

Parents, Kids, and Cars

Amy Best

Most of us think of parent-child relationships as both enduring and continually changing. Even young children try to gain freedom from parental control, and parents often resist those attempts, at least temporarily. As a result, parents and children are constantly negotiating the terms of their relationship in this and other respects. Such parent-child negotiations are probably most intense during young people's long transition from childhood to adulthood, in our society, roughly the teenage years and often into the early twenties. Young people strive for greater autonomy, and parents, often out of concern for their children's safety, try to maintain some control over their lives.

In our society, gaining the ability to drive and car ownership are major steps in young people's growing autonomy. Except in those few cities with extensive and reliable mass transportation, being unable to drive or without a car is to be hopelessly dependent on others to get where you need and want to go. It is hardly surprising, then, that driving privileges and car ownership are major subjects of negotiation between parents and their teenage children in this society.

This selection examines negotiations between parents and children over car privileges from the perspective of the children, and how those negotiations are influenced by social factors external to the family. For example, it shows how young people plead with parents to allow them to drive and for financial assistance in purchasing a car of their own. Despite concerns about their child's safety,

many parents often relent, to some degree, in part because it means that they will no longer have to chauffeur the child here and there. However, parents use car privileges to control their children, restricting or withdrawing them if their newly driving child displeases them. They also often extract promises from the child to assume some of the family's transportation needs in return for driving privileges and assistance in purchasing a car. In these and other ways, parents and their young adult children negotiate the changing terms of their relationship around cars.

Foreshadowing the following section, Amy Best, the author of this selection, also examines how a family's class or income and general social standing influence these negotiations. More affluent parents can clearly contribute more to their child's car ownership—and may even buy them a new car—than can less affluent parents. Hence, young people are reminded of their class standing when negotiating with their parents over car ownership. They also learn something about their parents' approach to money, such as expecting one "to earn their own way."

Although focused on parents and children's negotiations around car privileges, this selection illustrates some more general sociological lessons. Even enduring social relationships, such as those between parents and children, husbands and wives, and long-standing friends, are subject to negotiation and change. Those negotiations, in turn, do not occur in a social vacuum but are influenced by various social influences that originate outside the relationship. Social relationships are never defined once and for all but are ongoing social constructions.

Jorge, a bright young 17-year-old Latino, is a senior at Bernards, a prestigious all boys school in the Northern California city where this research was conducted. Jorge is a lot like the other young men who attend Bernards: His priorities are academic, he is actively involved in a host of extracurricular activities intended to boost his college applications, and he feels assured that his dreams of a

bright future will be realized. But every day after school, after he has finished football practice or one of the many other school-based extracurricular activities he pursues, Jorge boards two buses for the 2-hour ride that brings him across town to the Eastside where he lives with his mother and father. To outsiders, the city's Eastside is viewed as a hotbed for gang activity. But a more complex depiction is one that reveals the Eastside as one of the largest ethnic enclaves for the Vietnamese and Latino communities in the county. And although it has more than its share of rundown houses, overcrowded apartments, and families living on the edge, the Eastside is also home to many middle-class families. Jorge comes from one such family. His mother and father travel each morning the 40-plus miles to their jobs to guarantee they stay that way. From their combined income, his parents pay a mortgage on a modest home, his mother drives an Infiniti, a midpriced luxury sedan, and they are able to finance the cost of a private school education with the hope of a secured future for their only child. It is their dual income that allowed them to surprise Jorge with a 1998 Ford Explorer last Christmas. The impetus—"They don't have time to drive me, so they got me my own car," Jorge explains. Like most kids at this prestigious all boys school, Jorge doesn't work. "School is my job," he offers, yet adding, "I want to get a job and try to lift that burden off my parents." But Jorge is simply too busy to find the time. For now, he is just happy he no longer has to ride the two buses each afternoon to get home.

