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Home from home?: a research note on recreational caravanning

Dale Southerton, Elizabeth Shove, Alan Warde, Rosemary Deem

(Alan Warde is now at the University of Manchester) July 1998

The paper is based on a small exploratory study of recreational caravanning in the North West of England. This research suggests that the uniformity of the key material object involved - the caravan - belies the variety found in the commercial provision of services and sites and the orientations and purposes of caravan users and owners. The paper examines differences between sites and site owners and develops a typology of caravanning practice. It is argued that these distinctions arise from responses to a series of constraints deriving from particular material cultures and patterns of site and service provision. These constraints give rise to a number of practical or value dilemmas which confront all caravanners, but which are resolved in different fashion by different sub-groups. While to the uninitiated caravanning may appear a homogeneous and mundane activity, deeper scrutiny reveals an internally differentiated set of cultural ideas, values and practices related to wider patterns of social life.

1 Introduction

In the UK, more than 60 million holiday nights are spent in caravans each year, making it the most popular form of holiday accommodation after staying with friends and relatives. These nights are spent in some 520,000 touring caravans and 330,000 statics, excluding those



which are used as a "main residence" (National Caravan Council 1995). Yet we know relatively little about who uses these caravans, why they choose caravanning rather than hotels or bed and breakfasts, nor just what recreational caravanning involves.

To non-caravanners, planners and environmentalists, caravanners represent a uniformly problematic population crawling along country lanes and despoiling areas of outstanding natural beauty with row after row of standardised white boxes. Though models are updated annually, and though there are some differences across the price range, caravans are remarkably similar in style, design and manufacture. Yet caravanners are quick to mark themselves off both socially and culturally from their fellow travellers. To those involved, the world of caravanning is marked by finely tuned and quite precisely calibrated forms of social differentiation.

This paper examines how such a uniformly standardised object, the caravan, might become the vehicle for a variety of meanings, interpretations and practices. In exploring this question, we acknowledge that the experience of caravanning is not simply defined and constituted by the caravan as a stand-alone object in its own right. Much depends on the way in which it is used and on the contexts into which it is situated and positioned.

This is of practical as well as theoretical importance for caravans quite literally require a site. The combination of site and caravan together permits a whole range of possibilities, allowing users to choose between a rural experience, a sea-side trip, a "basic" lifestyle or one combining luxury and economy - all within the framework of the same white shell. This prompts us to consider the variety of sites on offer and to reflect on site owners' own analyses of the range of caravanning types for whom they cater. In taking this approach we examine the combination of critical elements, the van, the site and the enterprise of caravanning, which together constitute the practice. For the uniformity of the caravan itself does not restrict its use in either highly sociable or highly privatised ways. Equally, caravanning can constitute an activity in its own right or it can be a base from which other leisure interests like walking or sailing are pursued.

Whatever their divergent ambitions and purposes, caravanners are nonetheless presented with a range of common dilemmas. We suggest that it is the way in which these are addressed and resolved that provides a further, finer grained, system of social distinction within the caravanning world. In other words, it is the way that caravanning is done, and the positions taken with respect to the valuing of novelty or routine; security and anxiety; privacy and sociability which caravanners refer to in distinguishing between themselves and others.

Though focused on caravanning, this discussion is of wider relevance for the understanding of how standardised consumer objects are appropriated and given meaning. In this case, as in others, the caravan - as the primary object of investigation - can only be understood in terms of the way it is used. The possibilities of use are themselves structured both by the physical characteristics of the caravan, and by the contexts and sites in which it is situated. More than that, the practices of caravanning reflect the multiplicity of ways in which people deal with a series of challenges distinctively and inevitably associated with life in a standardised white box. Again the more general message is that similar objects can be used in different ways. Such possibilities are nonetheless ordered, and it is by reflecting on their own and others responses to these situations that caravanners and other consumers mark themselves off from each other.

