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COMMENT



Our culturally maladaptive transport discourses are continuing to fail our children

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ABSTRACT

The private car, as a dominant form of everyday mobilities across Australia and around the globe, continues to create a significant level of social and spatial injustice. Children are disproportionately affected by such injustices, not just through the loss of their basic rights to roam their local environments freely and safely due to traffic safety concerns and being greatly susceptible to illnesses generated by car-inducing pollution and noise, but also through being at the greatest risk of being hit by drivers. Road crashes continue to be the leading cause of death for children globally and our current – and decades long – ways of dealing with road violence are inadequate and counter-productive as they distract from what actually needs to be done. Utilising Boyden's framing of cultural maladaptation, this paper conceptualises current maladaptive transport discourses and discusses how they continue to harm the health and well-being of children. The paper highlights the need for the recognition of these maladaptive discourses, including our worldviews, languages and principles in order to replace them with new narratives which enable the transition to a future where children's mobility needs and rights are honoured.

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Introduction

A truck driver hit two 16-year-old children while crossing at pedestrian lights in front of their inner city Adelaide school on Wednesday, the 22nd of March 2023. Both of them were rushed to the hospital with serious injuries including a broken collarbone and jaw with one remaining in critical condition. At the time of the writing, the police investigation was continuing to determine the exact cause of the crash along with a broader debate as to whether the driver ran a red light and/or a tree branch blocked the traffic light. After confirming his order for the immediate pruning of the tree to stop the potential obfuscation of the traffic light, the South Australian Premier, Mr Peter Malinauskas stated:

We of course don't know what caused that crash and a huge amount of police work needs to be done before we can start drawing any conclusions.

This investigation is likely to produce information that can be used to improve the conditions of the subject site, a school located on a busy freight route, but is unlikely to be sufficient to make the broader impact that a city like Adelaide with an entrenched car culture needs. This tragedy involving cars and children is not the first and unfortunately won't be the last. It is of course simpler to let technocratic road safety experts propose solutions directed at the site and characteristics of the

individuals involved in such crashes. But if we want a truly effective strategy that would make our streets safe on a systemic level we need to look beyond these individual cases and have a real societal conversation about the underlying choices we made and continue to make (te Brömmelstroet 2020). We need to recognise it as a system-wide socio-political issue that requires a system-wide socio-political response.

In fact, car crashes are the leading cause of death for 5–25-year-olds globally (World Health Organization 2022). In Australia alone, 293 people aged 0–25 died as a result of a road crash in 2022, compared to 277 people in 2021, 263 people in 2020, 281 people in 2019 and 276 people in 2018 (BITRE 2023). This is a stark reminder of the scale of the problem that we have with our current way of living. Yet these statistics do not seem to draw the level of anger and outrage it would if this degree of child mortality was a result of other forms of human-to-human violence.

But ‘why would a 13 year old girl be on the road or near a road when it would (have) been peak hour unless the driver was on the footpath’ (A comment by a member of the public after a Facebook post by 7NEWS Adelaide 2022).

Due to this ongoing, unquestioned status of the car, we have developed a tendency to take violence for granted and place our attention and blame on the victims. A comment on social media like the one above, following the reporting of another road crash in Australia that left a child seriously injured, is quite common across Australian discourses.

Such tragic, violent and systematic loss of life (and the public perceptions about it) is not a place we have arrived unknowingly or unexpectedly. This is a direct result of choices that created our car culture and that are deeply entrenched, reinforced and protected by several social, spatial and political mechanisms. Similar to what Lutz and Lutz Fernandez (2010) show for the North-American context in *Carjacked*, there are many examples illustrating how entrenched car dependence is across Australian societies. One only needs to look at the budget allocations for non-car based infrastructure and programmes or a quick look at typical reactions to the removal of car spaces in any part of the nation to confirm this (see Pojani et al. 2018).

Maladaptive practices

In his enlightening book, Boyden describes cultural maladaptation as ‘the propensity of a culture to influence people’s mindsets in ways that result in activities that are not only nonsensical in the extreme but also sometimes cruel, destructive and contrary to nature’ (2016, 77).

Globally, the history of spatial- and transport planning is littered with examples of such maladaptive practices, from poor urban planning and design principles (e.g. strict monofunctional zoning) to harmful cultural and social norms (including the representations of road trauma or traffic) and regulatory practices (e.g. minimum parking requirements) that continue to entrench social and environmental injustice by privileging cars. Australia as a well-established neo-liberal economy has been an enthusiastic adopter of these practices. For instance, the highway building agenda of the post war planning policies is still commonly practised across Australian cities as a means to address traffic congestion (Butt et al. 2019). In some cases, these large-scale, high-speed roads cut through the highly populated areas, giving rise to various problems such as noise, air pollution and social and spatial segregation while severely restricting the movements of those who use other forms of transport.