When asked if he'd ever lost his car privileges, he answers with a matter-of-fact tone, "It's not worth taking away the keys. I do a lot of stuff. They feel bad taking away my extracurriculars," adding a few moments later, "my curriculars are more than just hanging out with friends. I do a lot of stuff at school." By just about anybody's standards, Jorge is a good kid: earning high marks in school, getting along with fellow classmates, and being

involved in school athletics and several academic clubs. For many middle-class parents such as Jorge's, it is a matter of good practical sense to give their child a car once he or she is able to legally drive. As Jorge's narrative suggests, driving their child to and from the endless stream of organized activities, in addition to managing two busy professional schedules of their own, is almost impossible. This is the "time bind" Arlie Hochschild (1997) so cogently described in her book by the same name. For middle- and upper-middle-class children struggling to gain an edge in what could only be described as the ever increasing[ly] competitive marketplace of high stakes education, all of this is a matter of course. . . .

Jorge's story about how he came to have his own car is an interesting one because it provides important clues not only about the decisions parents and teens make concerning teens' changing roles and responsibilities inside and outside family as teens move into adulthood, but also something about how these decisions are made and the social forces that deeply influence them. Whereas Jorge's story seems to reveal something about the inadvertent gains of greater independence for children of working parents and the intense academic demands for college-bound kids, it also points to the central role of class and the demands of work in structuring these family decisions. This article examines how young adult children collaboratively negotiate for greater freedom and independence while also fulfilling increasing family responsibilities as they transition to adulthood by focusing on how teens negotiate with parents around driving and the car.

"Yes, No, Maybe So": Framing Co-Collaborative Negotiations Between Parents and Teens

For adolescents, getting "the license" usually results in more time spent away from

family. But for many, the license is also accompanied by greater responsibility to the family. Young adults are often expected by their parents to share more of the work that maintains modern family life once they are able to drive. Highlighting the interactional dynamics as they are narrated by teens themselves, I identify the ways in which the car serves as cultural object around which parents and kids negotiate kids' independence from the world of family, arguing that this process is not without some struggle. Grippled by a very concrete concern for their children's safety, parents often award greater freedoms to their kids reluctantly (Kurz, 2002). Parents exercise considerable control over their young adult children, placing limits on how they may drive, when they may drive, and where they may drive. However, the conventional characterization of parent-youth relationships as one of warring positions, although at times apt, in the end fails to explain the complexities and contradictions that emerge as parents and kids struggle together and apart to make sense of a variety of changes in family structures, family responsibilities and family roles in contemporary America. . . .

I highlight the perspectives of young adults, keeping in mind that the accounts provided by parents would likely look quite different from those provided here. Family sociologists and life course scholars have long overlooked the active role children and youth play in socialization; in family contexts. . . . [Today] [family studies scholars increasingly see children as fully participating family members . . . active in the complex negotiations of family practices and relationships and contributing in significant ways to the everyday construction of family life (Larson & Richards, 1994; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). . . . [Here] I examine how parents and their young adult children negotiate around driving and having a car, drawing attention to the collaborative nature of these negotiations and the active role teens, themselves, play in them. I examine how these negotiations si-

multaneously express and construct class for these teens by drawing teens into the economic contexts of their families. . . . [Then] I examine how teens perform the work of family life as they manage the increasing responsibilities to family that accompany learning to drive, also considering what this emerging responsibility means for their independence from family. . . .

Background to the Study

Data for this article were drawn from a larger multimethod study focusing on how cars operate as cultural objects through which kids make sense of what it means to be young in culture today, engage the process of cultural production, and solidify their social identities. How young adults interactionally manage the "push and pull" of freedom from and responsibility to family . . . is the particular focus of this analysis. This article primarily draws from materials gathered through focus groups and in-depth interviews with slightly less than 100 young men and young women. . . . All interviews were conducted in a Northern California city and its surrounding suburbs. Like other California cities, this city is sprawling, lacking a comprehensive public transportation system. For this reason, a significant portion of the population relies on automobiles as their primary ground transportation. As a result, cars are a central part of the landscape and car culture is firmly embedded in everyday life. . . .