The paper draws on preliminary research examining the recreational use of caravans. The study was carried out in the summer of 1996 in North West England and involved a small number of unstructured interviews with caravan users (contacted through impromptu visits to sites, followed by snowballing), site owners and caravan manufacturers. We also examined caravan manufacturers' brochures and other caravanning literature and conducted observational field work at several caravan sites and retail stores. The research was intended to be exploratory and we make no claims for its empirical generalisability. What we do suggest is that some of the issues raised by our data offer considerable potential for further theoretical analysis and empirical investigation.



2. Uniform objects, differentiated practices.

The only fundamental distinction between caravans, as objects, is between the static holiday home and the smaller touring caravan, though other minor differences relate to size, price and interior fittings. To outsiders, caravanners are attributed a common identity, occupants appearing as homogeneous as the caravan itself. A superficial understanding might suggest that caravanning is simply a mundane study of tourism. However, that would be to misunderstand recreational caravanning as a cultural practice for it encompasses several social worlds, where the caravan may play a large or an incidental part, and where leisure routines are often closely linked to domestic provisioning.

Interviews with caravanners led us to identify four broad types of participants. The four types were, firstly the 'family fun seekers', who often rent static vans for a fixed holiday period, frequently at the seaside, their main interest being a high level of entertainment on or off site. For such people, usually in household groups including children, the caravan is little more than a cheap way to have a British family holiday, in which "you know what you're getting" (female interviewee), at a relatively low cost. The second group, 'activity seeking tourers', whose use of touring caravans is largely secondary to the pursuit of other sport or leisure activities, admit that they do not "usually mix" with other caravanners (female interviewee). Third, the 'private relaxers' are caravanners who have their own static or touring caravan but who do not seek high levels of entertainment, sociality or other leisure/sport activities. One such male caravanner commented that "we only want the basics [not] flashy showers ... a quiet site [where] people keep themselves to themselves, without kids that are allowed to run riot". Finally there is 'the enthusiast' immersed in touring caravan culture, who attends regular meets and rallies and socialises extensively with other caravan enthusiasts. One male enthusiast claimed that the sociability found at a 'meet', can be "likened to the old terraced houses community spirit", as everyone's door is always open. It is this sense of imaginative communalism that leads some enthusiasts to claim that they are "responsible New Age Travellers", with the caravan providing a base for communalism and getting "back to nature" (male interviewee).

The typology was endorsed by those we interviewed, many of whom were at pains to differentiate themselves from other types of caravanners. Whilst the family fun seekers have little investment in caravanning as an activity, they do have opinions about others, particularly the privatised caravanners who they believe look down on them and are "a bit uppity" (female interviewee). Indeed it is the family fun-seeking caravanner who are least liked by the private relaxer group. One of the latter described the children of privatised group as being: "you know, brought up properly, polite, not cheeky or playing around under your caravan, causing trouble" (female interviewee). Another (male) suggested that "Butlins type" fun seeker caravan sites are full of "drunks ... (who) ... walk home at all hours", which is exactly why he does not like "them kind of places". By contrast, the enthusiast has most at stake when self-identity as a "real caravanner" (male interviewee) is threatened by the other groups failing to appreciate that the 'true' meaning of the practice involves sociability and the outdoors.

Some of the principal defining characteristics of each type of caravanner are listed in Figure 1. We recognise that not all caravanners will fit neatly into these categories but nevertheless suggest that this typology is useful in alerting us to the different forms of consumption, life-style and socio-cultural use of space which caravanning involves. The typology points to the social worlds of caravanners in which the use of a caravan and the associated practices perform the dual function of both binding together and differentiating sub-groups, all of whom fall under the umbrella term 'caravanners'.

