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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Inescapable objects? Automobility and everyday disorder in an English town

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Abstract

In our study of everyday security in one English town (Macclesfield in north-west England), numerous sources of data suggest that annoyance about cars—their volume, speed, (bad) parking, presence at the school gate, and overall effect on the quality and character of everyday life in the town—loom large in the preoccupations of local people. It has been common in work on public insecurities—including, we should add, our own study of the same town twenty-five years earlier (Girling et al. Crime and Social Change in Middle England, Routledge, Abingdon, 2000)—to marginalize such car-related concerns from consideration of the social meanings of place, disorder and public safety and hence from sociological attention. But what happens if, instead, we attend closely to the ways in which people in this English town have come to notice cars and treat automobility as a consequential component of their sense of the town as being or not being a safe and liveable place. In this paper, we document and make sense of certain framings of the car's prominent place in the local harmscape and consider what is at stake in the competing ways in which automobility is spoken about as an agent of everyday disorder.

Keywords Automobility · Disorder · Everyday life · Harm · Place · Security

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> I used to love looking at them because I liked remembering what the, who the maker was, and looking at the colours. Now I just think it's a nightmare. . . I hate looking at cars now because they're everywhere. So, uh, I think it's a massive, massive problem. Because there's so many of the new developments are at least one to three miles from the town centre, you go around the estate, every house has got three or four cars. And then I walk to work a lot of the time between eight and nine, peak travel time, absolute bedlam out there. So many people are making journeys that are completely avoidable. You can see the buses and they're empty, but you see hundreds and hundreds of cars. (*Christopher, 30s, biographical interview*)

Introduction

During a single day of fieldwork in the English town of Macclesfield in December 2021, the same topic arose in three successive research encounters. That topic was cars. That it arose in the first meeting was not especially surprising. We were in a local church interviewing Lionel, an activist from a local environmental campaign. He observed how a town "not built for the motor car" had come to be dominated by "far too many cars", and that it was difficult to navigate Macclesfield by other means. Not being built for the motor car, here means, among other things, that the central areas of the town pre-date automotive traffic. There are narrow streets, and dense housing. There are hills, corners and in some places cobble-stones. The local bus service, Lionel remarked, is "effectively zero for most people as a realistic alternative". The cycle infrastructure is "very limited", and one rarely sees anyone cycling. People are dependent on the car to get around, but in a setting at best only partly adapted to them.

In Lionel's view, this generated problems of cars at a standstill—in commuter traffic jams, clogging neighbourhoods at school drop-off and pick-up, or when parked badly or illegally. Conversely, it created problems of speed—of objects being propelled by their drivers too fast through the town's residential streets. Lionel detailed the difficulties involved in trying to persuade the responsible local authority (Cheshire East Council) to introduce more twenty-mph limit zones in the town.

Three hours later we were in Macclesfield police station, having an introductory meeting with the newly appointed area commander. We asked him about local priorities and the demands made of the police by people in the town. The concern, he replied, that most often finds expression on the police "Residents' Voice" platform was speeding, and the attendant demand for greater enforcement. Later that same day, a town councillor echoed the point. When asked what filled their post-bag from constituents, they replied without hesitation: "traffic". By this they meant volume of traffic in and around the town centre, and the speed of it in and across the town. They said that what people wanted was greater enforcement against cars being driven at

greater than safe or legal limits. As we shall see, "safe" and "legal" do not always mean the same thing, and both are often the subject of intense local contestation.

Work on public insecurities about crime has tended both to recognize and deny car-related concerns about mundane security (Loader 2025). It has long been acknowledged that social and physical "incivilities" are important indicators of neighbourhood decline (e.g. Farrall et al. 2009; Lewis and Salem 2017). Some strands of such work do focus on the place of cars and roads in cities' disruptive passages into late modernity (Berman 1982; Davis 1990, 1998). Yet, most efforts to theorize the meanings of place and everyday security, and of related problems of disorder, anti-social behaviour and "quality of life" offending (Girling et al. 2000; Innes 2004; McKenzie et al. 2010; Sampson 2012), have largely remained silent on the ways in which the car has become an agent of disorder and unsafety in urban settings. The car does not appear to fit into the "publicly available categorisation systems" through which people "see" disorder (Sampson 2012, p. 131)—perhaps because that object, and the infrastructures of automobility that makes car use possible, has come to be integral to our sense of how modern life is organized. Auto-dominance remains, in Zerubavel's (2018) terms, "unmarked".

But what would happen if we don't take that path and, instead, attend closely to the ways in which people in this English town have come to *notice* cars, and treat car dominance as a consequential component of their sense of the town as being or not being a safe and liveable place. In this paper, we interrogate the range of concerns, and forms of cultural contestation, that arise with respect to the car's prominent place in the local harmscape (Holley et al. 2020). In terms of what people care about and argue over now, perspectives that continue to diminish the place of cars in the local politics of security seem to lag behind the times. Taking the school run as a "condensing symbol" (Turner 1970) of a range of car-related disorders in the town, we explore several ways of framing the car's now prominent place in the local harmscape and consider what is at stake in local contestation over automobility and its role as an agent of "ordinary harm" (Agnew 2020).

Revisiting Macclesfield: Questions of method

We came, or rather returned, to Macclesfield in November 2019 to investigate the everyday security concerns of the people who live and work there. Macclesfield is a town of some 53,000 residents in north-west England, about twenty miles south of the nearest large urban centre, Manchester.[1] Our previous study of crime-talk in the town, conducted between 1994 and 1996, resulted in a book-length account of how worries about crime featured in local social relations in the mid-1990s (Girling et al. 2000). We returned, some twenty-five years on, following a quarter of a century of technological, socio-economic, cultural and political change in Britain that included

[1] Readers wanting more spatial detail on the ecology of the town can consult this Google map - https://www.google.com/maps/place/Macclesfield+Railway+Station+Car+Park/@53.260994,-2.1338584,14.08z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x487a497089e6f2df:0xbadb7443ce821e6b!8m2!3d53.2595608!4d-2.1229269!16s%2Fg%2F11h5rdyqp7?entry=ttu

the digital revolution, austerity, migration, Brexit, greater climate consciousness and—shortly after we commenced our research—the COVID-19 pandemic. We returned with a view to using the town—a place of moderate prosperity and relative safety, but by no means without its problems—as a site for exploring what it means to be and feel secure in Britain today. We were interested in finding out what troubles afflict the daily lives of differently situated people across the town and what actions they took, or demand from responsible authorities, to deal with the things that threaten them (Loader et al. 2023).

