
Men Talking About the Environment Discursive Masculinities in Men's Talk About Climate Change and Sustainable Travel

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Abstract

The fact that many everyday actions contribute to climate change is something that individuals may regard in various ways. However, research indicates that individuals' concern and willingness to adapt their everyday life in order to reduce their impact on climate change might be gendered. This chapter investigates linkages between masculinities, femininities and individuals' views on climate change by analyzing focus group conversations with men. The ways that these men made use of or challenged discourses of masculinities when positioning themselves in relation to climate change and sustainable travel are scrutinized. Three diverse discursive practices are found, each one enabling various positioning regarding individuals' responsibility for travelling sustainably. A discourse about men's affection for cars was used as well as challenged by the men. The article contributes with a nuanced understanding of men's reasoning on climate change and sustainable travel. It thus challenges narrow assumptions of men as environmental rogues and masculinity as problematic in relation to environmental issues.

Introduction

Many everyday habits for people in high-income countries such as Sweden contribute to climate change (EPA 2010, 18-26). This fact, and the possible request for altering lifestyles following, may be challenging. This is however, something that individuals regard and deal with in various ways.

The fact that Swedish men's and women's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions appears to differ becomes significant when thinking about individuals' contribution to climate change. Some quantitative studies suggest that differences exist due to gendered travel patterns as well as a difference in self-reported attitudes and the estimated potential to adapt to a more sustainable lifestyle (Carlsson-Kanyama, Linden & Thelander 1999, 357; Polk 2003, 85-94; see also EPA 2009, 5 and 25f). International re-

search reviews comparing men's and women's environmental concern and attitudes suggest similar gendered differences, but since the 'environmental' concept varies depending on whether issues are local or global, these differences are multifaceted (Davidson & Freudenburg 1996, 302-339; Zelezny, Chua et al. 2000, 443-457). Nonetheless, a more recent study of men's and women's environmental concern in China reveals a reversed pattern and implies that the gendered aspects of environmental commitment is both contextual and class dependent (Shields & Zeng 2012, 1 and 5f and 15f) (cf. Bradley 2009).

Besides the established research interest in comparing men's and women's views of and concern about the environment, fewer studies have analyzed men's and women's view of environmental issues as a process of meaning-making. The question is whether theories of gender can bring about an understanding of people's ways of relating to the environment. Or possibly the reversed; can environmental studies serve as an example of exploring how gender affects people also when it comes to themes that are not obviously gendered?

Due to Swedish men's somewhat higher impact on climate change on average, this chapter focuses on men's reasoning. Studying men may enable a more profound understanding of men's interpretations, feelings and ways of positioning in relation to the environment. Having said that, it is also important to look for variations within the category of men in order to challenge the understanding of men as a homogenous group.

The analysis is based on a study of six focus groups interviews with 25 Swedish men. The groups were gathered with the purpose of achieving a variation of positions, experiences and views of climate change and sustainable travelling. The overall purpose of this chapter is thus to investigate how these six groups of Swedish men talk about climate change and sustainable travelling.¹

Masculinities and femininities in environmental studies

Research on gender and the environment initially focused on women's positions and relation to the environment and to 'nature' (Alaimo 1994; Alaimo 2000; Braidotti, Charkiewicz et al. 1994; Domosh & Seager 2001;

Seager 2009). Various ways of turning nature into something feminine was revealed, ranging from a respected mother nature to a wild feminized nature for culture to control (Domosh & Seager 2001, 174-183; Merchant 1989, 1f). Feminist geographer Joni Seager (1993) studied institutes and authorities with influence over environmental politics and claimed that they were dominated by both men and by a masculine culture (Seager 1993, 1-13 and 42f and 164f). Linkages were thus made between men, masculinity and ignorance towards environmental problems.

Rosi Braidotti et al. (1994) have tried to avoid a one-dimensional view of men in relation to the environment, not wanting to 'blame' men for a worldwide ignorance towards the environment. However, Braidotti et al. still maintain that since men occupy such a great political, economic and organizational influence worldwide, the existing world order is masculinized. This masculinized power is also the target of what has to change according to the authors; the environment has to be revalued and estimated as more important (Braidotti, Charkiewicz et al. 1994, 8).

