are important notions, and even driving forces, in relation to car mobility. Car use is central in modern western lifestyles. 80 to 85 % of all households in Western European countries have at least one car, and some 30 % of all households have two or more cars available. Between 75 and 85 % of all traveller kilometres in surface transport are made by cars 1).

In the literature many motives for car use can be found ; most mentioned are freedom, identity, flexibility, habit. 2). Also, often mentioned motives for car use are convenience and comfort.

Convenience is seldom operationalized in debates on car mobility. An elaborated definition of convenience is hard to find in the literature. Yale and Venkatesh stated on this issue: "Through its operationalization in recent research, convenience is overwhelmingly implied to be equivalent to time saving or time buying." Mostly authors seem to plunge into operationalizing convenience via convenience goods, convenience products or convenience services. However, the convenience aspect itself is not clarified, and the term becomes synonymous with something like "more easy" 3).

In this article *convenience* will be described in its relationship to the changing organisation of everyday life in the richer countries in the world. As operationalisation of convenience the Oxford Dictionary definition; "convenience is the state of being able to proceed with something without difficulty" is chosen.

Comfort is described by the Oxford Dictionary as; "a state that contributes to physical ease and wellness can be described as higher and higher valued standards of wellness".

Life in modern western societies has developed towards wellness the last decades as harsher conditions have mostly disappeared and a differentiation in conditions on comfort has taken place. A majority of households and individuals can now create their own spheres, own comfort rituals and own housing temperatures.

This article will elaborate on convenience and comfort in relation to cars and car mobility in the economically most developed societies of the world. Convenience and comfort can be seen as positive assets but can at the same time create dilemmas in personal life and at a societal level.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article is organised as follows. The German transport researcher Rammler presented the basic insight. He sees mobility as the facilitator for the spatial integration of the social differentiation. Transport infrastructures, and certainly the recent car systems are “both skeleton and nervous system of modern industrial growth society “4). The car, being able to reach nearly all destinations, is essential for the social integration of modern man. This integration is important, as social differentiation continues; functions, tasks and services are spread further away. This development of social differentiation was also facilitated by car use, and each time the car has to connect all these elements. This means still greater car distances, and it means more reliance on the car to reach all the essential elements and services of modern life. Transportation, especially in its most important mode, car mobility can be seen as partly responsible for this social differentiation, and can be seen, at the same time, as responsible for at least some form of new integration via connecting locations ; “...*transportation is a force that holds the world together while driving it apart*” 5)

This double role of car mobility can also be noted for the function of convenience and comfort. Convenience and comfort could be seen as great helpers for modern households and individuals, but they also create or facilitate patterns and practices with dilemmatic aspects.

Questions to be elaborated in this article are threefold. The first is to define the relationship between the general development of convenience and comfort in modern western societies and the specific convenience and comfort elements related to cars and to car use. These questions will be taken up in paragraphs 3 and 4. The second is to understand which patterns and routines in modern western societies could be seen as directly related to convenience and comfort stemming from cars. This question will be taken up in chapter 5. The third question is to identify which personal and societal dilemma's that seem to be produced are activated by patterns and routines related to convenience and comfort of cars. This question will be taken up in chapter 6. Here we also return to the statements of Rammler.

3. CONVENIENCE AND COMFORT IN MODERN WESTERN SOCIETIES

Convenience, as operationalised in 1., did grow in the last decades. In former times individuals – and especially many women - had to spend much time on daily or frequent activities, like cleaning, washing, cooking, or overcoming distances. A great part of this time can recently be spent in other ways. Especially middle- class women have for the first time started to work outside their homes. There is a rich literature on this development, and sometimes convenience products and home appliances are called “engines of liberation” 6).

The extra household income that could be generated with entering the labour market created extra household prosperity. This extra prosperity has led to further rising of standards of convenience and comfort.

And as societies did grow more prosperous, comfort started to be taken more for granted. People seem to feel that normal life can not exist without high levels of comfort. Comfort standards change in time. To give an example; around 1960 the inhabitants of Chicago moved their sleeping bags to their gardens during extremely hot weather. Now they put the thermostat of the air-conditioning to a cooler level, using a lot more energy. 7)

There is a relation between growing prosperity and higher expected standards of quality. Van der Brink noted in a broader study; "growing prosperity gives rise to growing expectations. Dissatisfaction arises when modern living conditions can not meet the standards related to these growing expectations." 8). He clarifies this vision for a few areas of life. In the private sphere, partners expect more from their relationships than ever, the burden of affective problems is growing. In the work sphere demands from employers towards employees are growing, and employees have higher expectations of their careers. It is rather difficult to meet these higher expectations, so often a price is paid in the form of stress and anxiety.

