

Making Ripples

The Social Science of Carpooling

by Amanda Bancroft

Recent studies suggest that baby opossums are better at carpooling than Americans. Just kidding. But seriously, only 10% of Americans carpool, and that includes those who ride with family members. July marks the two year anniversary since we sold our car for Ripples, and while we've had dialogue about emissions, social psychology has been largely left out. It's time we had an honest conversation in America about what it's like on both sides of the windshield.

The psychology of carpooling in America can be as confusing as English grammar. When was the last time you paid friends for buying groceries and cooking dinner for you, or helping you move? Yet, it is polite in our culture to offer gas money in exchange for a ride. Is it fair for passengers to pay for ride favors from friends, when those friends don't pay for dinner or moving favors from their passengers? A driver who offers *free* rides might feel taken advantage of, despite receiving gifts or favors from their passengers. And acceptance of a *free* ride (if you don't own a car) could create debt in a friendship in a way that accepting expensive food can't.

Car owners may share rides with each other for free, but people who don't own a car often become a gas money account. Yet greed may not be the motive for these drivers: car owners face incredibly high costs of maintaining a personal vehicle. Drivers may offer a ride to someone they perceive as desperate, without evaluating their own desperation for gas money. This can lead to unfair carpool situations in which a driver may feel like a chauffeur and the passenger feels like a bank. But awareness of these issues can reduce them.

In the USA, carpooling has plummeted since the 1980s, despite genuinely well-intentioned people offering rides. Applause to the car-pooling mavens out there! Most people are generous and will gladly offer rides to shared destinations. But sometimes even generosity arises from a misconception. Despite being highly mobile without a car, to car-centric American culture, not owning a car is like being permanently grounded by your parents.

American culture depicts people without a car as immature and unfit to date, or in a bad place in their life due to poverty, crime or disability. This affects the American perception of carpooling. Offering a ride to someone "in dire need" of a ride is seen as saintly, a gesture deserving of immense gratitude regardless of the driver's other, less saintly, actions (like driving a carpool while intoxicated).

While it may not make them a saint to offer a ride, the driver is required to selflessly forego convenience and privacy for the sake of a carpool. Americans are unaccustomed to sharing their cars, which are experienced as private spaces for phone calls or entertainment. "For some people,

saving the earth in a future century isn't as important as freedom to choose their radio station this morning," writes Ben Barkow, Ph.D., in Toronto's Behavioural Team study entitled "The Psychology of Car-Pooling." Barkow describes the type of social bargaining skills necessary for effective carpooling as *maturity*. Well said.

Even in the best of circumstances, carpooling takes more than logistical planning and tree hugging. It involves maturity, emotional resilience, good social skills, and healthy amounts of compromise and backup plans from both driver and passengers. Our society can grow to encourage carpooling as a virtue, just like some indigenous cultures grew to consider favors (even to strangers) a hallmark of humanity. This can be tough on both the driver and passenger, but if baby opossums are so good at it, there is hope for Americans, too.

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