To address these questions, we deployed a range of methods within a study whose overarching sensibility has remained ethnographic. Each of these methods provided "exposure" (Small and Calarco 2022) to different aspects of local people's experiences of, and demands for, security and the practices of security governance of various state and civil society actors. We conducted in-depth conversations with residents individually and in small groups—in their homes, in public rooms, sometimes while walking or cycling with them. We talked to a total of 120 residents in interviews ranging from forty-five minutes to two and half hours. Participants were recruited by a combination of responses to a leaflet delivered to every residential address in the town and snowballing from contacts made during our access negotiations and observational work. The aim was to speak to people from across as many socio-economic groups in the town as was feasible.

We conducted interviews, informal discussions and observations with actors from local government, security providers and the town's voluntary sector. We interviewed twenty-five formal and informal security providers including elected officials, key actors in the local voluntary sector, town centre security managers and police. The latter included interviews with senior officers at Cheshire Police and the elected Police and Crime Commissioner, with Macclesfield area commanders and serving police officers and Police and Community Safety Officers (PCSOs). We spent over 300 hours following officers and PCSOs in their everyday work around the town (on day, night and weekend shifts) as well as observing civil enforcement officers.

We conducted formal and informal observation of public spaces, local organizations and security providers. Members of the research team engaged with various local groups—from youth groups, foodbank volunteers, litter-pickers and community gardeners—and attended a wide range of local events. We observed meetings of local authorities—both online and in person, particularly the Town Centre Regeneration Group set up by the Town Council during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted analysis of how the relation between security and place is articulated, debated and visually represented on social media (cf. Miller 2016). On Twitter/X, we collected and analysed police tweets from thirteen Macclesfield-relevant police accounts ($n = 1389$) dating from April 2018 to July 2021. We also analysed tweets about Macclesfield and its places ($n = 7660$) from November 2019 to April 2022. On Facebook, public town/neighbourhood-related pages were monitored throughout the period of the research, with more intensive analysis in Spring 2020, Spring 2022 and early July 2022 until the end of January 2023.

We conducted two community surveys in the town. Both surveys used face-to-face interviews conducted by a social research company. The first survey ($n = 416$)

was conducted between May and August 2021; the second (n = 502) took place in September and October 2022. This was not a panel survey; different respondents were interviewed for each wave. Several questions were common across both surveys though new questions were added to the second in response to the themes emerging from the interview and observational research. About two per cent of the town's population took part in the survey.

Finally, we analysed official documents pertaining to everyday security—local authority consultations and strategy/policy documents and proclamations of the police and elected Police and Crime Commissioner, for example—as well as tracking local planning applications and the objections they prompted. We also elicited several audio/photographic diaries from residents—largely in response to our inability to conduct face-to-face fieldwork during the pandemic—and have taken hundreds of photographs to aid our understanding of the relation of everyday security to people's sense of place. Finally, at the conclusion of the research, we held an all-day deliberative workshop attended by around sixty residents, as well as local councillors and representatives from Cheshire Police and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Automobility and everyday security

In *The Culture of Control*, his influential analysis of how crime came to dominate social relations and public life in the last three decades of the twentieth century, David Garland writes that "crime is now widely experienced as a prominent fact of modern life. For most people, and especially those living in cities and suburbs, crime is no longer an aberration or unexpected or abnormal event. Instead, it has become a routine part of modern consciousness". Crime, Garland continues, has become an everyday risk that must be routinely assessed and managed "in much the same way as we have come to deal with road traffic—another mortal danger that has become a normal feature of the landscape" (2001, pp. 106–107).

Garland's claim is that crime became a widely acknowledged public problem when it became an everyday risk *akin to road traffic*. He goes on to dissect the rise of crime consciousness and the forms of othering and adaptation that emerged in high crime societies. But crime, in key respects, did *not* become like road traffic. Garland's point is that rising crime prompted discourse, polarization and action across society. Crime, he argues, became an organizing feature of social relations and political authority. Road traffic risk has rarely if ever assumed such structuring prominence politically, even if it has fundamentally reconfigured our streets and highways, and the infrastructure of routine surveillance. It prompts nothing like equivalent discourse and rarely demands that political actors, certainly at national levels, compete for ownership of the issue. It tends not to galvanize political action, at least not until decisive actions are taken against car-related risk, when pronounced forms of reaction are sometimes evident. It is typically met with resignation, silence, and denial, or is cabined in the realm of technical solutions (Rajan 1996). No equivalent culture of control emerged around the mundane and mortal dangers of urban life associated with road traffic, especially the car. This is despite the fact that deaths

from road traffic collisions alone in the UK exceed those from homicide by a factor of at least three (Office for National Statistics 2023).

There are specific and general reasons for this lack of discursive equivalence between crime and road traffic risk. Crime is typically experienced and depicted as the product of malign intent in which "law-abiding" people imagine themselves to be threatened by, and in need of protection from, predatory others. Though it can be couched in such terms (as a problem of "dangerous" drivers), the risks posed by road traffic are generally subject to a different framing. These risks are created by mass motoring and, as such, defy any easy "naming of agents who could be discerned as primarily responsible for the problem", flowing instead out of "the entire social experience of spatiality and mobility" (Rajan 1996, pp. 71–72). Road traffic is, like crime, a risk to which people—in Garland's reading—are routinely exposed, and have to learn, or be taught, to navigate. But it is also a risk that driver-citizens are—albeit often grudgingly—conscious of co-producing (Wells and Savigar 2019). It is a danger of modern existence created by "people like us". Crime risk is, moreover, apprehended and experienced as a threat—to one's person, loved ones, property, house prices, local neighbourhood or way of life. It is a disruptive aberration from the reassuring rhythms of daily life. Traffic risk appears not to be like that. It is, rather, an unwelcome but perhaps inevitable by-product of an object (the car) and activity (driving) that has come to be regarded by modern subjects as essential to their lives and livelihoods, even the embodiment of freedom.

The car has become the quintessential technology of everyday life. Since it appropriated urban streets and marginalized or expelled other street users in the early decades of the twentieth century, the car has become a dominant fixture in the urban landscape.[2] It is the fulcrum of a "system of automobility" (Urry 2006, pp. 17–18) that comprises the following elements: a manufactured object; a major item of individual consumption; a socio-technical complex of roads, industries, filling stations, service stations etc.; a hegemonic form of quasi-private mobility that subordinates other mobilities; a dominant cultural representation of the good life; and a significant cause of environmental resource use. The key here is not to focus on the car as such, but on this system of material and psychosocial interconnections; one that generates the pre-conditions for its own expansion (see also, Rajan 1996, p. 87; Seiler 2008, pp. 4–10). Automobility has, in particular, become pivotal to how people navigate towns and cities, and how urban space is designed and ordered. Cars have made themselves an indispensable means of getting around for those who have access to them, and an inescapable object to be watched and negotiated by all of us, owners and non-owners alike. We are, as Miller (2001, p. 3) puts it: "socialized to take them for granted, so that we think our world through a sense of self in which driving, roads and traffic are simply integral to who we are and what we presume to do each day".