While studies of gender and the environment have challenged its own assumptions and contextualized the gender analyses, the interest of investigating connections between various kinds of masculinities and ignorance of environmental problems partly remains (Alaimo 2009; Seager 2009). The conceptualization of masculinities may however vary. Stacy Alaimo (2009) claims that the Bush administration's political stance towards environmental problems is gendered and linked to a particular configuration of (hyper)masculinity (Alaimo 2009, 26f). What kind of influence this configuration and other masculinities might have in a Swedish context, where discourses of gender equality are more widespread, is worth exploring.

In order to develop an understanding of how relations between masculinities, femininities and environmental concern are shaped in various contexts in Sweden, I consider it fruitful to regard masculinities and femininities as discourses. These discourses are manifold and more or less available for various individuals to use and position themselves into. Furthermore it is reasonable to investigate how men and women use these discourses in conversations about the environment.

The overall aim of this chapter – to explore how various groups of men talk about climate change and sustainable travelling – can then be

developed by the investigation of whether and how discourses of masculinities and femininities are used, recreated or challenged by these men.

Theoretical framework

In order to get a glimpse of how discourses of masculinities and femininities are used, recreated or challenged within conversations among men I make use of concepts and perspectives gathered from research within discursive psychology (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, 7 and 97-108). When people talk, they make use of discourses in order to create meaning and achieving a continuous construction of themselves within a particular situation (Davies & Harré 1990). Using discourses is both an adaptive and creative process. That is, discourses are guiding and directing people's positioning, but also the object of people's recreating and challenging practices (Edley & Wetherell 1997, 204-206).

To describe patterns within the act of positioning and making use of discourses I use the concept of *discursive practices* (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000, 113-115). This means that I am mainly interested in the *use* of discourses as opposed to identifying discourses. I also want to discuss the consequences of certain discursive practices both in the conversation and in relation to whether certain discourses are recreated or challenged (Wetherell & Edley 1999, 352).

The article employs a discursive perspective on masculinities and femininities, which means that a discourse of masculinity or femininity refers to a specific way of constructing men/masculinity or women/femininity.

The social psychologists Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley have studied how men construct themselves as men by using discourses of masculinities within group conversations. Wetherell and Edley start off with the assumption of existing configurations of 'conventional masculinity' and move on to investigate how men position themselves in relation to those configurations. They reveal how men in the study establish *heroic*, *ordinary* and *rebellious* positions in relation to conventional masculinity (Wetherell & Edley 1999; see also Edley 2001).

My analysis is also inspired by queer theorist Judith Halberstam's (Halberstam 1998) and masculinity scholar Marie Nordberg's (Nordberg

2004) critical discussions of the concept of masculinity. Halberstam and Nordberg both question research that take the relationship between male bodies and masculinities for granted. Halberstam suggests the concepts of *female masculinity* and *male femininity* in order to achieving subversive gender studies (Halberstam 1998, 2f and 16 and 29). Nordberg discusses the merits and demerits of Halberstam's contribution and concludes that although the concepts reproduce and preserve the meaning of 'feminine' and 'masculine', they still bring about subversive analytical possibilities. Those possibilities lie in studying how both, men and women, use masculinities and femininities in patriarchal as well as subversive ways (Nordberg 2004, 53f and 62f).

Since the gender topic was seldomly made explicit within the focus group conversations, the analysis in this chapter is based on how discourses of masculinities and femininities have been demonstrated in other contexts elsewhere. Consequently, the analyses will take results from previous research as starting points and investigate whether those results can make the positioning of these informants explicable.²

Methodology

The focus group method may disclose how various themes are constructed and managed within a group conversation. The focus group is a situation characterized by social negotiations and self-presentations, both of them produced within and adapted to a particular context. This makes focus groups suitable for exploring how people use discourses in order to position themselves in relation to a certain topic. The discourses used within each group will reflect specific group circumstances but also reflect, recreate or challenge discourses that can be found within other societal contexts and conversations (Hydén & Bülow 2003, 308; Kitzinger 1994, 116; Smithson 2000; cf. Bergnéhr 2008; Wibeck 2010, 24).

