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open space

Sharing the load: commuting and belonging for staff and students in UK universities

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Introduction

When Peter Kay's *Car Share* first aired on UK television, I started to think about the kind of intimacy that develops in this unique space and the parallels between Kay's supermarket workers and staff and students in higher education, who are increasingly diverse and precarious. This Open Space contribution considers the rise in commuting among staff and students and the growing trend of institutional car-sharing policies, reflecting in particular on how these transformations and directives might have an impact on staff and student intimacies, belonging and wellbeing. Interactions with the spaces of higher education have, of course, always been somewhat transient; students come and go, and the experience of higher-level study is often experienced, and for the most part represented, as a moment in time. However, in recent years the practice of commuting has become more common – catching the eye of policy wonks (Maguire and Morris, 2018) – giving new meaning to the mobility and impermanence of staff and students who are finding ways to navigate the shifting economic climate and rising costs of living and study. What I argue here is that car shares – while evidently a cost-sharing exercise – also have the potential for new intimacies and solidarities, as well as ways of managing and making sense of the stresses of the contemporary university. In the main, commuting is regarded as a challenging and highly rational practice; however, as shall become clear, car shares open up a space for relational and emotional experiences that may enhance everyday interactions with universities.

Precarity and financial insecurity: the rise of staff and student commuting

For staff, the growing incidence of long(er) commutes might be attributed to the rise in precarious work. In 2016 the Universities and Colleges Union reported that

just over half of all academics employed in the sector are on some form of insecure contract. Thus, uprooting lives, taking children out of schools and separating from partners or communities of support is far less feasible or appealing when new jobs are based on fixed-term or even zero hours contracts. A willingness to travel every day, therefore, has become something of an expected characteristic for those seeking work in the contemporary academy. Similarly, students' behaviours and values have also adapted in response to the wider socioeconomic conditions of austerity in the UK. The trend towards living at home, a decision that goes against the ostensibly traditional (and historically elite) practice of moving away, has been on the increase, with around 35 per cent of UK students living either with parents or in other privately rented accommodation. While these students are often referred to as 'locals', in both my research (Finn and Holton, 2019) and teaching I have often found that students who live at home are not necessarily local at all and can, in fact, find themselves travelling significant distances to take up higher education (HE) courses, depending on their home region. The decision to live at home and commute into university each day may emerge out of a limited desire for shared living and strong connections to friends, family and 'home' in its broadest sense. Notwithstanding these social and relational dimensions, cost is also a driver. Indeed, in December 2018 the National Union of Students revealed that the average student rental bill swallows up around 78 per cent of the maximum student loan, whereas in 2011 it took up just 58 per cent. The decision to commute is, then, the only viable option for many staff and students alike.

Institutional responses: sharing the journey

The growth of student and staff populations has put pressure on UK universities – particularly campus-based institutions like Lancaster University, where my own research was undertaken – and the rise in car-using commuters is a significant concern. As they try to conserve space and limit the impact on surrounding communities, universities have begun to implement car-sharing schemes and buddy-up programmes to encourage fewer cars on site without hindering access. Squaring the circle of accessibility and widening participation with environmental and economic concerns is not easy. Thus, car share policies usually form part of universities' transport and sustainability plans, and the benefits for those who take part are championed on university websites' wider literature. The University of Worcester, for example, presents the benefits as both economic and environmental:

> What would you do with an extra £974 a year? That's how much a typical commuter saves when they car-share to work. The university is reducing its carbon footprint — and helping its staff and students save money through its established car-sharing scheme. The free-to-use online system, which is designed to cut travel costs as well as local congestion and pollution, enables its members to share lifts to any destination.

This eco-environmental narrative is common to many university car share policies; however, other institutions have begun to highlight the social, emotional and relational benefits of car sharing, such as saving time spent looking for a parking space with dedicated car share bays for car sharers; enjoying the social aspect of commuting

with friends and colleagues; and improving work–life balance by leaving work on time (University of Exeter). The car share as a space for relational work, for intimacy and emotional wellbeing, and for making and maintaining connections is still underplayed, however, drowned out by the obvious financial incentives for coupling up and sharing the cost (rather than *sharing the load*). This is curious, and potentially a missed opportunity for universities that are increasingly preoccupied with student retention and feelings of belonging, and staff mental health and wellbeing. In my own work, it has prompted me to ask, what if commuting both hinders and promotes belonging and wellbeing, and indeed, what it offers potential for care and support shared between staff and students?