As Rajan (1996) notes, automobility has become part of the "formative context" of modern social life, part and parcel of "the basic institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that circumscribe our routine practical or discursive

[2] For histories of this appropriation, see on the UK, Plowden (1973) and O'Connell (1998); and on the US, McShane (1995) and Norton (2008).

activities and conflicts and that resist their destabilizing effects" (Unger 1987, pp. 6–7). Car dependency has, in other words, come over the past century to be "background activity" (Zerubavel 2006, p. 19), part of the undiscussed staging on which urban contestation plays out (including contests over social disorder), rather than being the stuff of such contestation, with the result that "the movement, noise, smell, visual intrusion and environmental hazards of the car are seen as largely irrelevant to deciphering the nature of city life" (Sheller and Urry 2000. p. 738).

This is, in part, the effect of the forms of desire associated with automobile use, and the attendant ideology of privatized mobility promulgated by the auto-industry (Freund and Martin 1993, ch. 6; Paterson 2007, ch. 5). Cars, on this view, offer flexibility and convenience, running to no-one's timetable other than that of their owners. They supply a form of "door-to-to door mobility" that connects people and places (Dant and Martin 2001). The experience of driving is one of safety and comfort, an experience that has been enhanced as cars have become larger, quieter and better insulated, and fitted with more gadgetry. Cars are a protective capsule that unite friends and families together in transit; offer a soundscape of self-chosen music or conversation; and, when required, provide their drivers with valued "me-time".

The enjoyment of these freedoms is, however, in key respects illusory, partial or else secured at great cost to others (Loader 2023).[3] Automobility tends to be experienced as freedom. Yet, it is at the same time a hyper-regulated environment, for both drivers and non-drivers. Cars are required to meet safety and emissions standards. Drivers have to be trained, licenced and insured, and are subject to routine surveillance by insurance companies and state authorities—a far greater range of control than they would likely be prepared to accept in any other domain of everyday life. To drive a car is to enter "a plethora of regulatory schemes, regulating speed of travel, the places of travel, direction of travel, where one can park, orders of priority in movement, all designed to regularize the forms of movement in cars" (Bohm et al. 2006, p. 7; see generally, O'Malley 2010). The freedoms of car use are also compromised on a daily basis, as the routine experience of traffic congestion attests, by others seeking to enjoy those same freedoms. "The essence of automobilization", Beckmann (2001, p. 598) writes, "is that it destroys the liberating effects of spatial mobility the very moment it creates them".

Automobility has given rise to forms of mobility and spatial patterning that are "immensely flexible and wholly coercive" (Urry 2006, p. 19). Automobility is coercive in so far as it generates and presupposes urban environments that make the routines of social life difficult or impossible to navigate without access to a car. For many people the car has simply become a "mundane necessity" (Paterson 2007, p. 136). Miller (2001) warns in this respect of the dangers of tin-eared social critique that overlooks the ways in which car dependence has been folded into the contradictions of people's lives—especially women's lives. In auto-centric environments, the car has become inescapably bound up with what it means to be a good parent, or to meet other family and caring obligations (Maxwell 2001). More broadly, the car "is

[3] As Andre Gorz put it back in 1973: "Mass motoring effects an absolute triumph of bourgeois ideology on the level of daily life. It gives and supports in everyone the illusion that each individual can seek their own benefit at the expense of everyone else" (see also, Mitchell 2005, pp. 96–98).

the single most decisive influence on the configuration of urban spaces" (Freund and Martin 1993, p. 112). Automobility dominates how non-car users experience and inhabit public places by prioritizing speed and flow over being and dwelling and making urban habitats sites of mundane danger that demand constant attention. As Urry puts it: "Car travel interrupts the talkscapes of others (pedestrians, children going to school, postman, garbage collectors, farmers, animals and so on) whose daily routines are obstacles to the high-speed traffic cutting mercilessly though slower moving pathways and dwellings" (2006, p. 21).

In all these respects, and despite their curiously minor place in much social, and especially criminological, analysis, cars have profound practical effects and emotional resonance (Sheller 2004). We often have quite intense feelings not only about our own connections with our cars, but also about others' ways of using them. In smaller and larger ways, in light of their pervasive effects on everyday life, we are caught up in many forms of "kinopolitics", and surrounded by practices that bear upon considerations of "mobility justice" (Sheller 2018). Here, we seek to elucidate some ways in which these emotional, aesthetic and ethical concerns play out in small forms of contention in one locality.

Marked cars: Framing automotive disorder

Over the course of the twentieth century, the "flattening of conflicts" (Beckmann 2001, p. 596) over the car's privileged access to urban space was such that the risks it created became largely "unmarked" in public and social science discourses on urban disorder and safety—taken for granted and thereby rendered invisible and inaudible (Zerubavel 2018, p. 9). This was largely borne out in our original study in Macclesfield, conducted against the backdrop of the altered crime consciousness that Garland (2001) describes. In that context, traffic-related disorders and offences (as distinct from crimes *against* cars and their owners) were decidedly part of Garland's "criminologies of the self". They were normalized risks, undramatically managed and governed by regulatory instruments such as insurance premiums, more often than by criminal sanctions overtly invested with censure. The foci of people's more emotionally resonant concerns about the condition of their town in the mid-1990s lay elsewhere—in the invasive threat of domestic burglary, in the fears attending young people's boisterous and non-deferential uses of public space and the alleged absence of visible policing from local social relations (Girling et al. 1998). Respectable residents desired to defend the town from encroachment by troubling cultural currents and the sorts of people deemed likely to carry them. The car of course did feature in these concerns, but mainly as a valued and valuable possession that risked being damaged or stolen. If road traffic got a mention in local talk, it was typically when people complained about the police targeting speeding motorists rather than "catching real criminals" (Girling et al. 2000, ch. 7).