Figure 1 about here

3. Means of differentiation

Despite their contrasting aspirations, all four types find themselves inhabiting remarkably similar spaces. While caravans are not literally identical, they are certainly alike in interior design and appearance and in the sorts of facilities they provide, even though manufacturers try to convey a much greater sense of differentiation. As discussion of the typology of



caravanners has already suggested, it is the combination of caravan, site and its use, not the caravan itself, which makes the difference.

In this respect the site is much more than a place to park, particularly since planning regulations in the UK prevent most caravans from being used outside official sites. Guides to camp sites provide an important clue to the full significance of sites as socio-cultural places to be consumed (Urry 1995), for it is here, rather than in the caravan manufacturers' catalogues, that the language of differentiation is really developed. These comprehensive volumes are intended for owner caravanners. For those who wish to rent, alternative brochures are available from tour operators or caravan site owners' organisations. Guides provide extensive analyses of features and qualities, facilitating choice between busy seaside sites with full facilities and entertainment, quiet rural sites with some facilities, and sites with no more than a water tap in a field. It is skilful selection of the right site which makes it possible to have the kind of caravanning experience desired.

Being near the seaside or next to good walking countryside also brings with it a certain geographical imperative. Although location does not strictly determine the style of camping on offer, there is clearly a connection. While the privatised tourers and enthusiasts wind their way along narrow country lanes, the family fun seekers are likely to be literally and metaphorically miles away, enjoying the luxuries of large, organised sites along the coast. In short, the site is important both for its generic qualities and its specific location. But its significance also depends on the way in which it is used.

For those who go touring, moving on is literally part of the experience. For others, stability and familiarity are essential ingredients. By taking a season pitch on a "nice" site, caravanners buy themselves the luxury of being able to return to a favourite spot week-end after week-end. And of course those who own a static caravan are even more strongly tied to their chosen location.

Since sites and the nature of caravanners' commitment to them are central discriminating factors, the ways in which they are owned, developed and managed are all-important. Interviews with local site owners provided us with insights into the diversity of commercial pressures at play and into owners' perceptions of their customers. At its most basic, all that distinguishes a site from the field next door is the label on the gate. Equipped with a tap, a toilet and an appropriate licence, land owners are in a position to sell what amounts to little more than permission for caravanners to park. At the other end of the scale, sites offer almost all that would be expected of a five star hotel. These highly-managed environments include bars, swimming pools, shops, showers, toilets, laundries, mains electricity, piped water and sewerage services, street lighting and more. In making practical decisions about the number of wash basins and showers to provide, what to sell in site shops and whether to have a bar, site owners make implicit and sometimes explicit reference to what 'their' caravanners want.

Among those site owners we interviewed, there was little agreement about what caravanners do want. For example, one site owner argued that there was no point in providing showers and toilets if caravans have all these facilities already. Another claimed that it was precisely the range and cleanliness of the facilities on offer which distinguished his site from others in the area. Choices about how to organise the site presented other dilemmas. The layout of the roads and the positioning of washing facilities, electric hook-up points and street lighting, determine the distribution of caravans and caravanners and hence the distribution of private and shared space. Some sites have grass covered 'emplacements' for each van, screened by hedges or shrubs in the European style, while others provide a so-called 'hard-standing' in which vans are placed close together in a close approximation to a gravelled car park. Certain caravanners may positively appreciate the second-home effect of their own hedged space. Yet this privatisation may also destroy the impression of friendliness and commonality which is an equally central element in the appeal of caravanning to others. Curiously, site owners' decisions about the design and management of their sites were only loosely related to caravanners' views and values. As we discovered, it is the nature of the owner's commercial interest in the business which really makes the difference when it comes to matters of investment and provision. The critical factor here seems to be whether the site is the owner's main business or whether it is a seasonal side line.