Growth in convenience and comfort often does not seem to find its first source in consumers wishes, but in the work of pioneer technicians, who developed higher convenience and comfort standards. Their pioneer work was implemented by marketeers. Shove on this theme: "Modern comfort has been developed and designed by marketeers, so what we have got used to is a manufactured expectancy, something that we have come to think of as convenience". 9)

In analysing convenience three basic goals for convenience can be noticed. 10) The first is saving of time and money. The second is diminishing unwanted situations. For example luggage does not have to be transported with your own personal bodily energy when using a car. And third goal is to realise instant satisfaction. You can immediately act instead of waiting for some service to arrive.

Especially the first goal, but also the second, could lead to more energy and time available for focussed activities, and thus to more energy and time for creating greater economic development. Consumption is in the core of modern western societies, with consumer goods as central elements for practices they facilitate. Practices can be defined as "'socially recognized forms of activity, done at the basis of what members learn from others and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly" 11) A broader definition is from Reckwitz (2002) ; "A practice is a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood".12)

In essence, there seems to be a spiral; convenience facilitates prosperity, prosperity leads to higher expectations, and these higher expectations lead via consumption to new practices, that can lead anew to a demand for higher standards of convenience. These higher standards could be met because greater prosperity mostly leads to higher and better paid technical skills and capacities, needed to technically raise comfort and convenience levels.

4. CONVENIENCE AND COMFORT RELATED TO CAR MOBILITY

What does convenience mean in relation to cars and car use?

First a look at *time and personal energy savings*. Cars can create convenience in relation to the other transport mode because only cars could create seamless journeys over greater distances. In one of the scarce studies on convenience and cars 13) the author signals that the convenience of the car is mostly appreciated when coordination problems exist, and when individuals are obliged to follow time schedules and specific routes to achieve all their daily objectives.

Secondly the *diminishing of unwanted situations*. Cars can create independence. There is no need to see or meet other people, you can just remain on your own, or with other people that you can choose. Cars seem to be able to give a good feeling. Ellaway, MacIntyre, Hiscock and Kearns concluded that car users scored significantly higher than public transport users on feelings of self- esteem, mastery and ontological security 14) 15) And the car is easy with luggage. In fact when you need to transport more than a certain amount of luggage the car is the only transport mode that can transport such luggage without problems.

Thirdly the element of *instant satisfaction*. With a car you do not have to follow external organised time schedules. You are able to leave immediately for your wished activity at your wished location. You can reach your destination completely or almost completely. Employers and local governments have created in the last decades an abundance of parking space, and only in recent times selectivity and scarcity in delivering parking space has become a more general objective.

Cars have become *more wellness related products* in recent decades. It is now possible to create your own microclimate in a car, with modern techniques and with airconditioning. In a car you now always will have radio, and you can have even audio or television. Chairs are more comfortable, and there is the comfortable feeling that you can feel safer in your car than in the past, thanks to airbags and other safety- oriented techniques.

In a car you can also live *in your own personal space*. "Personal space" incorporates in the vision of Mann and Abraham 16) two factors – time alone without intrusions, and the ownership of the space involved. In contrast, in a study in Edinburgh about buses, Stradling et al 17) noted that the most important irritation was "unwanted arousal"; you just want to make a trip, and unasked you are confronted with all sorts of persons (like drug addicts) and situations that you do not want to deal with (like aggression in waiting areas), and that confront you with the harsher and bleaker side of public life. In your car you can close yourself off from these experiences. On the other hand, Mann and Abraham concluded that their participants also saw positive social interaction in public transport. They concluded that "personal space is more likely to be an incidental benefit of transport choice than a priority " 18)

5. PATTERNS AND ROUTINES RELATED TO CONVENIENCE AND COMFORT IN CARS

Five important convenience and comfort elements were noted: time and personal energy savings, no confrontations with unwanted situations, creating instant satisfaction, growing

experiences of individualised comfort, and creating personal space in a vehicle. These convenience and comfort elements could be interpreted as important basic design elements for patterns and routines that have arisen in modern western societies. These patterns and routines form the basis for modern practices. A number of these patterns and routines of modern societies will be described.