We noted two exceptions. One, which we discussed in the context of local mobilizations in particular around drugs, was the widespread sense that threatening people and commodities, came from elsewhere. Cars brought "travelling" criminals into

Macclesfield from Manchester, Liverpool and other more vaguely identified sites and sources of urban danger. The other was this, which we relegated to a footnote:

> So too has Macclesfield come to be dominated by that other pervasive object of contemporary urban living -- the car; something that was registered in the prominent place traffic congestion was accorded when people were asked to select the "worst thing" about Macclesfield. One notable sign of this was our respondent's fondness for remarking that Macclesfield was the only place they knew where "they" (the Council) had "put a by-pass through the middle of the town"; a tale whose resonance is indicated by the fact that it was told to us in relation to no less than three different roads. (Girling et al. 2000, p. 185)

There are signs, twenty-five years on, that (local) sensibilities are changing and that—perhaps—road traffic *is* becoming more like crime risk: framed as a source of trouble, contestation and calls for action. To be sure, Macclesfield like most places will have plenty of residents who assume a "motonormative" disposition to the social world (Walker et al. 2023) and believe that "driving is what normal people do" (Paterson 2007, p. 223). Many people never give driving a second thought and may resent having to think about a daily practice, and beloved possession, whose use and value they would prefer to continue taking for granted. But we have also encountered several signs that cars are being "marked" by local people (Zerubavel 2018); that they are troubled or irritated by automotive incursions across the town's spaces; and that this is something that they talk or grumble about or see as a set of problems that demand action of some sort.

In our first study of Macclesfield, in the mid-1990s, talk about traffic tended to form part of the social chit-chat that people engaged in before an interview or group discussion started. It occupied a similar interactional space for British people as their habitual allusions to the weather—a preface to a conversation rather than a topic of serious discussion. But today cars have become something that people bring to one another's attention and brought to our attention.[4] Some of this assumes the form of *activism* in local civil society. Macclesfield has many long-established environmental groups who have made traffic problems and active travel a core part of their platform to "green" the town. This environmental activist framing of local automotive disorders typically comes with a vision of an alternative (local) future, resting on altered meanings and uses of public space:

> *Int*: What are your hopes for the future of the town?
>
> *Derek*:That's the sort of question we ask a lot in group actually. So it's something we've thought about a lot. From my own perspective, it's really about a town which is easy to travel round by foot, or by bicycle. And where nobody is frightened of using our streets, and a town where street are caring communities, rather than rat-runs for speeding traffic. That's where I'm coming from.

[4] The same has arguably happened to the discursive place of the weather, and for similar reasons relating to heightened consciousness of a climate crisis.

But concerns about the car were also raised widely—in ways we neither prompted nor anticipated—in our interviews and group discussions in response to questions about what troubles people in their neighbourhood, or the town generally. Traffic fills councillors' postbags and is a routine subject of complaint—and sometimes conflict—in local social media. It is a common source of calls for police action, rather than the source of objections to police wasting time on speeding motorists instead of catching "real" criminals. Cars have, in short, become visible and worth talking about, inescapable objects that signal something noteworthy about the character of public space and the sources and governance of social disorder. This has also become the case nationally, where emotive political and cultural contests have emerged over low emissions zones, low-traffic neighbourhoods, re-allocating land to cycle infrastructure and related car-curbing policies (see, for example, Goodall 2023; Smith 2023). Against the backdrop of climate breakdown, the local and national politics of road safety and urban transportation are becoming increasingly fraught, caught in tension between the politics of reaction and possibility.

Auto-fatalism

The first framing of these everyday concerns is one that treats problems associated with the car as simply a feature of the way the modern world is constituted. This is a sentiment we might call *auto-fatalism*. It is the overarching tone of many local conversations about the car-centric quality of the town. Sometimes this fatalism is explicitly stated. "I think where we live", one female respondent observed, "it's never going to be quiet in terms of traffic. And if I let myself be bothered by that, it would spoil where I live". This remark is an apt illustration of Zerubavel's (2006, p. 9) point that denial takes active work, requiring "a deliberate effort to refrain from noticing" and "refusing to acknowledge the presence of things that actually beg for attention".

More often auto-fatalism serves as a background assumption that structures what can be thought and said. On this view, cars are essential to how people live—and have to live—today. This is taken to be a fact about the social world that it is beyond our capacity to alter. So too is the fact that people have more cars (it's their choice, and modern life anyway renders this necessary); that cars have become bigger (what choice do we have when manufacturers design cars that way?); that more journeys are made by car (what other safe or realistic options do people have?); and that cars are left on crowded urban streets (they have to be parked *somewhere)*.

On occasions, these claims are articulated in the idiom of personal freedom, even form part of an ideology of autophilia (Lomasky 1997). But this requires active consideration of the questions at stake that is for the most part lacking—and in Macclesfield at least this outlook has not been provoked by any active policy agenda to restrain car use, or limit where they can be driven. More often this framing has an unthought quality, a "psychosocial attachment to automobile autonomy" (Charbonnier 2021, p. 251), and habituated sensibility towards the car's presence in the urban landscape, that "sidesteps" questions of "social accountability and blame" (Brewster

and Mayerfeld Bell 2022, p. 51). On this "natural" framing, car dependency reverts to being like the weather: one can chatter and grumble about it, but it is beyond the reach of social evaluation and imaginable interventions. Automobility is judged so "intrinsic to society", and change would require such "an extraordinary degree of public acquiescence and social mobilization" that the "underlying institutional contexts are immutable" (Rajan 1996, pp. 74, 219). This kind of fatalism amounts, in the end, to a form of denial (Shearing and Harrington 2017 p. 32). The car returns to the status of "unmarked" (Zerubavel 2018).

Auto-othering

A second—more common and active—framing of everyday car concerns we might call *auto-othering*: the harm caused by the car is the responsibility of a minority of bad drivers and careless owners. On this view, the mundane disorders of automobility are pinned on those who speed on residential roads or park their cars without care or consideration for others, or needlessly make short journeys by car to drop their children outside school. This framing draws upon forms of responsibility allocation and moral boundary-drawing that are commonly associated with public discourse on crime. To return to the comparison drawn by Garland (2001), road traffic risks are made familiar—and reassuring—by placing them in the same moral register as (other) crime risks. What follows from this framing is also familiar. Speeding, bad parking and cognate automotive harms are problems that call for more or better enforcement by police or other local authorities. Such action—as one complainant about speeding on Macclesfield's residential streets put it—is "necessary to deter future idiots".[5] On this "us" and "them" characterization, car troubles are rendered a risk created by "others", and they can (and should) be tackled in ways that leave "our" forms of living and moving unaffected.

Against this backdrop, auto-othering also begins to look like a form of denial. Its police-centrism is a refusal of what (else) is required to seriously address automotive harms, especially car-restraining measures (such as street re-design, low-traffic neighbourhoods, "school streets" schemes, or congestion/emissions-charging) that may affect "us". As Appleyard (1980, p. 117) puts it: "The city that relies solely on better enforcement as a solution to its residential traffic problems is avoiding the issue". The auto-othering frame is also a denial of authorship, a form of reassurance that local car troubles do not implicate "our" way of life but are caused by "them". "We have such a hard time", David Wallace-Wells (2019: 35) writes, "acknowledging or understanding our own responsibility or complicity in the changes now unfolding, and such an easier time evaluating the morally simpler calculus of pure victimhood". "Complicity", he continues, "does not make for good drama" (ibid.. p. 149).