There are various examples of cultural maladaptation in relation to transport where car drivers are prioritised over other road users. These include the century-old notion of jaywalking laws which ultimately punish pedestrians for getting in the way of car drivers, or the contemporary transport modelling practices reflecting the traffic engineering principles established in the 1920s with a heavy emphasis on speed and efficiency of the cars, at odds with the safety of non-car users (Norton 2008). Similarly, the use of dehumanised language in reporting traffic or road trauma conceals the true impact of such events on society.

The case of two 16-year-old children hit by a truck driver illustrates this. Because of what data is collected at the scene (Braun and Randell 2020) and how journalists decide to report on it (Ralph et al. 2022) the ensuing debate focuses on blaming an individual person or object such as a tree branch while remaining silent on the contribution of system-wide issues. We exclude questions such as where we locate our schools, how we (dis)integrate land use and support unsustainable forms of transport or why we mix such heavy, fast-moving vehicles with our children in the immediate vicinity of their schools. Or why do we even allow people to operate vehicles that can so easily turn any small lapse of attention into carnage for those within, and especially those outside the vehicle?

There are various strategies utilised to reinforce such maladaptive practices. In the next section, we will narrow our focus to three of these, which we consider to be the most commonly used. Namely 'normalisation', 'victim blaming' and '(mis)representation' and describe the ways in which these strategies are used.

Normalisation

Why is there so little sense of urgency, despite the undeniably shocking evidence around the deaths and injuries caused by our car-dependent mobility system? Culver (2018) links the normalisation of such maladaptive discourses to the lack of problematisation that is deliberately and carefully maintained under the labels of 'modernity, progress and freedom' (145).

Human history is indeed full of instances of counter-reformers in any given cultural maladaptation to ensure that such normalisation endures. Boyden (2016) explains that these counter-reformers often have vested interests in the status quo of the maladaptive activities and they strongly argue that the problems identified by the reformers do not exist or are being exaggerated while they label reformers as 'alarmists, fanatics, scaremongers and prophets of doom' (80).

In the case of transport, these counter-reformers can be considered as those who directly and indirectly lobby for the use of private cars. Those include car companies and the various media channels that aggressively advertise their products as well as governments that prioritise car-based infrastructure and land use plans over alternatives. Other actors also make up the 'road lobby' and contribute to the normalisation of the unquestioned status of the car. For instance, the insurance industry as a beneficiary of the increased car ownership rates plays a critical role in devising the language around risk and safe driving practices (Culver 2018).

Victim blaming

The stalling tactics used by these actors within these processes not only reinforce car dependence but also reproduce other complementary strategies such as 'victim blaming'. For example, the promise of solving the existing safety related problems of cars with newer or better cars such as autonomous vehicles. Braun and Randell (2020) articulate this false hope through the technologically determined construct that 'human error' is the main reason for crashes and that replacing humans with machines would prevent these crashes and the loss of lives. As Norton (2021) shows in *Autonorama* this tactic is used for close to a century and always presents the car industry as the one that will eventually come up with solutions to the problems it created itself.

In explaining the logic-defying nature of such problematic practices, Ennis (2023) also highlights the importance and the more active power of 'framing' in keeping the status quo and perpetuating the problem. He refers to a range of 'devious frames' that are used by actors such as denialism (it is not a problem), normalisation (it is normal and expected) and victim blaming (it is a problem because of the individual mistakes). These are successfully used in different domains to stall progress by undermining the need and political will to change. Such strategies then socially produce a range of actors to blame, such as individual cars, individual drivers and their individual behaviour and individual people who were not paying attention while crossing the road and so on. Through

this, these frames protect the unquestioned status of the automobility system as a cause (Braun and Randell 2020).

The ‘Individualisation of safety’ as a manifestation of ‘victim blaming’ is rampant across Australian transport discourses and continues to serve as a successful corporate strategy to shift the responsibility onto individuals and away from the underlying socio-political structures (Ennis 2023). One of the most vivid cases of this is when we see children’s safety and movement as an individual issue rather than a social policy issue (Sturup et al. 2013). This deflects responsibility and reinforces the de-politicisation and individualisation of car crashes. This is against the background of established knowledge that the broader community plays an important role in child-rearing and there are detrimental effects of the loss of these collective approaches on children’s happiness and well-being (Pinker 2015; Stanley et al. 2005).