Farmers who also run a caravan site are, for the most part, preoccupied with farming. Even if the site represents a significant source of additional income, caravanners are still likely to be seen as a rather special seasonal 'crop'. While the site might be developed incrementally, with additional facilities added over time, the perceived value of this "investment" depends on the specific combination of costs and rewards which site ownership represents in the context of the rest of the farming business. Once things are set up, once the shower block is built, there is little more to do than collect the fees, produce a few leaflets and perhaps buy an entry in an appropriate site guide. Extra money spent on the site is regarded as money wasted, hence farmers' complaints about official bureaucracy and the steady stream of (in their view) petty regulations forcing them to buy new signs, safety equipment and so on. Further improvements are unlikely to increase the number of campers or the rates which can be charged, for farmers know that "their" caravanners come because of the rural location, not because of the quality or standard of the facilities on offer. Like their caravanners, farm-site owners are clear about social markers and campers' tastes, and neither wish for heavier investment. One farmer claimed that he was "glad to see them (caravanners) go at the end of the season", underlining the status of site management as an essentially unwelcome interruption to the real life of the farm.

By contrast, full-time site owners are much more committed to "customer care", devoting real energy to the task of making caravanners "feel at home". Rather than differentiating between types of caravanner in terms of the "trouble" they might cause (as our farmers did), full-time site owners were attuned to the sorts of commercial opportunities each kind of customer represents. Owners of static caravans were, for example, important consumers of electricity, bottled gas, and caravan insurance, as well as food and drink. In this they differed from tourers. In the cases we examined, at least part of the trick was to juggle elements of infrastructure (grass, gravel, hard standing, plastic chain link fences) so as to cater for more than one group on different parts of the same site. Full time site owners' priorities reflect their interest in maintaining (or increasing) the income generated from a plot of land, situated in a particular part of the country, and licensed to accommodate a fixed number of caravans. This does not leave a lot of scope for inventive entrepreneurial activity, but owners can and do manipulate the image and popularity of their site through advertising and/or by improving the facilities on offer. For them, upgrading and promotion represents a real investment, not simply a cost.

The status of the site as a side line or as a main business clearly influences owners' ambitions and priorities as well as their definition of caravanners and their needs. These two commercial environments generate different sorts of provision. Of course this also relates to the generic positioning of a site (as rural, commercial, basic, luxury etc.) and to the even more specific qualities of its exact location. While these features together shape the smallest details of the site itself, such qualities were curiously missing from caravanners' descriptions of their holiday experience. The site was important, usually critically so. But it was only important within a rather broad band of expectation. Beyond that, caravanners seemed to take relatively little note of the finer points of site layout. Yet we have argued that it is the combination of caravan and site which is so crucial to differentiating caravanners from each other. There are two possible explanations for this apparent indifference. One is that the site is so taken-for-granted that it is not mentioned at all. For those owning or renting a static caravan, the site is barely a separate item; in effect it forms part of the totalised context of caravanning. Another possibility is that the site is merely the backdrop to caravanning. Absorbed by their own sense of self sufficiency, touring caravanners also discount the role of site and site owner, though for different reasons. For them, the site is, if not a movable item, then at least something which they can vary at will. Thus there seems relatively little interaction between caravanners and site owners when it comes to defining the finer grained details of design and management. Each seems to get by within a loose but effective framework of generic convention and expectation.

4 Generic constraint and differential practice

Our interviewees, asked to describe the experience of caravanning, mostly referred to topics like freedom, privacy, home-like qualities and daily routine. These themes are partly entailed by the material circumstances of caravanning but they also represent important means by



which to define the symbolic significance of the practice and to classify participants. If, as Bourdieu suggests, classification classifies the classifiers (Bourdieu 1984), reflection on these pivotal themes should allow us to detect something of the orientations of different caravanning practices. From our interviews, we uncovered three strong common dilemmas in participants' descriptions of the attractions and trials of caravanning. These were: the desirable balance between the perpetuation of ordinary domestic daily routines and the imperative to change at least some arrangements upon entry into a potentially liminal zone of holiday-making; the predictable management of feelings of insecurity or anxiety which arise from being in temporary and unfamiliar surroundings; and finally securing a proper balance of privacy or sociability with other people on a site. These form a series of dilemmas which are generic to the practice of caravanning (but also potentially other forms of holiday making), arising from being geographically away from 'home', engaging in recreational activity which requires suspension of at least some routines, and having to use sites on which strangers will also be present.