The selection of groups in this study strived to include informants that could take on varying positions in relation to climate change and sustainable travelling. In order to achieve this, variations with respect to experiences, life situation, age, occupation, educational level, travel habits

and level of engagement in environmental issues were searched for. At the same time, the level of variation in a study like this is naturally limited. Besides variation, certain topics³ from the field of masculinity studies guided the selection of informants, since these topics might awake discourses of masculinities. In addition, people thought to have reasons to reflect over the themes in question were of interest.⁴

All focus groups were united by a common denominator for the sake of creating a friendly environment and encouraging people to share their thoughts with each other (Wibeck 2010, 63f). In retrospect, certain groups may be perceived as unusual. At the same time, studies of precursors may be of special interest and disclose paths for social change.

In total, 25 Swedish men aged 26-65 years were included in the study. The focus groups were conducted in 2009 and 2010 in two medium-sized Swedish cities and two big cities. Beforehand the informants were told that the study focused on what various men think about the environment in relation to travelling. The conversations were unstructured and recorded. The initial questions, however, were the same: "Do you consider the environmental implications of your travelling?" and "What do you think about this?"⁵

After transcription, each interview was analyzed and coded. The coding was characterized by a search for patterns of interest for the study's focus on masculinities and femininities, positioning in relation to climate change and sustainable travelling. The men's way of presenting themselves and relating to each other was explored. Eventually, when I searched for patterns across groups, I found three categories of discursive practices, in which assumptions, arguments and attitudes were similar. These practices are partly a result of group selection. Nevertheless, I also consider it to be likely that they resemble, recreate or challenge discursive practices performed elsewhere in other conversations.

The three discursive practices have been named after a main assumption that characterized them. They are called *Freedom from liability and powerlessness*, *Car criticism* and *Responsibility and environmentalism*. I am now going to introduce each one separately.

Freedom from liability and powerlessness

This discursive practice characterized two focus groups' conversations. Both groups had in common that they were frequent drivers. Several of these men were also politically engaged and/or trade union representatives. The two groups differed in age; in one group the men were between 37 and 55, in the other they were between 55 and 65 years old. The men in the 'younger' group worked within so called 'male working-class' occupations. In the 'older' group, some men had retired. They had occupational backgrounds, or still worked, in the care sector, as craftsmen or engineers. They all lived in a middle-sized town.

The men in these groups expressed reluctance towards considering the environmental aspects of their travelling. For instance they claimed that travelling sustainably was incompatible with their income, their travel needs or simply their travelling preferences such as not enjoying cycling. In one of the groups, both, the actual existence of climate change as well as the importance of environmental issues compared to other political issues, were questioned.

A discursive space that enabled critical positioning towards the importance of climate change in their everyday life was created. The idea itself was sometimes depicted as absurd. At the same time, resignation and distrust characterized talk about those who "were supposed to" take responsibility for the environment. Those were politicians and planners.

Örjan: *It's actually crazy... Buses are supposed to be environmental.*

Sven: *Yes.*

Örjan: *And then they're building lots of multistory car parks in town.*

Bo: *Mm, mm.*

Örjan: *That folks are suppose drive to.*

Örjan and Bo came to an understanding of how unwise several tendencies in society were from an environmental perspective. Decisions from politicians were described as irrational, irresponsible and sometimes as expressions of hypocrisy. Altogether, this made climate change appear as un-

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manageable, especially for themselves as individuals. They ascribed themselves no ability to influence neither the process nor the outcome. Hand-in-hand with the critique of the societal handling of climate change was thus the construction of powerlessness characterizing their individual positions. Actions aiming for individual responsibility, such as lowering your energy consumption, were depicted as ridiculous and pointless. Furthermore, these men positioned themselves as being politically critical towards the idea that individuals should take responsibility for travelling sustainably or reducing their carbon dioxide emissions. Travelling sustainably should not be something that some people could afford and some could not. Related to this, these men positioned themselves as working-class people supporting working-class interests.