Begging, Pleading, and Granting Permission: Parents and Kids Collaboratively Negotiate the Car

For many kids, perched at the threshold of adulthood, getting a driver's license offers the promise of greater freedom, independence, and autonomy. In the words of one young woman, "you feel kind of liberated." Free-

dom, as it is articulated by youth around driving, carries several meanings. First, freedom is defined directly in connection with parental ties. That is, it is largely understood as a freedom *from* the constant presence of parents. Freedom is also defined in terms of young adults' changing relationships and greater access to a number of public settings beyond family. In short, youth gain freedom *to* spaces previously closed off to them. In very concrete terms, the license represents greater freedom of movement, as one European American young woman explained,

When I got my driver's license, I looked at it as freedom, getting out from my parents, going places you couldn't get to before because you had to have your parent's permission . . . not having to be worried about being dropped off and being picked up. Going to the library even or a dance club or a party and not having to worry about, I don't know, your parents having to come pick you up. Not necessarily, it wasn't embarrassment for me, it was more, just like okay, I make my own choices I can leave when I want to you know, I made this decision to come here you know I'll drop you off. I felt more like an adult but um, I don't know, I went to the beach, to people's houses, friends' houses, the movies.

In addition to the most obvious gains, the most cherished aspect of this new freedom is her greater ability to exercise control of her life, where she goes and when. Although she alludes to her concern for her appearance within youth cultural worlds (parents are rarely seen as social capital in youth peer groups), for this young woman, what seems most important is her ability to be self-determining, something few adolescents regularly enjoy. As this woman notes, it is not just freedom from parents that is gained but also greater control over self in different social settings. . . .

The struggle to claim greater freedom over self and setting, in short over one's life, in-

volves a series of negotiations and ongoing interactions with parents. Hortencia, a young Latina who participated in one of the focus groups, explains,

My parents I don't think they were strict, but then again they weren't maybe because I challenged them on it, I mean, it wasn't, when they would say no to something I would say, but why?, here are my reasons why I can do this, what are your reasons? So I kind of engaged them in a conversation and because like I was always totally involved in school when I was, it was, just like by chance if I went somewhere, like I didn't, I didn't, for me like, I was never into drinking, I was never into, so I knew what I was doing was fine. After I talked to them they would let me go.

With the exception of a few, most teens, like Hortencia, saw these as negotiations where parents were at the very least willing to listen to their child. Sarah and Christina, both European American and female, seem to be the exceptions to the rule.

AB: Do you have a car?

Sarah: I'm gonna get a car when I have money. Yeah my parents don't like me and they don't like the fact that I would ever get a car because I'm a B-I, B with an itch and I would probably run people off the road, trust me PMS straight out . . . I'll get my driver's license but no car.

AB: Will your parents let you drive their car?

Sarah: I don't think they trust me.

Christina: I got my permit when I was fifteen and I had kept wanting to go get my license. I took all the driving lessons and everything. My mom finally decided you know "we'll just put this off, put this off." So when I was eighteen I got my license on my own. Since they [parents] don't have to sign anything. She'd used it as a punishment because I wanted to drive myself to school and work and every

thing else . . . umm . . . she would say "no, no, no you have to do things my way" and if they weren't done the right way "you can't get your license."

But as much as young adults play an active role in these negotiations with parents, they do so under particular conditions of constraint. For those kids who must drive a parent's car . . . asking permission to borrow their parents' car also often means having to manage their parents' work and leisure schedules. Consider the comments from one South Asian young woman:

I needed the car and my mom needed a car for work and it was kind of getting difficult where you know if she needed the car on her days off and I would have to revolve my schedule around her and stuff . . . I was sharing it. It was like between me, my mom and my sister and like, the way it was set up was my sister would carpool with her friend to school and that would be the days that my mom would take it to work and then a couple of days it would be home because my mom needed to run errands or whatnot.