4.1 routine and liminality: home from home?

The extent to which tourism and holiday-making represent respite from the routines and locations of everyday life and work varies. Much of the literature on tourism indicates the importance of temporary accommodation, offering a respite from the routines and locations of every day life and work, and the possibility of viewing different sights (Krippendorf 1987; Urry 1990; Urry 1992; Kinnaird et al. 1994). Though it is also recognised that tourism and everyday life may not be as strongly differentiated as such definitions suggest (Lash and Urry 1994), there is so far little empirical substantiation of this argument. Caravanning provides an interesting test. Caravans offer temporary accommodation which may be either owner-occupied or rented, and may thus give access to temporary sights and respite from paid work and everyday life. However, the caravanners we interviewed differed with respect to their desire to preserve familiar routines or cast themselves into liminal, out-of-the ordinary circumstances (Shields 1991), even though their excursions too might become routinised.

Caravanning makes possible, and probably encourages, greater continuity with everyday routine than many other kinds of holiday-making. While tourers are literally mobile, those which are mechanically static or located on a single site for a season provide a different type of transformation. In these cases, the caravan provides a kind of substitute second home, enabling the establishment of new domestic habits which, whilst not necessarily replicating those of 'normal' everyday life, may keep intact or reinforce certain kinds of activity and relationships. For example, in practice, the allocation of housework tasks in caravans appears to have strong parallels with those more typical of year-round domestic routines (Hochschild 1989; Wheelock 1990; Gregson and Lowe 1993 & 1994; Sullivan 1996, Morris 1985 & 1995). Housework in the caravan is often highly routinised and regular, not least because of the problems posed by shortage of space and people living in close proximity to each other. However, caravans are also perceived as easier as to manage than a real house. One interviewee commented that it is 'easy to clean a static [caravan], surfaces are easy to wipe down, beds easy to make, bathroom easy to clean' (female interviewee). The miniaturisation of the home itself may be attractive precisely because it really does reduce the scale of domestic work. At the same time, caravanning introduces new domestic tasks. Site observations suggest that collecting water, emptying chemical toilets, and parking, hitching and towing the caravan are tasks usually done by men, whilst cooking (except barbecuing), cleaning and clothes-washing are usually carried out by women. New tasks tend to call forth extensions of established patterns of the domestic division of labour. Eating and cooking are not exceptions.

Touring or static, many caravanners take food with them, at least enough for a few days, often in tinned form for those in mobile vans, or home-frozen for those going to a static van. Self-catering was generally part of the attraction, and could be construed as both "normal" and different. One woman reported that cooking in a caravan was easier than at home because her husband would not eat pre-prepared meals at home, but would accept supermarket convenience meals in the caravan. Some modifications made cooking more fun: sociable experiences of sharing a barbecue may represent desired and welcome breaks from routine domestic food preparation. As documented by research on women's experiences of



holidays taken in respondents' own homes, the holiday 'frame' allows participants to relax and loosen the routines of everyday life (Deem 1996a; Deem 1996b). For enthusiasts, a proper meal in a caravan comprised items like sausages and beans, perhaps betraying a nostalgic attachment to an image of holidays under canvas, again implying that eating in the caravan was symbolically distinct from eating at home.

As these examples suggest, different groups of caravanners resolve the tension between novelty and routine in different ways. Some exhibit an unusual 'fear of flexibility' when deprived of comforting daily routines. Deprived of those symbols of security, the preferred process may be one of transferring everyday life to another site where it is re-played, with only minor variations. However, caravanning can also turn everyday routine into entertainment, a transmutation typically reported by users of self-catering cottages and second homes (Chaplin 1997). The attraction of playing house in this way deserves more attention, but it is clearly different from the way in which enthusiasts construct their caravan sojourns as adventures. But, even for the latter groups, it seems it is primarily the activities associated with caravanning, rather than the modification of domestic routine itself, which sustain the impression of being engaged in a leisure activity.