Instead of ascribing responsibility to individuals, a structural responsibility was embraced. Politicians and planners should do more in order to reduce emissions and facilitate for people to travel sustainably. Simultaneously, they were themselves depicted as free from liability. This freedom from liability as well as the powerlessness that was part of it, enabled for these men to talk about their own vacations, their driving habits and, in some cases, their reluctance to travelling by train, as understandable. Sten's reasoning exemplifies this:

Sten: *I feel like, well why shouldn't I have the right to take that vacation flight sometime or if I'm flying to visit the kids...*

Bo: *Mm.*

Sten: *I mean, if they can go ... to Brussels and move that office between those cities there*

Bo: *Mm.*

Sten: *and not consider the environment, then I'm entitled to visit my kids and take a vacation trip sometime.*

Sten ascribed responsibility to politicians in the European Union and used that to justify his own travelling abroad. Noteworthy is also how he explained his flying. He mentioned his children as the reason to "take that vacation flight sometime". This, and "sometime", helped him to

depict his flying as justified and unusual. Naming children as a reason for travelling unsustainably is something that took place in both these groups. Compared to the importance of seeing your children, travelling sustainably was depicted as irrelevant. At the same time, implicitly, a discourse about the importance of being a committed and care giving father was brought to the fore (Hagström 1999; Klinth & Johansson 2010; Nordberg 2007; Olsen 2007). This discourse was thus used in a way that legitimized unsustainable travelling.

Car criticism

Two other focus group conversations were dominated by a discursive practice that included questioning routine driving yet not positioning themselves as environmentalists. The three men in one of the groups all had an interest in cycling. They were between 26 and 35, lived in a big city and depicted the bicycle to be the best way of travelling in their hometown. These men worked as teachers or with software engineering. The men in the other group were gathered due to their membership in car pools. These five men were between 30 and 63 years old and lived in a middle-sized city. They ran their own businesses, worked as architects or at high positions within the industry.

Samuel was in the group of cyclists. He had no driving license and positioned himself as being critical towards cars for many reasons.

Samuel: *This winter ... I went by bike to work all winter even in snow and everything and when the snow level reached its peak, you could pass the cars since they couldn't*

John: *Mm.*

Samuel: *get through.*

/ ... /

Samuel: *And then you can question who is the... What is the most practical mode of transport then?*

Within these conversations, discourses depicting cars as indispensable were questioned. On the contrary, the car was constructed as uneconomical, impractical and as bringing on laziness. It was also depicted as a violent, noisy and unnecessarily slow way of moving in a crowded city. These men thus positioned themselves within a discursive practice of car criticism (cf. Böhm, Jones et al. 2006, 3-15).

Compared to positioning themselves within the discursive practice of Freedom from liability and powerlessness, these men distanced themselves from the car-oriented lifestyles that were made valid and defensible within that discursive practice. Instead of depicting themselves as powerless within a flawed traffic and societal system, these men portrayed themselves as norm breakers. They positioned themselves as having seen through something that others had missed. In addition, they had found a way of managing without a car of their own, whether that was by using bicycles or car pools. They had successfully followed their ambition through. This enabled them to depict themselves as energetic and independent.

When Wetherell and Edley (1999) studied men's positioning in relation to masculinity ideals they found that a recurrent positioning was to ascribe themselves a rebellious position. By depicting themselves as unconventional compared to assumed expectations of men, these men appeared as autonomous and independent (Wetherell & Edley 1999, 347-350). Their positioning within the discursive practice of car criticism did in a similar way include the challenging of expectations and framing of oneself as a precursor. Fredrik, for example, talked about how he tried to convince friends and colleagues that car owning was irrational and uneconomical. In addition, he pointed out that he himself had never nurtured a longing for a car.

However the experience of being different due to not owning a car was not always depicted as positive. Indeed, Gunnar pointed out that his colleagues had now begun to understand that he was a pioneer. Peter, however, regretted the fact that his children did not have the same transport facilities as their friends. Samuel described difficulties in encounters with colleagues when transportation came up. His own interpretation of the situation was that he might be perceived as a critic towards their way of living.

In contrast to the embracing of car criticism, these men positioned themselves with ambivalence in relation to sustainable travelling and environmental issues. Tobias explained his ambivalence as related to the environmental movement:

Tobias: Many people... in the environmental movement has been so ... deviant from ... well, average Swede, style, so ... I realize that I have a hard time ... identifying with ... the, so to speak, representatives of the ... movement ... Although I do think and have thought for a long time that ... we must take care of our planet.

