

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM
Reevaluating Societal Values, Attitudes and Vehicle Use

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INTRODUCTION

Can current environmental problems be solved through more intelligent application of the conventional modern ideas of humans, the environment and proper relations between them, or are fundamental changes in prevailing basic assumptions and attitudes required?

Modern human-nature and human-human relations have reached an unsustainable pinnacle. Societal attitudes and behaviours have become too egocentric and insensitive and this poses serious challenges toward seeking appropriate solutions to address substantial environmental problems like climate change. Within this societal and cultural framework any attempt to foster more sustainable behaviour, lifestyles and processes, be it policy-driven, technological or otherwise, may be considered ineffectual unless they aim at deconstructing and reevaluating the underlying drivers of our attitudes and beliefs towards nature, our environment and each other. Reaching appropriate solutions to our environmental problem, then, may only become feasible under a new societal context. To illustrate my point, this paper explores the challenges that potential strategies to reducing vehicle emissions in urban environments may face in light of the way the automobile is held within society.

THE PROBLEM

Automobiles provide people with a fast, flexible and convenient way with which to travel on a daily basis. Indeed, it is difficult not to find someone in North America who does not use a personal vehicle for some aspect of their daily travel. From an

environmental perspective, however, automobiles are somewhat of a black sheep when compared to other modes of transportation like public transit, walking and cycling. Mobile source emissions largely attributable to household vehicle travel are a leading cause of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in many urban regions (Frank et al, 2000). In British Columbia, for instance, personal transportation (almost all of which is driving) accounts for over 14% of the province's total greenhouse gas emissions (Pembina Institute, 2007). This is more than the province's homes and buildings, waste and agriculture industry and electricity generating sector. Obviously, then, a major step towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions from personal transportation at the local level is to implement initiatives that will reduce the need to drive for daily travel.

Planning literature and academia are quick to point at various land use and design concepts like New Urbanism and Smart Growth as potential strategies that may be used to achieve a reduced reliance on the automobile. These approaches aim to break the cycle of automobile use primarily by encouraging more compact and well-connected development in urban and suburban areas (Crane and Schweitzer, 2003). Compact development usually features relatively high densities of functionally mixed and integrated land uses that are connected with a well-designed pathway and sidewalk system that favour pedestrian and transit travel over that of the car. Compact development, as argued by its proponents, will bring social and economic opportunities within walking, cycling and transit distances to where people live and, as a result, people will forgo driving a vehicle as part of their daily travel patterns (Frank et al., 2007).

This optimistic perspective assumes, however, that achieving sustainable trip and travel characteristics is very much a straightforward process as individual and household decision-makers are rational. That is, once a public policy strategy is implemented, in this case the development of more walkable communities, people will respond accordingly with the expected change in behaviour. At the very general level, the focus of my graduate research here at UBC will be assessing the validity of these claims using empirical evidence and observation to determine the relationship between travel patterns / characteristics and land use patterns in Vancouver. As a planner, I am confident of the potential role a well-designed built environment can play in aiding to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, the more I have immersed myself in the literature I get a sense that our contributions within our current socio-cultural paradigm may be limited. For instance, empirical studies have indicated that there is a higher prevalence of walking and cycling in these more compact and walkable neighbourhoods in urban areas (Frank et al., 2007). However, these studies also conclude that simply moving locations and destinations closer together does not necessarily reduce vehicle use and vehicle miles traveled (Crane and Schweitzer, 2003). This suggests, then, that there is a deeper issue that needs to be addressed.

DIGGING DEEPER

Western cultural has developed an unhealthy obsession with the car that goes beyond a mere functional affinity. If the car was simply viewed as a means of transportation then, given the chance to readily use a less expensive and alternative

mode like public transit or walking, individuals and households would. I would argue, instead, that the car is viewed and held as a much sought after material possession. Automobiles provide people with a sense of satisfaction in that they have a means with which to exert control over their surroundings and environment and something that may make them look better in the eyes of their peers and neighbours (Steg, 2000). As a result, the automobile is something held high within the existing framework of western society and culture.

But why is this? Certainly, one can point the finger at any number of reasons. The media, for instance, often portrays personal vehicles as the preeminent symbol of social status and attempt to arouse feelings of jealousy, want and desire to become social accepted through advertising (Steg, 2000). The government and our political systems, too, may also be potential culprits for such views and attitudes through their long-term subsidies of personal vehicle ownership and highway development over investments in public transit and walkable communities in the process fostering the idea that automobiles are the only means for daily travel. I do not discount the impact these aspects have had on perpetuating our society's obsession with the automobile, however, I see these as only acting to reinforce underlying societal values that have become ingrained in our psyche.

As articulated by Rousseau in the late 1700s, the constructs that are modern society and civilization have corrupted the way with which humans and the collective population thinks and acts. Rousseau argues that society and civilization are the products of individuals coming together to form collectives based on a set of values,

beliefs and attitudes. In the absence of civilization human beings are concerned only for their own preservation and will act in ways to do so. As human beings and collectives spread and form relations with others, however, the focus shifts to acting in a way so as their esteem comes to be prized (Rousseau, 1754). To quote Rousseau "...He who sang or danced the best; he who was the most handsome; the strongest, the most adroit or the most elegant became the most highly regarded" (Rousseau, 1754: pp. 114). Civilized human beings, he states, live outside of themselves in the opinions and authority of others. In doing so, the individual or collective may act irrationally to ensure their place within "society" is secure. I make the argument, then, that from the early formations of society and civilization, human beings have known no other values and beliefs but jealousy, desire for acceptance, selfishness and self-consciousness. The ramifications of these attitudes on pro-environmental and sustainable actions are lamented by Kollmus and Agyeman (2000) when they state: "...[p]ersons with strong selfish and competitive orientation are least likely to act ecologically." (pp. 244).