[5] https://www.macclesfield-live.co.uk/police-shocker-officers-catch-speeding-15866814

Auto-complicity

This suggests a third frame—*auto-complicity*. This framing intimates that a wider set of questions flow from the observation that people in Macclesfield are today (in ways that they didn't a quarter of a century ago) *noticing* cars and *registering* their deleterious effects on the urban landscape. One dramatic exemplification of this larger framing took the form of a 'Death and Climate Change Sold Here' protest daubed on a filling station in a middle-class neighbourhood that was reported during our fieldwork.[6] That protest is one way of dramatizing—and drawing inferences from—a typically more muted realization that people are implicated in producing the automotive disorders about which they are concerned—they are agents of their own peril. "Those who suffer from the harmful effects of automobility are", Rajan (1996, pp. 218–219) writes, "simultaneously bound up in the institution through which such risks are produced. There is no clear distinction between the producer of harm and its victims; most of us are both". This realization is also focussed on the felt necessities built into people's daily lives by car dependency: that we drive because it has become the only realistic way to get around; we drive because it is not safe to walk or cycle, but by driving we undermine the safety of other mobilities and bolster an urban infrastructure that privileges automobility. In other words, people feel trapped in their cars; required to experience personal freedoms that entail the ongoing production of a series of "ordinary harms" (Agnew 2020).

This wider framing is permeated by what might be termed a "greening" of worries about disorder. The forecourt protest is one activist instantiation of that altered ecology of security. But perhaps what is also going on, in the mundane concerns and grumbles about the place the car has come to occupy in the local harmscape of one English town, is a quieter reappraisal, and renewed contestation, of the car; one that folds automotive harms into questions of everyday security and treats that security as a matter of how to create liveable urban environments and sustain viable planetary futures.

In the remainder of the paper, we describe these forms of and meanings of automotive disorder and expound on how these frames are mobilized to make sense of them.

On the forms and meanings of automotive disorder

People's relationship to place, and to the authorities governing that place, is mediated by infrastructures. "Slowly formed over time, infrastructures are made by and constitutive of diverse political rationalities, past and present" (Anand 2017, p. 12). In the case of transportation, infrastructures create material and social affordances for certain kinds of movement (whether that be walking, cycling, driving or taking public transport), while rendering other mobilities more difficult, even impossible. They also "generate the ambient environment of everyday life" (Larkin 2013,

[6] https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/bizarre-death-sold-here-graffiti-21447950

p. 328), configuring in particular ways the relation between moving through, and dwelling in, place (Sennett 2018, pp. 35–37).

People in our discussions often identify the town's connectivity to the world beyond as one of Macclesfield's positive features, especially the road and rail infrastructure that places it within easy reach, not only of beautiful adjacent countryside, but also Manchester (and its airport) and London, 174 miles to the south. By contrast, within the town, Macclesfield offers infrastructural inclusion to those who choose, or who are able, to get around by car, while restricting the (safe) mobility of the twenty per cent of the local population without access to a car,[7] or those who navigate the town as pedestrians or cyclists. The town's auto-dominant infrastructure also creates residential neighbourhoods whose inhabitants are disproportionality "travelled-upon" (Sustainable Development Commission 2011, p. 8). As one male town centre resident reflected: "It's very car-centred. And the more you get interested in seeing how the volume of cars, or the number of cars, restricts people walking and cycling, and makes their lives more difficult, the more annoying it becomes. From my perspective, that's one of [the town's] chief problems".

Macclesfield has become a town routinely congested with traffic, the irony of which was not lost on Lionel. "Don't try and get around in a car", he warns. "There are certain times when it's especially bad, particularly school drop-off and pick-up times. We wouldn't dream of getting a car out from where we live unless you really had to between eight and a half past nine, or between three or four, because it's just gridlocked. There's an awful lot of children get taken to school in cars".

Observations about congestion were typically made during conversations about how the town has changed over recent decades.[8] Having quipped that the town's "rush hour" had morphed into a "rush day", one focus group participant wistfully contrasted the situation with his childhood, conjuring up a time when public space was child- rather than car-centred: "I used to live on [a main road], up by the Weston", he recalled. "We used to be able to play in all the streets around there. You would actually play football in the streets. You would cycle up and down the streets. There were cars around, but not in significant numbers". For others, the local experience of the first COVID shutdown in 2020 brought the car question into sharp relief: "It was lovely in that it was quiet, and all the traffic stopped. Because that was the other thing I was going to say about the changes. The traffic is just incredible now in Macclesfield, during the years I've been here. It's just so busy" (*Kate, 40s, focus group participant*). One concern here related to housing developments—"all these new houses, all these new cars" (*Christopher, 30s, biographical interview*)—and their impact upon a town people like "because of the countryside and the greenery".

[7] Figure taken from the 2021 UK Census.

[8] No local figures are available on the changing number of cars in the town. But the national trends are striking. In 1965, there were 7.7 million registered cars in the UK. In 1995 (the period of fieldwork in our original study), there were 21.4 million. In September 2023, that number of registered cars in the UK had reached 33.6 million. There are up-to-date local statistics on car ownership. Forty-five per cent of Macclesfield's adult residents have access one car/van; twenty-seven percent can access two or more cars/vans; 8% have access to three or more cars/vans; twenty-one percent have no access to a car/van. The equivalent figures for England & Wales are forty-five percent one can/van, thirty-three percent two cars/vans and twenty-two percent no car/van. (All figures from 2021 UK Census).

Table 1 How much of a problem in your area is ..?

Percentage seeing a 'fairly' or 'very' big problem		
	2021	2022
Drug dealing*	.	*50*
Badly parked cars	*32*	*43*
Speeding cars*	.	*43*
Rubbish or litter lying around	*20*	*25*
Homeless people living on the streets	*13*	*23*
People being drunk or rowdy in public places	*15*	*16*
Teenagers hanging around on the streets	*13*	*16*
Vandalism, graffiti and other deliberate damage to property	*11*	*12*
Noisy neighbours or loud parties	*8*	*8*

*Question not asked in 2021 (added in 2022 in response to themes emerging from qualitative fieldwork)

Table 2 Do any of the following things ever make you feel unsafe?