(Mis)representation

Perhaps, out of all culturally maladaptive transport practices, the language used for reporting road trauma is the most problematic as it enormously contributes to the de-politicisation and normalisation of the violence inflicted by the automobility regime. Treating these cases as accidents, unfortunate events or ‘glitches in the machine’ (te Brömmelstroet 2020, 10) rather than expressing what they really are: ‘the results of our long car privileging planning (e.g. urban sprawl) and transport practices (e.g. neglect of active and public transport)’ render these as the unavoidable outcomes of our everyday lives and serve to perpetuate car dependence. Based on the crowd-based research on media reports of traffic crashes, Verkade and te Brömmelstroet (2022) report that such language including that used in the reporting of road closures foregrounds the car, makes us take the daily violence for granted and conceals the non-car modes and users.

Often, these maladaptive discourses and the associated stalling tactics are so successful that we produce and consume them in an addictive and obsessive manner such as the frequent traffic update reports that take up significant amounts of public broadcasting time (around 350 min every week per radio station) (Verkade and te Brömmelstroet 2022).

Compare this to the ephemeral presence that trauma from car crashes is given. For crashes that kill people, the timeline is usually up to a week after the crash and a day or two at the time of the court hearing if there is one. In our case of the truck driver hitting two 16-year-old children, the most recent reporting was dated back to only 3 days after the crash.

Delusional ideas about solutions

When a problem is maladaptively defined, the solutions produced naturally follow suit. These ‘solutions’ not only fail to address the problem at hand but further exacerbate it by creating additional problems. Again, this becomes most clear around children’s mobility, where two specific maladaptive solutions can be observed: ‘segregate the child’ and ‘educate the child’.

Segregate the child

In the case of children’s mobilities, cultural maladaptation dates back to the changing sociological notions of childhood and the conventions around children’s citizenship. This dictated their changing place in public spaces. The mass introduction of the motorised automobile has a lot to answer for in these trends, as the segregation of children’s play spaces and their disappearance from the streets was mainly in order to keep them out of the car driver’s way (Lange 2018; Norton 2008).

These trends in the othering of children and their mobilities can be clearly observed by the misguided citizen categories produced by neo-liberal agendas (Iveson 2006). For example, while young children are described as future citizens in need of protection, the youth are described as anti-social citizens from whom the community needs to be protected. In the same way, parents are described as

the citizens who should bear responsibility to maintain this protection which is vital for an orderly society (Iveson 2006). In parallel, Gillespie (2012) argues how 'child-rearing became the focus of perfecting the social order' (73) and how the assumptions underlying these norms connect the unsupervised child on the street with criminality later in life. She points out to the inadequacy of any formal consultation with children in planning practices in the grand scheme of their total disappearance from most public places.

Segregation of children is currently in full effect with most of today's children being subject to significant spatial and temporal exclusions in their daily lives. Christensen et al. (2018) articulate how uncomfortable children's experiences in public places can be due to, for instance, age-based exclusions, such as children older than 8 years being removed from playgrounds or a 10 year old child on a bike being subject to a range of contradictory social and spatial directions in terms of where they belong (133).

Safety concerns are often the underpinning reasons for such exclusions, whether in the form of protecting children from stranger adults or the protection of younger children from older ones. Indeed this is a highly contagious strategy in the context of risk-averse societies such as those in Australia, despite the fact that risks around traffic danger and car crashes are far greater than for stranger danger (Gill 2007).

The prevailing parental ideals and social norms make individual parents solely responsible for protecting children from vehicle traffic related dangers which in the absence of investment in safer walking and cycling conditions, unsurprisingly lead to high rates of chauffeuring children to access their daily destinations (Gilbert et al. 2018). Or worse: keeping them at home and robbing them of their freedom to roam, play and be autonomous in public space. Important contributions to a host of physical- and mental health epidemics, such as obesity, anxiety, depression, ADHD and loneliness. Modern notions of 'good parenting' are deeply connected to keeping children secured and isolated (Silonsaari et al. 2022) and as such directly contribute to these health problems.

What is worse, these maladaptive discourses continue to result in more hostile environments for children including the immediate surrounding of their schools, where drop-off zones became more important than play spaces for children. As Verkade and te Brömmelstroet (2022) explain, such practices lead to and reinforce the perception that children are crossing the roads, instead of our roads crossing their living spaces.