The rise of the market economy and the impetus placed on wealth and prosperity afforded western society with the ability to satisfy its needs and desires with material possessions (Polanyi, 1957). Aspects like the car or property became benchmarks and pinnacles that everyone attempted to strive towards for their ability to demonstrate one's control over their environment and fulfill the desire for acceptance. Blinded by these beliefs and attitudes, I feel society is unable to observe that their actions are destroying the natural environment and depleting

resources. The framework of society has externalized any negative impacts away from the individual in the name of good tastes and a “high quality of living.”

The role of government has done nothing to quell this paradigm and, arguably, has nurtured it through the inequalities it has created within human society. Tax breaks and subsidies that have encouraged consumptive and unsustainable behaviour, for instance, may have further instilled a desire to consume within society so as to become better off in the minds of others.

I argue, then, that western cultures connection with the automobile and other material possessions that exert our control over our environment and others is deeply seeded within the modern societal paradigm. This paradigm needs to be deconstructed if we are to get people out of their cars and onto more sustainable modes of transportation.

REEVALUATING OUR PRIORITIES

Obviously, a change is needed. But what will these changes look like? And how do we get to where we need to be? Although we are continually bombarded with news and media reports that talk about the potential dangers of climate change, we ignore the fact that these may be caused by anthropocentric means – our own behaviour and actions. Society needs to become aware of how unsustainable its current values and attitudes are. To do so, we need to reevaluate our basic assumptions and acknowledge that they never were, nor will they ever be in their current state, sustainable for the health of both the planet and the human population.

Educating people to act in more sustainable and healthy ways seems to have gotten us nowhere rather quickly. As Kollmus and Agyeman (2000) conclude increased knowledge and awareness does not lead to pro-environmental behaviour. This is disheartening news, especially considering that many non-profit groups and governments continue to preach the education card as a key means towards getting people to act and think sustainably.

In order to get society to reassess their values and attitudes, then, measures need to be taken that internalize the negative impacts of people's decisions. When the problems being faced in the rest of the world like climate change, poor air quality and reduced natural resources suddenly become *your own problem*, attitudes and behaviours may begin to shift (Kollmus and Agyeman, 2000).

Arguably, the role of the government in reshaping western societies attitudes and behaviours may be paramount. Governments have the capacity to regulate and adjust the market and institutional factors that may aid in fostering more sustainable behaviour. The inability of the government to do so today (see above), however, is evident even in our own backyards thanks to superficial and irrational actions that, perhaps fittingly, mirror the behaviour of their constituents. For instance, while the Province of British Columbia and the Metro Vancouver region are in favour of reducing greenhouse gas emissions through the development of more walkable communities centred on alternative modes of transportation, they are investing, at the same time, in increased highway and roadway development that will result in more room on local and regional highways for cars, therefore making it much more

easier to get around by driving (BC Ministry of Transportation, 2006). Surely, with such conflicting perspectives and priorities, what is the message being sent to the local and regional community? We want you to live in more compact and walkable neighbourhoods but, don't worry, you can still keep your car for you daily travel needs? Governments need to fulfill the role they are intended to do, that is create a situation where equality reigns and there is no need for competitive and jealously-driven behaviour to subsist. They need to recognize that severe problems exist within the framework of society, part of which they may be to blame, and strive to correct these by articulating clear and decisive objectives for change rather than ambiguous and disjointed initiatives that attempt to address the problem using "band-aid" solutions. Instead of making more highways to reduce idling-related emissions, for instance, governments at all scales need to make it difficult, if near impossible, to drive within urban areas. In this respect, well connected transit systems at both the local and regional scale that can compete with the automobile in terms of time, speed and convenience should become key priorities to complement a walkable built environment. When appropriate and consistent infrastructure is in place, more sustainable behaviours may result (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2000).

Economic factors also have a strong influence on people's decisions and behaviour (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2000). Governments can match building walkable and compact neighbourhoods with fees and taxes that charge people who use their vehicle ostentatiously. Road tolling and congestion pricing initiatives (i.e. London and soon New York City) are often seen as successful ventures that can curb automobile use in the short term (Litman, 2006). Better yet, provide subsidies to those who

actually decide to leave their cars at home. The U-Pass program in Metro Vancouver appears to have shifted a lot of students onto public transit thanks to substantially reduced transit fares compared to driving and parking costs.

The point is that, with these and other strategies, we need to stop nurturing unsustainable behaviour by getting to the core, underlying values and attitudes that drive our actions. Society is too blinded by jealousy and consumption to even begin to acknowledge that our behaviour is unsustainable. Superficial and piecemeal “fixes” that do not get to the root of the problem will not help matters in the long run. Creating walkable communities is a good start but these initiatives will not succeed if they are simply an island in a sea of unsustainable decision-making and behaviour. Only holistic and perhaps seemingly harsh actions that get people to reassess and question their attitudes will, I feel, produce the values and behaviour needed to seek beneficial changes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I have attempted to demonstrate with this paper that the egocentric, insensitive and consumptive nature of western society and culture poses a serious challenge toward reaching appropriate solutions to address environmental problems like climate change. As such, we can continue in our attempt to make more walkable communities that will encourage people to get out of their vehicles, however, these initiatives need to be part of a bigger package that forces society to reevaluate its obsession with the automobile. This task will require a substantial amount of resources, commitment and courage on the part of governments, institutions,

businesses and everyday citizens but is something, I feel, needs to be undertaken. As lamented by Williams (2001), environmental problems like climate change are “a crisis caused by culture and character” (pp. 20). The sooner we recognize this, the sooner we can begin to move forward.

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