Percentage responding 'quite' or 'very often'		
	2021	2022
Drug users/visible signs of drug use	*17*	*31*
Speeding cars*	-	*28*
The way some people drive or park their cars	*20*	*28*
The risk of being infected with Covid-19	*23*	*20*
People drinking alcohol in the streets	*8*	*20*
Young people hanging around	*8*	*18*
A lack of police presence	*9*	*17*

*Question not asked in 2021 (added in 2022 in response to themes emerging from qualitative fieldwork)

As a female resident put it: "There's the sort of micro-level of concerns about the increase in traffic, the increase in pollution generally, the impact on the environment of . . . there's been quite a lot of construction". The generic worry centred on the impact of increased car ownership and use on a town much of whose built infrastructure pre-dated the motor age. "It's a pretty typical small market town", one resident observed, "increasingly choked with traffic" (*David, 60s, interview*). This trope of choking, or of the town as a body whose arteries are clogged, resonates throughout local discourse on this issue.

Traffic congestion is the backdrop against which people connected the car to the topic of our enquiry: everyday security. These connections came to the fore in both waves of our community survey in response to questions about neighbourhood problems and the things that made people feel unsafe. After drugs, speeding and (bad) parking rated consistently highly among people's concerns (see Tables 1 And 2).

In this context, speakers drew explicit comparison between automotive disorders and the seemingly more serious safety problems that tend to feature in public discourse. "Can I say we haven't mentioned crime at all", one member of the

environmental campaign group observed towards the end of our discussion. "I don't know whether we were going to. But I don't feel, I don't feel it's a big issue, for me anyway. I feel safe in Macclesfield, except when I'm on my bicycle". Reflecting on her daughters' safety, one mother used a similar hierarchy of danger to couch her concerns: "Well, car safety's my biggest one. I mean, I don't think I worry about them going out on their own, I'm not somebody who thinks about them being abducted by strangers. It's crossing roads. Because I think that's their actual biggest risk. So, I think again, there's lots of places, there's a lot of traffic and lots of cars and I worry about that for their safety. I think that's it really". These mundane concerns about automotive harm coalesce around one particularly troublesome local matter: the school run.

Contested mobilities at the school gate

At a public meeting held by the then Chief Constable and Police and Crime Commissioner in Macclesfield Town Hall in December 2019, complainants in one residential area spoke of "running the gauntlet" of speeding cars on the way to school, and of "tempers flying" due to inconsiderate parking on the pavement around school. The school run was also named as a recurring problem in the town in several interviews and group discussions, "traffic outside schools" being variously described as "horrendous" (*Rosemary, 50s, focus group*), or "mayhem" (*council transport official*). It came more fully to our attention during observations with local police. Schools across Macclesfield are an ongoing matter for the police in this respect and sites of routine patrol by neighbourhood officers. The following field-note illustrates some of the issues at stake:

> We went to patrol outside [X] Primary School. Being here, the PCSO said, had two purposes.[9] One was to be seen and to get to know people. Lots of the children and one or two parents said hello as they passed the gates into school. But the PCSO was mainly here to regulate parking and car drop-off issues. "It's chaos when I'm not here", he remarked afterwards. He explained the problem of the dangerous junction and those created by parents parking on the pavement blocking residences or dropping-off in the no stopping zone outside school. The road is narrow and sits on a corner. The PCSO kept a watching brief and explained to me what his rules were: pavement parking is okay if a double buggy can get past; no parking in ways that are dangerous or obstructive, and no dropping off in the no stop zone. One driver just did this – he pulled up in an Audi SUV and stopped to let his child out. The PCSO approached the car and explained that he couldn't stop here on the yellow lines. The male driver barely spoke but had anger and irritation etched all

[9] PCSO stands for Police Community Support Officer. PCSOs are a category of staff with a more limited range of powers than police officers and whose role is chiefly focused on local patrol and community liaison.

over his face: as if he couldn't believe he were being reprimanded by the police for such innocuous everyday behaviour.

The school run is an emotive everyday concern. Twice a day for short periods of time it brings together in the same often unsuitable urban space groups of local people with different mobilities and competing interests. Many parents are driving their children to school. In so doing, they combine what they consider to be normal everyday behaviour (driving) with a primordial parental instinct (protecting the sacred child, ensuring they get safely to and from school). This may explain the SUV driver's affront at their "normal" behaviour being "turn[ed] into a figure of explicit attention" by the police (Zerubavel 2006, p. 65). Some parents are driving several miles across town. But often these are short journeys made by parents who live close to school. Many are time-pressed and drop their children by car en route to work. Ironically, some parents drive because the volume of cars makes them feel it is unsafe for their children to walk or cycle to school (Buliung 2014). One parent posted her frustrations on a neighbourhood social media group:

> The school is getting bigger and bigger. More kids mean more traffic. I've written to the council to suggest a meeting of "stakeholders" (that's what they're called nowadays isn't it?) to try and sort things out. Before suggestions of "make the kids walk" roll in, you try getting a teenager to walk in the rain, carrying heavy books and musical instruments!

There is some recognition in this post that driving children to school has come to be judged as problematic. But its purpose is to bring such behaviour back within the bounds of normality, fatalistically accepted as a necessity of modern life. Parents who are walking their children to school have similar parental motives. But beyond that their interests diverge. They feel intensely that their children's safety and enjoyment are threatened by those who are driving to school. So too do the few children in Macclesfield who cycle to school and are forced to navigate cars dropping children off and pulling away as they make their way to the school gate.[10]

Mobile and immobile objects

It is against this backdrop that annoyance about speeding and parking often arise. Concerns about the former are especially acute on the residential streets around the town centre, several of which function as "rat runs" for through traffic. In a local media report, a resident of one such street relayed her concerns, especially with respect to children's safety. Barbara said: "I live on [X] Street and it's very concerning the speeds some people travel at. Especially as we have a primary school and lots of little side roads, often where you have to edge out slowly to see/hear oncoming vehicles due to the parked cars". She then urged the local police to "Keep up the good work!". Another resident echoed the sentiment: "Well done. Must be like

[10] One percent of children in Macclesfield cycle to and from school; thirty-four percent are driven - https://www.pct.bike/m/?r=cheshire (Calculations taken from the 2011 UK census. No more recent figures are available).

shooting fish in a barrel on X Street. Crazy road to drive quickly on". Deborah said: "I also live in the X Street area. The speeds the people come down that road at is shocking".[11]

Those walking to school also face obstructed pavements. In fact, the presence of cars is most keenly felt, not when they are moving, but when they are static, or parked. Cars must be left somewhere. Most of the time cars in urban settings are not in motion but immobile.[12] Motionless cars actively perform work on the urban environment (Kurnicki 2021). Cars not only require land for parking infrastructure – most obviously in the form of carparks or private driveways. Cars left dormant on the street temporarily take control of, and privatize, a portion of public space. When parked on the streets they collectively *become* part of the physical environment, in ways that have material effects on "what, when and how people do things" in urban space (ibid.: 2). As Bloch (2021, p. 139) puts it: "Struggles over parking are no small matter given the proportion of car space that dominates neighbourhoods".