Tobias later explained that he also associated the environmental movement with “some kind of fundamentalism” that did not appeal to him. This way of positioning himself as car critical but still not as an engaged environmentalist was typical within this discursive practice. Instead, engagement and passion was ascribed the alternative way of travelling (bicycling or using a car pool). The bicycle was constructed as an amazing vehicle; it was simple, functional, available to everyone and resource-efficient. Bicycling to work made you alert and kept laziness away. Samuel even insinuated that bicycling might make him a better person, saving himself from becoming an irritated man in a car.

However, the sustainable way of travelling in the hometown did not keep these men out of airplanes. Although, some of them expressed a feeling of guilt related to foreign travel the criticism directed at motorism was not corresponded by criticism towards unsustainable travelling in general. Fredrik positioned himself within a discourse pointing out young people as being inclined to travel and thus foreign travelling as something normal and expected from him as being part of that generation (Elsrud 2004, 24f).

To sum up, commitment for sustainable travelling within the discursive practice of car criticism was built upon passion, but not passion about the environment. Consequently, travelling sustainably was not desirable any more when the passion was not there. The idea of staying at home instead of frequently visiting other countries was not depicted as passionate or desirable at all.

Responsibility and environmentalism

In two focus groups, interviewees' positioning was characterized by assumptions of responsibility and environmentalism. One of the groups was quite heterogeneous since it included men engaged in environmental advocacy organizations or working with environmental issues as well as men engaged in a lobby organization on cars and traffic issues. These five men lived in a middle-sized city and were between 33 and 65 years old. The other group included three men who recently became fathers. They lived in a big city, were between 30 and 44 years old and worked as consultants or civil servants.⁶

Within this discursive practice, men ascribed themselves a great amount of individual responsibility for adapting their daily lives in accordance with reducing their environmental impact. This often meant appearing as both knowledgeable and consistent. It appeared as important to fully understand the societal aspects and challenges related to climate change and sustainable travel. But it could also imply an understanding of specific circumstances, such as expressing knowledge about carbon compounds and the chemical aspects of climate change or the production of natural gas. Some men depicted themselves as visionary when it came to how individuals or society should tackle the task of being eco-friendly. The visions ranged from structural economic changes to vacation habits or changed ideals in life. A positioning within this discursive practice thus demanded knowledge and insight into a number of related issues.

The men within this discursive practice established a direct link between having understood that climate change exists and taking responsibility for one's actions. For Markus, taking environmental responsibility was related to being "a good person". Niklas emphasized the interconnected relationship between himself and society and the importance for him to take responsibility for what was caused by his actions. Furthermore, he constructed his engagement as a challenging project:

Niklas: *...it's not just transportation but it's everything I put my money into, so I want to spend the money I earn on something that I can support and*

take responsibility for. It's a project, and as with each one of these projects that makes you think, it's fun.

Niklas depicted climate change as a challenging task and thus ascribed himself a similar passion as the men positioning themselves in line with the discursive practice of *car criticism*. The men positioning themselves in line with the discursive practice of *Responsibility and environmentalism* generally ascribed themselves the potential of being part of a solution for climate change problems. Compared to the men mentioned earlier, who depicted themselves as powerless, these men ascribed themselves influence, intellectual capacity and perhaps a potential of inspiring other people. By depicting themselves as leaders when it came to handling climate change and travelling sustainably they also assumed influence in society.

To some extent there is once again a similarity with the rebellious positions that Wetherell and Edley (1999) found in men's positioning. The men presented themselves as bold challengers of the surrounding society. They depicted themselves as visionary leaders, knowledgeable experts and engaged environmentalists. Therefore, I also find similarities with the heroic positions Wetherell and Edley (1999) found in their study. These men associate masculinity with accepting challenges, feeling confident and performing well in stressed situations. Wetherell and Edley assert that there is a self-glorifying element within this positioning since it creates a connection between oneself and a heroic male person (Wetherell & Edley 1999, 340-342). An important difference between this study and the one mentioned above is that these men not at all described their environmental commitment as something masculine. Rather did the conversation about climate change and sustainable travel enable a context in which these men came to position themselves in heroic ways, depicting themselves as some kind of environmental leaders or heroes.