Car sharing in popular culture: televisual representations of the bond between familiar strangers

I was turning this question around in my mind when I stumbled on Peter Kay's *Car Share*, an English sit-com centred around two supermarket workers – Assistant Manager, John and Promotions Rep, Kayleigh – who are paired as part of an employee car share scheme. As with many other shows of this genre (for example, *The Office*, *Phoenix Nights*), *Car Share* taps into the everyday dimensions of those intimacies that fall outside of traditional family or friend relationships. Focusing on the daily commute, Kay's comedy magnifies the mundane and the ordinary, but no-less touching, interactions that occur between not-quite-strangers on the regular journey between work and home. It quickly captured the imagination of the British public, and I remember hearing lots of different people talking about it at the time – different generations of family, work colleagues, as well as friends. It first aired in 2015, at a time when people were finding ways to tighten their belts and told (once again) to 'get on their bikes' to find employment in an increasingly precarious and unforgiving economic climate in the UK. *Car Share* seemed to touch on the national mood, bringing some light relief in the form of a shared intimacy that developed between the two unlikely friends as they drove to and from work.

The show made me recall my own experiences of car sharing when I took up my first academic post in 2010. Like John and Kayleigh my car share was one of convenience rather than a pre-established relationship. I shared my journey to work with another lecturer from a different department within my school. She was older and more established than me, and over the course of a year we discussed everything and anything during those hour-long drives up and down the motorway. I was going through a difficult time in my life; I was turning 30 and reflecting on my first real relationship break-up. I felt quite lost and rudderless, and navigating my first academic post (and the opaque workload) was overwhelming at times. My car share offered me a unique space to work through many of these issues, to air grievances and test ideas with a person who was neither a close friend nor a direct colleague. The relationship had an intergenerational value that served me well in terms of both work and personal life. However, I am by no means romanticising here; there were days when I longed for privacy, silence (and my own music!), and some days the 'affective atmosphere' (Bissell, 2010) could feel 'off' if either of us had been in a difficult meeting, or if one of us was running late and when the traffic was unbearable. I'm also aware that another share would have led to a very qualitatively different experience. Nonetheless, it stands out to me as a significant but difficult to categorise relationship.

A different kind of (mobile) relationship?

I enjoyed *Car Share* because it brought to the fore the ways in which relationships of this sort – the not-quite-friendship, more-than-a-colleague – bring value and complexity to our everyday lives. David Morgan (2009) has written about the kind of acquaintanceship that is forged in work contexts, and considers the role of gender, the distinction between 'mates' and 'friends' and the value derived from 'networking' and work-based solidarities. Most working adults have relationships with their colleagues (for better or worse) and spend considerable amounts of time with these people, even though they may not consider them to be friends. When these relationships are developed in mobile contexts – bus companions, care share buddies – there is an added dimension to the interaction and the intimacy that unfolds. We often imagine that students are 'friends'; however, quite often students (particularly non-traditional and mature students) see themselves in more instrumental ways and relationships can often be more pragmatic. Notwithstanding, even relationships of convenience have important consequences for intimacy, as Kay's *Car Share* demonstrates.

Intimacy on the move: sharing the load?

In Kay's sit-com, we see how the vehicle becomes a *vehicle for* intimacy. The pair share their musical tastes, their dating histories, their hopes and fears, and their feelings about death. Music features prominently throughout the series, and we get a sense of the sensory aspects of the car share and how the relationship forms around the traffic, the music, life events and the mundane and more spectacular events of the day. The charm of the programme is perhaps in the way it holds up this relationship of convenience to have its own unique intimacy; it is based on deep knowledge generated through an everyday and accelerated intimacy, and the constant movement and forward-facing position of each character (each episode is filmed entirely in the moving car) means that conversations can be stunted, halted or left unresolved as the traffic and the road dictates and eye contact is minimal. While *Car Share* is 'just a comedy' (and certainly not without its issues), it is also a lens on how people organise their everyday lives, how they give meaning to the wider aspects of work and study, and how the diverse relationships that emerge from these experiences spill out and away from more official spaces. It is perhaps the same with university then – feelings of belonging and positive wellbeing are not merely cultivated in the defined spaces of higher education; they are also shaped by the commute.