Parking issues are most acute in the "small, quite narrow" streets surrounding the town centre because, as one resident put it, "there's just not the space is there. The roads weren't made for the number of cars or the current size of cars" (*Valerie, 60s, focus group*). The basic problem is too many residents' cars chasing insufficient space, coupled with narrow streets that encourage pavement parking. The result, one young male respondent put it, is that in streets "built in 1850", before the advent of the car, "people just get wound up at each other about parking".[13]

Sometimes the concern prompted by bad parking had to do with what it signalled about drivers' lack of care for the safety of others: "I get there are more cars today than years ago", one resident posted on a local social media platform. "But peoples drives are blocked, junctions are dangerously obstructed, pathways blocked. Nobody considers others safety. Not just here. It's going on everywhere". Others complained about "selfish people who park on pavements" with scant regard for other users of the occupied space. As a female resident from one of Macclesfield's estates put it: "I've just had to walk on (X Road) with my baby in his pram because some idiot has left no room at all when parking!!!😳 I tried to get passed but the pram's wheels wouldn't fit. If someone in a wheelchair comes across this, they're going to have to climb a steep curb and walk in the road! So bloody selfish". Against this general backdrop, one parent posted about "the idiot that parked their car blocking an entire pavement for the past two days at school drop off". "Don't worry", she wrote, "we

[11] https://www.macclesfield-live.co.uk/police-shocker-officers-catch-speeding-15866814

[12] The average car in the UK is parked ninety-six percent of the time - https://www.racfoundation.org/media-centre/cars-parked-23-hours-a-day (accessed 14 August 2023).

[13] Conflicts about "bad" or "anti-social" parking also surfaced across other neighbourhoods in the town. During our research a Facebook site – "Dangerous Macc Parking" – appeared as a place for local people to report bad parking. https://m.facebook.com/Dangerous-Macc-Parking-107102928126130/. This is a local instance of what has become a growing online phenomenon. Variants of @badlyparked X, Facebook or BlueSky accounts can be found in many towns and cities in the UK and enable people to name and shame drivers and post photographic evidence. Posts to such sites commonly tag the relevant police force or local authority. There are also national X and BlueSky sites that perform the same role, such as @YPLAC.

will all walk our children in the road because you can't be bothered to walk a little bit further".

Local residents often feel that their neighbourhoods are overrun with cars twice a day, with parents parking in front of their homes (in parking spots they frame as "belonging" to them), or polluting the air with idling engines, or generally causing congestion. They frame the issue in terms of "their" street or neighbourhood being occupied by daily motorized incursion. One resident posted that "we have tried to stand up to these parents and just get sworn at. It's time that the schools and council stood up to these people. If there are no consequences it will sadly just carry on".

Some residents got in touch with us in order specifically to raise concerns about car-related disorder in their neighbourhoods. In one discussion, two male residents—Archie and Bernard—talked at length about conflicts at school pick and drop-off. They spoke of regular arguments with parents; annoyance at their sense of entitlement; the risk of "kids getting knocked over"; the feeling that no one listened to residents' concerns. They also thought that the school run made an already bad problem with parking in the area so much worse. Archie complained about residents of terraced houses having two or three cars, and made it sound like he had asked people around him why they considered this necessary.

The daily troubles of the school run left Bernard and Archie feeling besieged. They spoke of their neighbourhood being "invaded" by parent-drivers who "come down twice a day in their 4x4s" and "just treat it as their own backyard". They think that most parents "only live round the corner", and puzzle over why their children cannot walk. They speak of hostile and entitled outsiders, who just want to get their children to school and cannot see what they are doing is problematic or damaging for residents. Bernard says the struggle for a parking space has got so bad that parents turn up thirty to forty-five minutes early at school pick-up to get a space. This is something that a local civil enforcement officer we observed later confirmed.

Part of the issue for Bernard and Archie has to do with the "ownership" of local streets. They acknowledge that parents are doing nothing illegal. There is no street parking regulation other than directly outside the school, and no residents' parking scheme. Parents are mainly parking where they are allowed to park. But they are occupying spaces that Bernard and Archie feel somehow belong to them and their neighbours. They speak of parent-drivers blocking access to properties. They also expressed irritation at cars idling and causing air pollution.

Two prevalent themes recur through these complaints about disorder on the school run: that these problems are caused by a minority of drivers, and that minority display a lack of care or concern for others, or failure to respect the rights of those who walk to, or live near, schools. These drivers are imagined as exemplars of what Mitchell (2005, p. 96) calls an "SUV model of citizenship", autonomous and insulated actors with little regard for the collective good: "we ride high and sovereign; we are masters of space; we are safe against all who might intrude, all who might stand in our way". Both these tropes fall within the auto-othering frame.

There are, however, several features of these everyday car troubles that press against the boundaries of this framing. Much of the behaviour about which people worry and complain is legal—annoying yes, unsafe perhaps, insecurity-generating, it would seem so; but illegal, no. Drivers can drive "too fast" at thirty-mph on

residential streets with thirty-mph limits. People can park legally but in ways that show a lack of consideration for other street users and scant concern for the quality of neighbourhood life. Parents can make short car journeys to school that others judge to cause urban despoliation and environmental harm, but there is no law sanctioning this form of mundane car use. But it is not simply that these activities are legal. It is also that the car problems about which people express concern flow from behaviour they also engage in, perhaps routinely. Haven't we all driven too fast, close-passed a cyclist, parked where we shouldn't, sat with engines idling, or driven our children to school? The majority, in other words, may be implicated as authors of their own peril.

Institutional complicity

The charge of complicity is one that is often pressed against relevant authorities, authorities Archie and Bernard felt either "ignored" their concerns, or "treated them with contempt". Several institutional actors assemble around the school run. Schools are the focal point of these everyday conflicts. Many are recipients of ongoing complaints from residents across the town. But school leaders appear to have limited capacity to address the issue. We attended a meeting between a manager of one school, and Lionel from a local environmental group who were keen to work with schools on encouraging active travel. The manager stressed how good the school was and pointed us to the recent national Inspectorate report which praised for the school for its safeguarding and emphasis on pupil voice. But the meaning of "safeguarding" does not extend to getting children safely to and from school. They were not aware of the local authority's policy on *Sustainable Modes of Travel to School* (Cheshire East Council 2018) or the requirement that schools have an active travel plan (such plans are not part of the school inspection regime). The school did not have such a plan, and the manager had no sense that there was any great problem at drop-off and pick-up, though they conceded that staff may be too busy running the school to notice what is going on outside of it. They explained that the school has no view on how children get to and from school, as this is a matter for parents.