Educate the child

The notion of educating children, for them to perform responsible behaviour around roads and cars commonly features in road safety policies in Australia (Raising Children Network Australia Limited 2023), which represents a culturally maladaptive practice. It goes against the fundamental principles of raising an independent, confident and physically, socially and mentally healthy child. There are many cases where children's behaviour was blamed for such fatalities as crossing the road on a non-signalised section of a road or just darting onto the road. This was unthinkable in the early stages of the car, when the main response by society to child victims was rooted in justice, and children were seen as intrinsically innocent. In *Fighting Traffic*, Peter Norton (2008) showed how this changed when our language to talk and think about streets shifted to principles such as efficiency, order and the freedom of car drivers.

Indeed, this maladaptive system enabled by the above-mentioned elements of the framing and powerful actors is so successful to the extent that even the most absurd practices manage to avoid any scrutiny. A well-known example of this is how the school safety campaigns were introduced by the automobile industry in the 1920s (Norton 2008) and the ongoing attribution of car crashes to the lack of education or lack of road signage which both are proven to be ineffective approaches in reducing road violence (Ennis 2023). Moreover, these road safety campaigns that are widely employed across Australia as a response to concerns around traffic safety and car crashes are, in

fact just another set of tools legitimising car culture while successfully securing the acceptance and status of the car (Montero 2017).

Through these mechanisms, we normalise traffic violence itself. Similar to teaching children to swim or to act responsibly in nature. But it makes us forget that systemic violence in the traffic system is, contrary to water or nature, fully human-made and can be reduced if we want to. But by normalising it, the violence itself became even worse: the number of cars is still on the rise, their size and weight continue to grow, their top speed and acceleration rates go up and the level of distraction for drivers is getting out of control.

Verkade and te Brömmelstroet (2022) reveal that when a Dutch activist group ‘Stop the Child Murder’ called for more radical safety reforms focusing on taking away the danger from our roads, this first resulted in more policy attention to this. But over time, this movement was strangled by a forced fusion with the road safety organisation that was supported by the car- and oil lobby: Veilig Verkeer Nederland. After this merger, the focus of road safety turned again back to disciplining people to adhere to traffic rules and cope with the danger that simply exists.

Pathways to remedy

Given the scale of the multitude of issues associated with this car culture, especially those around the health and well-being of children, an urgent response is needed. Unfortunately, the attention this issue receives is often inadequate leading to the ever-slow progress of advancing non-car based mobilities (Gilbert et al. 2022) and is reflected in the culturally maladaptive transport discourses dominating Australian policy and practice.

But how do we address these maladaptive and delusional activities? Where do we start? According to Boyden (2016), the remedy comes from a ‘cultural reform’: when new scientific understandings and new knowledge are brought in.

For this, the recognition of the culturally maladaptive nature of our transport discourses is an essential starting point. This helps us to get to the root causes of our transport challenges and the ongoing practices that sustain them. This would provide further insights into the resilient nature of these maladaptive activities and the magnitude of change we need to overcome them, including the strategies of the powerful and influential counter-reformers.

Our car privileging planning and transport systems are causing irreversible damage to the lives of ourselves and our children on multiple levels. If we do not challenge the underlying rationalities that we use to address this, there is little reason to believe that anything will substantially change. As Pirsig (1974, 92) stated: ‘If a factory is torn down but the rationality which produced it is left standing, then that rationality will simply produce another factory’. If we want transformative change, we need to confront our worldviews, language and principles.

It is well overdue that we address this issue head-on by exploring new narratives away from these individualist, depoliticised maladaptive practices that distort reality and delay meaningful action. With this we need to honour the rights of our children to freely, and safely move around their neighbourhoods in a dignified manner; their rights to be distracted and imperfect in public spaces without continuous fear; and their rights to access their daily destinations by child-friendly and sustainable means of transport (Gilbert et al. 2018). To achieve this, a holistic approach to child based accessibility (Gilbert and Woodcock 2022) is required. For example, instead of creating specific places for children, it is necessary to embed child-friendliness within everyday public spaces by implementing a combination of built environment interventions simultaneously. Numerous solutions are being implemented worldwide, such as play streets (Playing Out 2023), which offer various benefits by providing valuable opportunities to experience streets in alternative ways. However, in order to generate a significant impact, these interventions need to be scaled up both spatially and temporally.

The crash involving those two 16-year-old children and several others was totally avoidable by taming the social, political and spatial conditions that enshrine the car. Automobility itself, as a

whole, is the reason. Our lifestyles are constructed around the heavy reliance on cars and our planning and transport practices fail to privilege more sustainable modes of transport are the reason for these deaths and injuries. We can't continue our decade-long attempt to try and address traffic violence by disciplining the entire society around it to 'save some lives'. Instead, we need to cut to the core and dare to ask the real fundamental questions about the cause of this perpetuating violence. Our children deserve a future where cars are no longer privileged at the expense of their safety and dignity.

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