A young Latina explained how this worked in her household.

AR: I've always had their cars, they've always let me borrow their cars, my dad, yeah, always, like I mean, he would give me the one he didn't like.

AB: Now, does he still do that or do, do you have your own car?

AR: No, now, 3 years ago I got my own car.

AB: So when driving the back-up car, before you got your car did you have to ask or?

AR: I had to ask, of course.

For this young woman, it is simply a matter of course that she would seek permission to drive her father's car. Although family cars are essentially shared resources in many fam-

ilies, in the end, few kids see these cars as their own or themselves [as] having equal negotiating power in decisions over them. The car ultimately belongs to a parent and not them. This is reinforced by the fact that young adults are typically expected to satisfy a number of questions pertaining to their upcoming activities before permission to borrow the car is granted. The consequence is that their freedom to then travel beyond their immediate setting is contingent. After all, a parent has the power to say no. When asking to borrow her mother's car, Lucena explains that sometimes, "they would be like; no you can't take the car, but it wouldn't be like for punishment it's just that they didn't want me to. They didn't feel like it [laughs]."

Usually, it is the parents' busy work schedule that curtails young adult children's freedom to easily move between the world of family and beyond. I listened to many young adults as they identified the difficulty in trying to resolve scheduling conflicts. Marisol explains, "I started driving because I needed a ride to go to school and they can't take me to school, so that's why I started driving. [But] um I can only go to school and back home and they, if they wanted me to do some like, run some errands or something they will give me the car." This struggle to gain access to the family car is perhaps particularly acute at this historical moment. Time spent away from family, at work and school or involved in a variety of extracurricular and leisure activities, for both parents and their children is considerable (Kincheloe, 1997). Jorge explains, "All of us are so busy. Since I got my own car, we're like three units. Cause we have our own work. My mom works in Oakland now. I do all my stuff at school like I said, so I don't get home until 5 or 6. My dad doesn't get home until 6 or 7. We all arrive home at different times; we do our own things on the weekend." Jorge's scenario, discussed earlier, is all too common. His parents both work full-time, each commuting far more than an 80-mile stretch each day, and Jorge's life is

swamped by the demands of school and extracurricular activities as Jorge struggles to maintain an edge over his peers in the context of "high stakes" education.

It is not surprising, then, that many young adults experience these negotiations as both tiresome and involving too many constraints [and] that they work to initiate a new set of negotiations revolving around getting their own car. The same South Asian young woman who eventually was given a new Honda Civic during her sophomore [year] in college remarked, "I remember I started telling my parents I want a new car, I want a new car, I totally initiated it. So now all of us, all my friends I can remember we all had an old car and now all of us, you know, have gotten new cars within like a year, a year and a half." But many young adults exercise very little power in these negotiations. Consider the following remarks from one European American young woman,

My parents bought me a car. I used my dad's car for a good year and a half and then my parents bought me a car and um, we went and looked at cars together and I was trying to pick the right color and the right style because I wanted to look good. And then um, then they just decided to get a car and show up with it one morning and um they just showed up with it . . . they ended up getting me a Mazda Protégé, four-door sedan, you know, beige, nice and neutral . . . I was all excited and just the idea that I had my own car. . . . But um, after a while of driving it I was kind of bummed out, I would see my friends get cars and they got cars they wanted and cars that were cooler . . . I didn't get what I wanted.

This young woman, although recognizing the privilege of being given her own car by her parents, also recognizes the lack of choice she was able to exercise in the decision-making process. She wanted something stylish and good looking, and her parents wanted a practical "neutral" car. Her parents' preferences won

out over her own. Pam, an African American junior in high school, described a similar scenario during one of the focus groups:

Pam: My mom's buying me my own [car] right now.

AB: What's she buying you?

Pam: I don't know.

AB: Do you have a say in it, like what you get?