Acceleration in society

The car fits into the practices and arrangements of modern society. There seems to be a growing reliance on transport for conducting life (19). As Urry mentioned; we travel in order to be co-represent with others for certain periods of time. (20). This takes in our spread out-societies longer journeys and here the speed of the car comes in. Cars can be time savers (21). Stated the other way around; cars have facilitated an acceleration of societal arrangements and enable a drive towards more flexibility.(22). Acceleration is also better possible because driving gives more wellness than in the past.

Possibilities for social cohesion at greater geographical scales

Cars can organise the traffic between the nodes in the “interest and attention networks” of modern households. Much of what nowadays seems a normal life with friends at greater distances, with many experiences in different areas of life at several locations, is rather difficult without a car, unless one is rich or very creative. On this point Shove; “The personalization of scheduling is likely to have long-term and cumulative consequences for the social as well as the spatial and temporal order of society. Effective planning depends on being able to modify and coordinate what other people do “.23)

Convenience seems to work here in two ways ; it creates extra possibilities for individuals, and it creates extra stress because individuals could be forced to do their work and services in more tight timeframes and over longer distances, with the argument that the greater convenience allow this new practice. Households often rely on the “travelling around mothers” with time pressures (24). As the German researcher Rammler concludes; “The car grows into “...ein Grundausstattung eines volwertigen Gesellschaftsmitglied” (a basic element for full and able membership of society) (25).

Loss of social cohesion at neighbourhood level

Basically the car plays a paradoxical role; the car creates the build up and maintenance of contact networks over greater distances, and at greater geographical scales, while at the same time diminishing the need to invest and to keep investing in permanent contacts on the small action radius of the own neighbourhood, own village or city.

For the middle and higher classes in modern western risk societies this is primarily a neutral statement. But this changes when looking at the lower social strata, who live in essence more local lives. Their action radius is far more often limited to where they were born and raised and their travel horizons are far smaller (26). A further increase in car dependence will lead to diminishing social cohesion at the neighbourhood level ,which is for lower- educated and low income households the most relevant scale.

Creation of “excess travel”

In *Travel for the Fun of it*, Mokhtarian and Salomon (27) describe the pleasures of driving by car. They have their doubts on the vision of transport being predominantly “derived demand”. In their view there is certainly driving just for the driving. They look at “excess travel”, which is

about driving unnecessary miles on routine journeys. People want something more adventurous, just a little detour, want to get away from daily rhythms, and take with full consciousness a longer route. Many people value their car time as a buffer between work time and house time. Many people like longer journeys than the journey they have to make. Cars provide more wellness than ever, and instant satisfaction is possible. People do more with cars than only driving. Each trip is an enterprise on its own. To bring this argument a little further, Laurier works with images in *Habitable Cars* 28). He shows the possibilities of a phenomenology of car use 29), as he describes a journey to school, also taking other parents' children. For outsiders this looks like a simple trip, but he shows how much advanced thinking, planning and hidden precision has been involved. But a rather dry description of this trip does not show you "...the many mutual obligations, the flavours, the work, the trust, the aid and the generosity"30). And the car becomes in a journey as described a sort of living room. This all means that your car can feel like home.

Loss of contact with weather conditions

With a car you are not confronted with the weather conditions. Cars can diminish also here unwanted arousal. Cold, rain and wind can be "switched off" in a car. People in rich societies have an ambivalent relation to these influences 31). For several decades people have been trying to lessen external influences on our bodies. No physical proximity of unknown people, and no experiences of being cold, sweating, or getting wet.

Creation of compensatory individuality

Cars are important in showing lifestyles, especially for men. Cars are identity - creators. We already noticed that comfort standards can make cars to personal space. Car plus gadgets create possibilities for self- expression.32) This seems important for people who do not have many other opportunities for self- expression. The car has, together with a number of hobbies, the capacity to offer people, who are not able to find their individuality in other spheres of life, a form of compensatory individuality 33) They can create this compensatory individuality through the purchase of a unique car, through developing the skills to repair or build cars, through focussing on their car as an art object.