To flesh this out in a little more detail, I want to offer a long extract from the research project with student commuters at Lancaster University (2015–16) that I mention above. Fleur was a mature student and a parent studying her first year of a Law degree when she was interviewed. Through our conversations, it emerged that feeling a sense of belonging was contingent on her ability to manage the multiple rhythms of her university timetable, the school run, her husband's shift pattern at work and her own bodily energies as she combined the obligations of parenting with study, part-time work and a commute of 110 miles (round-trip). Fleur travelled by a combination of train, car, bus and on foot, depending on the particular scheduling of her day, her commitments to family, the seasons and weather conditions, and whether she was able to car share with a childhood friend who was also a mature student and parent. As will become clear, Fleur's interview was full of intricate details about how

the multiple spaces of higher education, home, family and work were sewn together in both practical and enriching ways, and how this helped or hindered her sense of belonging. There were tensions and frustrations, of course; however, the train journey was articulated as a time to catch up on reading and planning whilst maintaining links with course mates on the messenger app, WhatsApp, and the bus ride to and from campus, although often loud and chaotic, provided a brief period of solitude and escapism. It was the days when she was able to car share with a friend, however, which offered particularly rare moments of intimacy that were fundamental to her wellbeing:

> 'I get a lift to college with her and then the bus onward to Lancaster. Sometimes she drops me off and picks me up. It depends on what time she finishes and what time I finish. On a Tuesday she has a friend who lives near Lancaster University so she drops me off, picks her up, drives to the college, but because my lecture finishes I go to the library to do some studying and then get the bus over to her. On a Wednesday she comes and picks me up because she finishes earlier than me. It's a mutual thing because I pay towards the petrol and she says it's better for her to travel with someone else in the car. She can't use the travel time as study time, and if she had to do that drive on her own every day, well she'd be bored. So, we are both so busy it means we have two hours three times a week where we talk about all sorts, I love it [laughs]. It's a rare thing these days, time alone. She has children too so making similar decisions [about higher education]. She's my best friend, since I was about 14 years old. She's doing the access [course] like I did, and she's deciding where to go to do her degree. I am sort of being a level head for her; or a guinea pig – sometimes I'm not sure. Everyone has an opinion and she wants to keep a lot of people happy. She's weighing up Durham, because she's going to drive in, obviously. I'm pushing her towards Lancaster. I just think it's more geared up for mature students. Anyway, it's one of the best parts of my week. It's a really nice bit of time together and we can be in student mode rather than just two mums.'

The car share is a chance for Fleur and her friend to *share the load* and bounce ideas off one another. They debate the bigger and smaller decisions of life and tap into a deep and long-standing friendship, but also debate new issues on the horizon. While there is a practical value, the car share is so much more than that. Although this is not a relationship of convenience (as in my own experience), it is nevertheless extremely convenient and fruitful to have this mobile relational space as a place to work through the issues that many non-traditional students face when they enter university. In many ways, the car was the only private space for these women to do this kind of identity, relational and emotional work, and to engage in other dimensions of friendship outside of being 'just two mums'.

Conclusion

This short piece has brought the issue of commuting as a growing everyday practice in higher education to the fore, dwelling in particular on the ways in which new intimacies and spaces for emotional work might emerge in this context, as well as

new forms of solidarity. It is not the intention here to suggest that problems associated with staff and student wellbeing are to be resolved privately within car shares, but more that it is useful to consider the other, unofficial, spaces where staff and students might fruitfully form connections of support and guidance, and how they might manage their wellbeing in an increasingly strained system. I am mindful of the ways issues related to mental health, stress and belonging are increasingly shifted on to the individual in the contemporary neoliberal culture of universities, and how pernicious this can be. That said, there is an argument for increased interaction through car sharing, because of the ways this opens up dialogue and potential for supportive relationships between staff and students. It is important, then, that universities (and their patrons) understand the value of the commuting relationships as more than a cost-cutting, needs-must decision, and build a more social and relational understanding of travel and transport into their policies to support staff and students.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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