Pam: No. Whatever she picks that's what I get. I don't care if both of the bumpers is falling off she's gonna get it for me.

In another focus group, Lenore, a Latina sophomore, explains,

AB: He's gonna give a car for your birthday?

Lenore: No [not for my birthday but], just because I asked him to.

Jeanie: Can I borrow your dad?

Patti: Spoiled.

Lenore: I am not cause I have to beg him before he lets me get one.

AB: Anyone else, get a car?

Patti: I wish . . .

Patti and Jeannie regard Lenore's position as an enviable one. She is getting a car, which is something they are without. But Lenore is quick to remind them that the car was not simply awarded but eventually promised after considerable energy on her part. Begging, a term teens commonly use to characterize how their objectives are achieved as they negotiate with parents, is one that suggests work in the absence of equal power. The decision largely rests on the parent.

Parents often decide to give a car to their child as a gift celebrating what are essentially defined as meaningful milestones, usually educational, for their young adult children. Graduation from high school, graduation from college, and the start of college, al-

though socially defined as special occasions in their own right, are elevated in importance as is the parent's role in these events when such an expensive gift is given.

Car Privileges, Class Privilege: Grades and Gas Money

Class structures these negotiations in meaningful ways. In an immediate sense, class plays a role in whether or not parents will be able to buy a car and, more important, the kind of car they are able to buy for their child. Class also organizes how kids talk about these decisions. Most middle- and upper-middle-class kids who were given cars as gifts took for granted that such a gift was a consequence of their parents' economic resources. One young woman who was given a brand new red Pontiac Firebird for her 16th birthday explained,

They paid [for the car and related expenses] because I was in high school and I didn't have a job, you know my parents wanted me to focus on school and sports and I didn't have time to do a job after that. So that was my job, basically . . . my parents just never like, you know, said don't worry about it.

This young woman gets a car, a meaningful object in youth cultural worlds, but doesn't have to compromise her free time or time dedicated to studies or sports to do so because of her privilege and affluence.

Yet, it is also through these negotiations that kids are drawn into the economic contexts of their family lives. Decisions over whether to buy a car, what kind of car, and its intended uses reveal to kids, although not likely for the first time, how their parents think about spending money and perhaps provide occasion for them to formulate their own ideas about financial spending. This seemed evident when talking with a number of kids, all squarely middle class, about having an expensive car. When talking about other kids they knew who were given what

were seen as unreasonably expensive cars as gifts by a parent, a number of them were critical of this decision and objected on moral grounds. Invoking the importance of cultivating a work ethic, one biracial young man who drove a used Ford Taurus wagon, which he almost entirely financed himself from money his parents had put aside from his modeling as a child, remarked, "They're not going to appreciate their car because they didn't work for it, they just kind of got it." . . . Another European American young man who was given his grandfather's relatively new Jeep Grand Cherokee (because he was no longer able to drive it himself) offered,

I find it kind of funny when you know someone who like got a brand new car, Amanda Wilton, and totaled it. Then, like, her mom gets her a brand new car, I mean you know, it's fine because, that's what her mom chose to do and everything but I, I don't, maybe she'll get the impression that cars can be, you know just tossed away and you'll get a new one for free.

Countering prevailing perceptions of teens as irresponsible and immature, this young man adopts an "adult" attitude that assumes that there is something to be learned through buying a car, whether that is the value of money or hard work. Different [values] get knotted as this young man struggles to resolve the contradictions inherent in buying a teenage child a high priced luxury car. Debating the freedom of (parental) choice, a high premium value in American culture on one hand, and a parent shamelessly indulging a child's every want on the other, also reveals some . . . cultural contradictions . . . namely, the opposing American ideals of deferred gratification and conspicuous consumption that inflect how kids (and parents) make sense not just of this cultural object but of work to articulate their own parental values, their values around having "stuff," and their desire to display their class membership through this status-conferring object.