4.2 security and anxiety

Leaving home behind can lead to the thrill of adventure or to fear of the unknown and unpredictable. Our caravanners tended to position themselves rather differently in this respect, some exhibiting a high degree of confidence about their encounters with the unknown and others a perceptible anxiety about about what might go wrong. One reason for liking caravanning, prominent among reasons for owning a static or touring van, was that the caravan interior was known and did not present any of the threats associated with hotel rooms used by any number of previous occupants: 'the caravan's your own, you know where it's been and who's been in it' (male interviewee). Knowing what you would be facing while away from home minimises many forms of anxiety. This came across through unfavourable comparison with the quality of cheaper accommodation in guest houses and hotels, and particularly with respect to food. Several interviewees disliked foreign holidays, often because they did not trust the food provided. For them, being able to cook what they wanted was important. Self-servicing, for all the extra labour it involves, is therefore seen as a positive virtue, the exchange being worthwhile because it leads to greater independence and less exposure to risk.

More positively, some interviewees valued the control, self-sufficiency, and autonomy which caravanning offered in comparison with other forms of holidaying. Obviating uncertainty and insecurity, circumventing threats from the outside world, avoiding being cheated or rendered vulnerable to events beyond their control, were principal objectives. Freedom was also perceived to exist in the choice of where to take a caravan, the ability to move on at a moment's notice as desired, and independence from the rules and demands or restrictive timetables of hotel regimes. The value of personal self-control, not having any obligations and not having to depend on anyone else, seem to touch something central to the activity of most forms of caravanning, suggesting that it offers a kind of security not found in other sorts of holiday accommodation. Even those for whom unexpected encounters were a pleasure, or who were simply using a caravan because it was a convenient base for other activities, were enthusiastic about the equation between freedom of movement and independence.

The search for control is clearly not just a question of minimising anxieties and avoiding the traps in which other unwary holiday makers are ensnared. Many consumer goods are customised, or singularised by their owners as a means of attributing personalised meanings to impersonally produced and acquired items (Appadurai 1986). Since a caravan contains many of the same items and features as a house, there are opportunities for alteration and improvisation of the mass-produced object to make it into something of a statement of personal identity or taste. In practice, scope for creativity can be applied to little more than furnishing, cups, cushions and ornaments. Beyond that, the next move is to trade the existing caravan in for a new model. Whether or not customisation takes place, its possibility remains, and this may signify potential for further personal investment. However, the major form in which the caravan permits creativity is that when used as the backdrop for



some other activity; the associated activity, but perhaps also the site and its location, 'customises' the sojourn in the caravan.

4.3 privacy and sociability

Themes of independence and self-reliance carry over to daily life on the site itself. This generates another potential source of ambivalence regarding the maintenance of an image of community alongside, and sometimes in tension with, a desire for privacy and non-interference. Framed by the physical layout of the site, the density and proximity of other caravans determines the distance between neighbours.

Irrespective of the way space was allocated, the caravanners we interviewed almost always sought some degree of privacy, and in terms which are not much different to those associated with lower middle class housing estates (Southerton 1995; Southerton 1997). One woman said that while sites are 'the friendliest places in the world', caravanners nevertheless 'keep themselves to themselves', being helpful but not interfering. She met some 'very nice people', but did not socialise with them, rather she had, and clearly preferred, 'nice polite chats'.