6. BROADER PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS AND DILEMMAS

The six patterns and routines mentioned in the last paragraph will be put into broader perspective in this paragraph. To which type of dilemmas do these patterns and routines lead? We will identify four dilemmas.

Stress and the urge to be flexible

Convenience created the possibility to spend more time to other activities than the daily chores. Societies in the western world could be described as "societies on the schedule" ,as Warde et al conclude in a broader study stating "the obsession with convenience is a hallmark of the society on the schedule"34) In the type of societies that are created created, a permanent urge for more efficiency and more flexibility interrelates with prosperity related to permanent economic growth.

We already noticed that convenience in daily practices created the possibility for especially women to start working from home, thus creating extra prosperity for their households. But

working seems also necessary. It looks essential in many richer western countries for middle class households to earn at least one and a half income to be able to live what is considered to be a worthwhile and fruitful life. 35) This shows a difficulty to accept a substantial lower level of convenience. Less convenience will lead to more time use needed for daily chores, less availability to the labour market, and thus to lower budgets to spend for households. This seems to be a seldom explicitly stated "normal wisdom of our age".

At a certain moment the growth in convenience does no longer seem to be able to equalise the stress created by ever growing accommodation of individuals and households towards the exigencies of economic development (with its focus on flexibility, efficiency, hard work, coordination and fixed time slots).

Stress and hurriedness can then break through the artificial boundaries of convenience, as we can see happening with higher stress levels 36). For example ; in the Netherlands, a broad survey of the Social Research Organisation SCP concluded that 60 % of the women and 52 % of the men felt pressured a number of times during a week. And this pressure was concentrated between the ages of 30 and 50. Combining tasks and escorting family members played their role ; " ...Being active in different domains of life means not only an accumulation of activities, but also coping with different expectations and duties, in the different domains. One has to connect and to change gear all the time ". 37). Many people were asked whether they felt hurried 38) 39). People recorded that they felt hurried three times a week ; "the fuss that exists to keep on fixed times for dinner, for work, for school in a very active life, with circumstances that you can not control is not shown in official statistics ". 40).

Less need to move yourself and growth in obesity

With the growth of convenience the necessity to use our human body has diminished 41). People do not have to go to a bank, but just do their banking via Internet. With a washing machine at work, a washboard using human energy is now obsolete. People can now get by car and do not have to walk to and from public transport. The active use of the body for normal day to day activities, has greatly been diminished in modern western societies. Moving the body is no longer a need, but has become a matter of choice.

In most countries can be seen that the more a transport system is car -oriented, the less adults are walking or biking at a regular basis 42). In the United States most new neighbourhoods are now designed without biking- and walking paths. Freund and Martin 43) did analyse the decline of time available for spontaneous physical, non disciplined, activity; "to walk is to contest the standard space- time usage"44)

Because this modern system around moving is built on choice, and no longer on necessity, many people withdraw and can develop in the direction of motionlessness.

Freund and Martin make a connection between the car, and another cause for obesity, the food we eat. In *Fast cars, Fast food ; Hyperconsumption and its health and environmental consequences* they show how both elements fit in the arrangements of daily life; "possession of a car in the US is a necessity, fast food for time constrained people a reality"45) Obesity problems in the U.S. are concentrated in sprawling districts, and in city centres in the U.S. it is rather difficult to get good food without a car (the "food deserts,") 46)

Less cohesion in society

For most middle and higher class -households geographically spread (and spreading!) networks of friends are their primary source of social cohesion. Community life in their own neighbourhoods or municipalities is for them of lesser importance. Axhausen, Urry and Larsen

elaborate on this issue in *The Network society and the networked traveller* 47). Every person has his networks and travels around within this network. Network travellers mostly do not share close bonds with their neighbours. They no longer live local lives. There are some neighbourhood contacts, but they do not dominate; "...for the bulk of the residents the immediate environment around their residence is populated by strangers.