Whereas some parents were willing and able to buy a car for their young adult child, other parents expect their kids to also contribute. "They were paying the payments under their name and I was paying them cash every month for my car. I would pay like \$200 and it was like \$350 so they would like pay [the remaining amount], you know what I mean," one European American young woman who was given a new Volkswagen Jetta explained. The ability to financially contribute was often critical to the move toward purchasing a car and was generally seen by young adults as a sign of their growing maturity and movement into adulthood. For this South Asian young woman, her ability to cover monthly payments was seen as a key negotiating strategy, enabling her to cleverly persuade her father to agree to the car.

I was like, I think I have enough money where if you guys put the down payment maybe I could make the monthly payments, you know. And then they were just like, hmmm, we'll see, we'll see, don't worry about it . . . coming around. So I used that as an excuse. I was like, come on you know and then I think either my brother got a raise or something, something happened where he, I asked him to help me out. So then we came up with a plan, okay if my dad put the down payment then we would both pay half of the monthly. And so but they were still kind of like, yeah we'll see, we'll see and then my dad got a new car so I kind of laid a guilt trip on him. I was like, well you got a car and my sister got a car when she went to State, so did my brother and now I'm starting and my birthday's coming up, you know that kind of a thing and so they ended up getting me a car and now I have to pay half the monthly installments.

Although some parents partly or fully finance the cost of buying a new or used car for their child, it is often with the expectation that the child will contribute to other car-related expenses. Expenses related to traffic violations,

such as car accidents or speeding tickets, insurance payments or surcharges, gas, and repairs were commonly seen as the responsibility of the young adult child. One young woman was given a gas allowance with the understanding that if she exceeded the allowance, she had to pay for it. Although one could argue that these are lessons in financial responsibility for young adults, and no doubt they are, one also can argue that this is also about parental control and monitoring. Parents indirectly, although perhaps not always effectively, are able to exercise control over their kids, regulating and monitoring their whereabouts and how they spend their own money. This is because kids must often find part-time employment to cover these expenses, consuming much of their free time outside of school; the money they generate from these jobs often goes directly to cover these costs rather than being spent on other items or activities.

Because parents play such a meaningful financial role in purchasing and maintaining their young adult child's car, the car often is used as a means of control by many parents. The loss of car privileges is common among teen drivers, often resulting from activities and behaviors entirely unrelated to driving. "My dad's actually gonna give me a car this summer but I can't drive it until next year cause I kind of got in trouble," one young woman explained in a focus group interview. Referring to the car, Andrea, a European American young woman, offers,

AR: It was basically kind of like held over my head a lot, you clean your room or you don't get the car this weekend. Always, you know, the car was always taken away if I didn't do what they wanted.

AB: Did you lose your car a lot?

AR: Yeah. I was pretty good but my dad was big on keeping the car clean, keeping your room clean, it was mostly household chores, it was a way to get me to do things and I didn't do them all the time so I would get my car taken away a lot.

This strategy of control was especially common for parents who partially and fully financed cars for their kids. It is interesting that those kids whose parents did not buy them a car rarely mentioned the use of the car as a resource of parental control. I interpret this particular strategy of control as a class-based strategy insofar as only parents with disposable income will be able to finance a car for their kids. For young adults who purchase their own car and pay for their own insurance, parents are less able to use this strategy as a means of control, as was the case for this European American young man, Jay, who fully financed his car, a fully-loaded Mustang GT:

AB: So did your mom help you with?

KA: No. She didn't know about it, she almost disowned me for it actually.

AB: Tell me about that, what happened?

KA: She just didn't think I needed it and I didn't need it but I wanted it and I normally do whatever I want. It sounds weird but I normally don't listen to my mother very much, so. She didn't have any say in what I did really. She just didn't talk to me for a week and then she got over it. . . .