However, the environmental hero was not depicted as particularly admired. On the contrary, these men positioned themselves as being perceived as problematic in certain situations by other people. They also emphasized the risk of going 'too far' in their environmental commitment. Karl for example assured that he did not always prioritize his

ambition not to fly; he could make exceptions due to the circumstances. It became clear that these men described their commitment, knowledge and consistency as somewhat unwanted by other people. The environmental hero was thus not accepted as a hero by his entourage.

The use of transportation masculinities

Previous studies of men and cars have sometimes portrayed the relationship between men and cars as close and caring (Landström 2006; Mellström 2003 and 2004). In this study I suggest that men used this discourse about men's love for cars. The discourse was used in three different ways in this study. The first way was to use it as a way of legitimizing the choice of driving. The discursive practice of *Freedom from liability and powerlessness* included positioning that emphasized the joy of driving which was enforced by the discourse about men's love for cars, giving these men less to explain and depicting them as men who like to drive or men with emotional bonds to cars.

The second way of using the discourse about men's love for cars was to challenge it and accordingly construct another position for oneself. This happened when some men ascribed themselves strong feelings for another vehicle, the bicycle. The bicycle was constructed as the 'new car' in the sense that it came to represent true freedom and autonomy, among other things (cf. Fincham 2006). Irrespective of the sustainable aspects of this discursive use, one might also interpret this positioning as sustaining another, only just slightly different discourse, about men's love for technological artifacts or transportation vehicles (see e.g. Mellström 2003; Mellström 2004).

The third way of using the discourse about men's love for cars was another way of challenging it, this time perhaps more thoroughly. This happened when men depicted themselves as deviant from other men (and sometimes women) in their lack of a longing for a car. A similar positioning was also done in relation to the environment. Elderly men then got to represent a lack of environmental concern and at the same time as men to distance oneself from. Men's distancing from other men has been acknowledged before within masculinity studies and interpreted

as a way of constructing a desirable masculine position for oneself (Nordberg 2005, 242-247). Looking at the findings above, my contribution to this discussion is to show how an example of such distance was established in relation to the discourse about men's feelings for cars or the discourse about men as environmental rouges.

Discourses of masculinity, femininity and environmental concern

In contradiction to some previous studies linking environmental concern to women or to some configurations of femininity (Davidson & Freudenburg 1996; Domosh & Seager 2001; Polk 2003; Zelezny, Chua et al. 2000), such discursive linkage was not recreated in this study. However, there was a linkage created between men and environmental neglect (cf. Alaimo 2009), which was, however, only used by men in ways that depicted themselves as different.

This chapter has exemplified how the relationships between masculinities and environmental concern are conflicting and manifold and has therefore contributed to nuanced notions of the relationship between men, masculinities and environmental concern or ignorance. The chapter has shown the multiple possibilities for men to engage in environmentalism. Among other things, environmentally engaged men were able to position themselves as knowledgeable leaders. Car critical men could depict themselves as courageous pioneers. In addition, discursive linkages between masculinities and environmental ignorance were used as something to distance oneself from in order to create new positions as environmentally friendly men.

Notes

- ¹ This chapter is based on the article "Män pratar miljö. Diskursiva maskuliniteter i mäns samtal om klimatförändringar och miljövänliga resor" published in *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, 2011, 4: 109-137.
- ² The fact that previous research stems from different conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity might be problematic. I address this difficulty by regard-

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ing previous research as discursive statements and discussing their knowledge claims in relation to my empiric material and conclusions.

- 3 One topic emanating from masculinity studies was the car (see e.g.; Landström 2006; Mellström 2003, 2004; Wajcman 1991), which resulted in both, car owners and people without a car, having been included in the study. Another topic was the identity as father (see e.g. Bekkengen 2002; Hagström 1999) which resulted in a group of men who recently became fathers.
- 4 This ambition further supported the choice of fathers since the presence of children might change the experience of travelling and/or traffic. Furthermore it supported the choice of including people living and travelling without a car since that experience might awake reflections when being positioned as non-driver in a traffic system often prioritizing the car (Böhm, Jones et al. 2006; Falkemark 2006).
- 5 The focus group interviews were conducted in Swedish. Quotations and questions are translated by the author.
- 6 I lack the information about the occupation on one of these men. Positionings within this conversation oscillated between this discursive practice and the discursive practice of car criticism.

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