This school was not alone in adopting this stance. It was a common refrain of the local police that, as one neighbourhood officer remarked to us, "headteachers do not see this as a school issue". This is not surprising. As the meeting with the school manager attests, schools feel over-stretched and focussed on their core mission. Safe and active travel to school lies on the margins of that mission and is promoted by local authorities who are on the margins of the institutional eco-system governing education in England and Wales. School managers may feel that the question of how children get to and from school is, in Lionel's words, "just too big a problem for them". They may also be reluctant to take action that makes it appear they are criticizing parents, or—as Lionel puts it—"seeking to attack their lifestyle".

Matters are different for the police. One police manager we interviewed was "appalled" that the school run had become a policing issue—a problem they dismissed as a consequence of too many cars mixing with intolerant neighbours "with nothing better to worry about". Beat officers, however, believe they are taking

positive action to alleviate school-run problems when they are there—even if they know they are mostly not there, and acknowledge that the issue admits of no enforcement solution. Responding to the problem also means that neighbourhood officers are visible to residents twice per day and can engage in trust-building encounters with parents and their children. This view of police responses to everyday school gate troubles was shared by this parent:

> *Int*: Would you know how to contact the police if you needed to?
>
> *Lois*: Yes. They're quite often at the school gates as well. It's mainly to do with parking. Which, ironically, is way better here than it was at my last school. Where we never saw police and they used to have all sorts of problems where we lived. But I think more people probably walk. But there is an issue with parking anyway. So, they're often there because of that. But I think that's really good because the kids see them regularly. And they're not massively involved in crime at that point, so they're seeing them on quite a regular basis. (*Lois, 30s, focus group*)

Local authorities are complicit in a different way. The position of local government with respect to the school run illustrates how remote local authorities have become from the everyday governance of English schools. It also attests to the aspirational but hollowed-out relation that cash-starved local authorities today have to the localities they govern. There is no shortage of policies. "They get written", Lionel remarks, "but there's never resources to carry them through". Cheshire East's (2021, p. 4) *Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan* propounds a vision of "communities that manage car use and promote more sustainable modes of transport". The implication is that things must change, though there is little appraisal of any obstacles other than limited funding. There is also authority backing for *Sustainable Modes of Travel to School* (Cheshire East Council 2018), though the government official we interviewed noted that "we don't have the resource to help schools produce their own travel plans". The policy consultation acknowledges the "free for all" outside many schools and the safety issues and environmental damage that the school run causes. It reports "the misery" caused to residents by abusive parents. It speaks of the need to change parents' behaviour but concedes—in an auto-fatalistic framing—that this is hard because "modern family life is so busy and parents are dependent on their cars" (Cheshire East Council 2018. p. 7). A council official we interviewed confirmed that "the political will" exists to "decarbonise" transport and "reduce dependence on the private car". "The biggest challenge I have is not political, it's financial". Given these constraints, the Council's public positions begin to look very much like acts of "performative governance" (Ding 2020).

This policy discourse offers a partial acknowledgment of the range of social and political questions that are entangled with what at first sight seems a local issue to do with the use and regulation of public space. That "local" issue is tied up with the stressed, accelerated quality of people's lives and the daily demands of work. It flows from educational policies in England that have since the 1980s privileged parental choice over the idea of neighbourhood schools. It is the product of decades of car dependence (and the interests that support it, and "forms of desire" it has cultivated (Charbonnier 2021, p. 251)), as well as modes of land allocation and urban

design that have been shaped by, and continue to privilege, automobility. It is a set of everyday irritations over the car's dominance of public space that play out amid an ominous climate crisis.

For the most part, however, these wider concerns remain disconnected from public sensibilities towards, and the local governance of, the school run and related car troubles. Instead, local authority action currently appears limited to deploying its small number of civil enforcement officers—in conjunction with the police—in the surface management of deeper social conflicts. As one enforcement officer we observed put it, while standing watch over the school gate: "Things are fine when we're here, but we cannot be here all the time".

Conclusion

In his paper "Why everyday life matters", Les Back (2015, p. 832) argues that focussing on the everyday means attending closely "to what is easily discarded as unimportant". By so doing, Back suggests, it becomes possible to "identify public issues in the mundane aspects of everyday life", and "link the smallest story to the largest social transformation" (ibid., p. 834). So what kinds of transformations are in play when people in the small English town to whose social relations we have been attending "mark", and make practical judgments about, the place the car has come to occupy in the urban landscape (Zerubavel 2018)? And how are we to interpret the matters of concern that arise in these acts of everyday sense-making?

We suspect that what is going on includes a number of indications that things that what might once have been background grumbles or personal troubles are today being foregrounded as actionable public issues. They begin, as such, to fall within the ambit of public questions that demand accountability from local decision-makers. Our sense in this regard is that the more accustomed frames of fatalism and denial that we outline above are increasingly challenged by allegations of complicity and demands for intervention.

To some extent, this tentative account of some emergent features of local mundane culture cuts against certain existing preoccupations and omissions of existing scholarship where cars are concerned. It suggests that the relegation of questions of automobility, and its attendant risks, in criminology and security studies is, literally and figuratively, unsustainable. The notion that crime is typically, even inescapably, salient in public discourse whereas cars and traffic are not no longer looks universally plausible.

At the same time, pioneering generations in studies of automobility tended to focus upon the transformations in the infrastructure of everyday life wrought by the car in virtue of its status as an object of desire and means of self-expression and assertion. Yet, the emotional palette of sensibilities towards cars is clearly not restricted to these manifestations of gratification and attachment. Cars and driving also ground equally visceral (Sheller 2004) forms of judgement, indignation and censure. They raise fraught issues about the meaning and uses of public space. In local hot spots of contention, such as around school gates, cars loom large in people's censorious views of others' conduct, and their often-impassioned condemnation of drivers' recklessness, selfishness and lack of consideration.

In the context of people's narratives of change in their locality, this often speaks to a concern about the felt failures of planning or provision. What are the local authority, the school, the police doing about this? How is the sense of our place in the world, as one of relative safety and modest conviviality, eroded by these developments? But beyond this, there are also detectable signs that the issue is being cast within an emergent ecological consciousness towards the impact of the car on the urban landscape, one that problematizes roads and driving, speeding and parking as indicators of people's concern for, or carelessness towards, the quality and liveability of the (local) environment. If this is even partially correct, then we may increasingly see longstanding concerns that have hitherto been construed overwhelmingly under the sign of orderly or disorderly conduct (Newburn and Ward 2022) being reimagined as matters of planetary (ir)responsibility.

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Data availability The data used in this paper will be made available at the UK Data Service (https://ukdataservice.ac.uk) after a period of embargo.

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