Whereas some parents take the car away as a punishment, parents also use the promise of a car as incentive to cull a desired behavior. "I want to get a sports utility . . . my parents said they would help me buy a new car if I move back in so that's another reason I want to move back into my parents' house," one young Latino explained. Lots of parents use the car as leverage in arguments over performance in school and decisions over future career and educational plans. In fact, some kids even identified their parents' attempts as outward bribes. Consider Mike, for example. Mike, who is Iranian and Filipino, spoke repeatedly about the control his parents exerted over him, although with astonishing resignation. "Yeah they're strict. They're still trying to be strict but I'm kind of like hard to control." In the course of the interview, I

learned that his relationship with his folks had been turbulent in the past. Mike had been kicked out of his parents' house a few times, on one occasion being left with little choice but to live in his car temporarily. Direct attempts to punish Mike rarely worked according to Mike. In a desperate attempt to bring Mike under control, his parents offered to buy him a very expensive car if he agreed to commit himself to his college studies.

They'll probably buy the next car, half of it or most of it. They're talking about getting me a new car, and getting me the one I want if I do well in college. There's the ultimatum. But I'm totally ready for that and I hella want to. Six years of suffering for an Audi s4. It's like a \$41,000 car, that's really nice.

Again, class plays a role here in a few ways. First, given that this strategy requires some degree of financial flexibility on the part of the parents, I argue that this is a strategy of control [that is] used largely (although not exclusively) by middle- and upper-middle-class parents. This particular strategy also seems to be tied to the middle-class value placed on education. . . . [T]hese decisions [also] work to define and construct class for these teens. The fact that parents are able or not able to buy a \$40,000 car for their child reveals something about the economic context of their lives to their children that in turn embeds class . . . in the lives of their children. It is through these decisions that teens come to think of themselves and their families in terms of class. As a status-conferring object, the car serves as a meaningful symbol of class membership and belonging. . . .

* * *

Teens' Care Work:

Sharing Resources, Constructing Family Life

Whereas getting a car and getting a driver's license usually are accompanied by

more time spent away from family as young adult children and parents collaboratively negotiate over gradual gains in freedom, for many youth, getting a driver's license is also accompanied by greater responsibility to various family members and "the family" as an acting unit. Mothers and fathers separately and together often expect that kids take on more responsibilities normally reserved for adult family members. These responsibilities include driving other family members around: younger brothers and sisters to school, grandparents to the doctor, and running errands for the family such as picking up groceries. "I have to pick up the laundry and pick up groceries and stuff," Crystal offered during an interview. Maria, a Latina, explains,

AR: My dad wanted me to take my mom out shopping and take the responsibilities that he didn't want to do anymore.

AB: Did your mom not drive?

AR: She never learned.

AB: So when you had that responsibility what were some of the things that you did?

AR: Oh, just take her to the store, grocery shopping mostly, yeah, doctor's appointments and all that.

Nan, a European American young woman, offered,

AB: Your parents let you drive to school?

HE: Yeah. I dropped my sister, my sister didn't go to the same school as me at that time, she was in junior high, so I would drop her off.

Hortencia, a young Latina whose mother was collecting disability from a work-related injury and whose father was getting "too old" to drive, conceptualized these responsibilities in terms of her duties as a daughter. She offers,

Well, the thing is in my situation I kinda had to learn how to drive. My parents are

older, my mom is like fifty something, 55 and my dad's 66, so they're older and my dad's sick too, and huh, in case of an emergency, I need to know how to drive cause my sisters are way older than me. I'm like 10 years younger than my older sister. So, I'm like really young so I kinda had to learn just in case of an emergency if something happens, you need to learn to get yourself out of a situation or take somebody somewhere.

What is also meaningful to her story is that she had yet to get her license. The driving she did—mostly local driving, running errands, and helping her parents out "in case of an emergency"—was done at a considerable risk. . . .

Often, parents are willing to cover car expenses in exchange for their children providing this family care work. Mike explains,

They paid for everything. They still pay for my insurance. They're covering all that stuff. I just have to pick up my sister here and there. I really don't mind because my sister's like totally cool.