Problems with sustainability

Especially the combination of the acceleration society, the growing possibilities for social cohesion at higher geographical scales, the creation of excess travel and the creation of compensatory individuality could lead to unsustainability.,

Because cars are convenient, people also choose cars for trips that do not have to be made by cars (buying cigarettes at the next corner), thus generating a greater amount of cold starts (with the most environmental impacts)

And in using cars ubiquitous, also for trips that could easily be made otherwise, the result could be the creation of a smaller market for (investments in) other transport modes than would be possible. Especially in Anglosaxon countries alternatives for car use have diminished in the last decades (Jeekel)

Cars have a certain life span. In most modern western societies, a third of all cars is replaced by new cars within four years, some 40 % within 5-10 years, and the last quarter is replaced after 10 years. 48). Especially households who replace cars within five years are vulnerable to the new insights and gadgets of the automotive industry. The idea of "constant and early renewal, earlier than really necessary" fits in the characteristics of modern western consumption societies but leads to waste.

And finally, also comfort comes with a cost; households have bought, with comfort motives in mind, far heavier cars, thus diminishing the decline in energy inefficiency and environmental pollution from cars. Annema, Hoen and Geilenkirchen present figures for the Netherlands. Real progress made in energy efficiency in recent years has not been impressive. Between 1998 and 2005 the emission factors of recent bought new cars diminished with 7 per cent, to an average of 170 g/km. The reason for this limited reduction, and this is the case world wide, is that the greater part of the technical progress on energy efficiency and economy in cars is offset by a huge increase in the purchase of heavier cars, using more energy 49)

Rammler revisited

Returning to the statement of Rammler it is now possible to see the double bind character of convenience and comfort, related to car mobility.

On the one hand.....new possibilitiesbut also...new dilemmas
Acceleration in society	Stress and the urge to be flexible
Cohesion on greater geographical scales	Less overall cohesion and more feelings of risk and vulnerability
More convenience for car users	Less convenience for non- car users and loss of transport alternatives
Everything easy to reach by car	Excess travel and more obesity
Compensatory individuality	Problems with sustainability

Wellness in cars permanently on the rise	Waste and less energy efficiency through growing car weight
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7. CONCLUSIONS

The car can be needed for saving time, thus creating possibilities to do more activities (compared to other transport modes) in the same time budget or to create prosperity (for example the possibility to start working outside home). Or the car can be needed because a trip can not be made otherwise.

Car consumption in these situations can only difficult be missed. The argument mostly goes via convenience; the car makes fitting into societal arrangements and social practices convenient. Convenience is here a necessity, sometimes a tragic necessity; most people just have to follow these arrangements and practices of the society they live in, feel unable to criticise these rules and just accommodate. Here the theories on the acceleration of modern western societies of the German sociologist Rosa (2005,2012) are relevant 54).

The other part of car consumption is related to individual choices and wishes, mostly related to instant satisfaction and/or to a wish not to meet strange and new people or a wish not to get involved situations that are framed as problematic. This other part could possibly be changed without damage to societal arrangements for creating prosperity and is not necessary, but just a wish, or a choice of the driver. Most arguments here have a relation to comfort. And habit is important. Habits can change at "tipping points". Behaviour is relatively stable, but there are moments when breakthroughs are possible. Gladwell 55) developed a theory for correcting routines, or changing actual routines by freer choices or a new routine, certainly of use. Klöckner 56) searches for these important moments in life. He mentions starting a new education, relocations, getting your drivers license, going to a new school, buying a car and starting a first job, or a new job. Especially at these tipping pints there are "windows of opportunity" for a change in transport modes.

We have created in western societies a type of society with practices in which the car fits perfectly. Cars create the needed convenience for households in time- scarce and complex societies. Without convenience in transport and the time savings convenience products and practices create, society could probably not have accelerated this much. The fact that convenience is possible creates space for faster arrangements, all the time. And comfort mitigates the tiredness of hurried individuals and households, by creating feelings of wellness. The notions of "convenience" and "comfort", when relating to car mobility could possibly be reframed in two statements:

- Modern households live in a society that asks so much flexibility from them, in fitting into practices and arrangements, that they need the car to help them not to become hurried and stressed (convenience)
- and comfort in and of the car augments the quality of lives of modern households, and makes it possible not to feel too tired or hurried, but to get positive energy and feelings of wellness, even if they are busy and flexible all the time (comfort)

Looking at this reframing it seems understandable that just arguing that convenience and comfort could diminish mostly leads to very negative reactions of intensive car drivers. They

just do not know how to live their modern lives properly without the now existing standards of convenience and comfort. These standards are integral parts of practices of modern life, creating social and individual dilemmas and forms of unsustainability.

NOTES

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