For many parents, the license means greater freedom for them. Ken, another young man, offers,

My mom is glad that I have my license because then she doesn't have to come and pick me up at twelve o'clock and she's not too thrilled about doing that. So, she was counting the days of when I would get my license, I would always say.

The new-found freedom parents experience combined with the need for kids to fulfill these responsibilities often has consequences for the driving rules they establish and enforce for their young adult children. Mena, a South Asian woman, elaborates,

In high school, my parents were very strict so we didn't really get to go out much, so that was another thing about me taking out the car or anything . . . I never had the car when, I was in high school, so he never restricted us and then he, I don't think he had much of a choice

to restrict because when we used to go to college, we had to commute so if he took the car away from us then.

To impose restrictions would mean additional work for this parent. Mike further elaborates,

They really couldn't take their car away from me for a while because of like the fact that my sister needed a ride to school and I was her ride to and from school. It was a necessity for me to be driving so I always pretty much have my car. Maybe if I were to do something really bad they'd take it away for like a week. No big deal. . . .

[Although] teens are primarily seen as economic drains on families rather than as contributors, this research demonstrates that teenagers engage in significant family care work and, in doing so, support family well-being.

The negotiations [in which] parents and their young adult children engage as young adults meaningfully contribute to family life need to be understood within the context of broader social forces and shifts in family. As has been well documented . . . more family members [now] must work to secure a livable family wage (M. Fine & Weis, 1998; Rank, 2001). This is increasingly the case for a larger number of families, particularly those at the lower end of the wage continuum. . . . These families, as they struggle to adapt to changing economic and social circumstances such as declining wages and the subsequent demand for longer hours at work, must often rely on the family care work and wage work their teenage children provide to survive as families. In these family situations, it often makes economic sense to impose fewer driving restrictions and to even contribute a nominal sum to purchasing an inexpensive used car for their young adult children as was the case for a number of interview participants. In doing so, parents are in essence providing the resources so that their young adult

children can more meaningfully contribute to ongoing family life, helping to secure its economic and social well-being.

Middle-class and upper-middle-class parents also rely on their teen children to run errands and shuttle younger siblings around. In fact, one young man with whom I spoke remarked that his parents, his father a successful surgeon and mother a stay-at-home mom, would never dare take his car away, even though they regularly threatened to do so if he did not improve his grades. When I asked why, he said that his mother hates having to run out to the store to get milk when they are out. Recall for a moment Jorge's story told in the beginning of this article about managing the busy schedule required to succeed in high stakes education and the economic and time demands such a schedule requires from the parents of these children. The difference, then, between these family groups seems to be one of material need. The work teens do for those families concentrated on the lower end of the economic ladder is usually not optional. This work often is necessary for their parents to create income, especially because these families are unable to rely on outside sources to care for elderly extended kin or to pay for various car or delivery services, on which middle- and upper-middle-class families increasingly rely (Hertz, 1986). Working poor families often live in communities with families in like economic situations, where all adult family members work and, thus, are unable to benefit from neighborhood carpools that usually require that one parent have enough free time away from work. For upper-middle-class families, buying a car for their teen makes good sense because it results in additional time for the parents to dedicate to work and leisure activities. These parents, then, are less reliant on the family care work completed by their teen children, although they certainly benefit from it.

Conclusion

Studying cars tells us much about how young adults negotiate everyday life. . . . This analysis demonstrates how young men and young women, as they talk about cars, negotiate the perimeters of daily family life. . . . What is clear is that as young men and women articulate their relationships to cars, they are also articulating their own understandings of their connection to the world of family and the public world beyond. Focusing in on the interactional work of parents and their young adult children as they collaboratively negotiate around driving, this article has explored how young adults struggle for freedom from the family setting, while also drawing attention to the demand for greater responsibility to family that arises for these young men and women. . . .

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