Meanwhile, the larger, more formal sites feature strategically placed barbecues, shared use of which created semi-organised occasions for interaction with partial strangers from regimented rows of identical static vans. Other sites, for example those used for rallies, have none of these organising principles. The enthusiasts, the most communitarian of our four types, appeared to make the least effort to cordon off their own space, though they still parked in lines. It is the privatised nature of the actual experience of caravanning which perhaps helps hide social differences and give an impression of equality, of being "like minded people" (female interviewee) at least on the same site. Indeed, it may precisely be the lack of intimate conversation and interaction that allows caravanners to retain an impression of community. Self sufficiency is a central value for all, even the enthusiasts avoided succumbing to relations of mutual dependence.. Excepting the need to use some, usually quite limited, central site facilities, for water, energy and so forth, the impression we gained was one of the congregation of independent household units rather than communal participation.

4.4 solutions to the caravanners' dilemmas

The three dilemmas we have outlined are handled differently by caravanners from the four groups. Some value privacy over sociability, some achieve a sense of security while others remain anxious, some seek to perpetuate routine, others revel in the possibilities of liminality. The point is that not all types of caravanner want the same balance of privacy and sociability, security and relief from anxiety, or domestic routine and holiday liminality.

Within the given constraints, not only do different groups solve their common dilemmas in different ways but they also develop a crude, often stereotypical system for classifying other caravanners. For example, the private relaxer who worried about noisy and ill-disciplined children associated such behaviour with the sites and clientele typical of family fun-seekers. The enthusiasts reserved their greatest contempt for private relaxers who were condemned because of their attachment to the privacy, comforts, and barely modified routines of domestic residential life. Expert caravanners, who are mostly either private relaxers or enthusiasts, scorn the incompetences of the inexperienced who fail to select a good position on a site or lack the appropriate tools for the job. In the process of passing judgment on others, respondents betray their own self-images, classifying themselves as, say, adventurous, capable and gregarious, or as considerate, controlled and independent. This classification goes well beyond caravanning and provides a marker of life style and taste in general (Bourdieu 1984). Prejudicial discourses identify types of practice which are thereby reinforced and reproduced. Orientations to action and responses to dilemmas associated with caravanning thus form a system of social classification and cultural differentiation.

5. Conclusion; the practices of recreational caravanning

In leisure caravanning, the same mass-produced object permits a variety of practices, the use and symbolic significance of the caravan being differentiated irrespective of the homogeneity of the material object itself. What this means is that people are able to make use of the available technology for different cultural purposes. Agents improvise to fit a mass-produced



item into a differentiated, culturally-defined, symbolically significant practice, but in this case not through acting upon the object itself; the degree of singularisation of caravans is very limited suggesting that the modification of the manufactured object is not the source of social differentiation.

If we look for a link between provisioning and the creation of socially differentiated practices, then the site and its location play an important role in ensuring that caravanners obtain an environment or context which is appropriate for their particular practices. But in caravanning, even the site provider has, at best, a conditioning role rather than a determining one. For tourers there is a degree of freedom in selecting between alternative ways of making use of a particular object and its associated infrastructures of application. Indeed, one of the appeals of a touring caravan is the chance or risk involved in making a decision about where to stop, and whether the experience of the place will be worthy of subsequent recollection. The process of selecting a site is in some part rewarding in its own right as an exercise of chance risk, skill and management. But this is not without structure, and as we have seen there are an identifiable set of parameters and dilemmas governing these choices and hence the practices of caravanning.

We suggest that there are limits to the extent that caravanners can differentiate themselves, because of their collective reliance on an infrastructure of provision which constrains and regulates their behaviour. The degree of freedom they describe is therefore partly illusory. They cannot stop anywhere, cannot use just any site or spontaneously adopt patterns of behaviour regardless of the collective norms and formal rules of the location. Caravanners also probably underestimate the way in which they have absorbed and 'voluntarily' reproduce the joint norms of the caravanning communities with which that they associate themselves.

The physical constraints associated with leisure caravanning generate some commonalities of condition among those who participate. As a confined space inhabited with chosen companions, the caravan requires an irreducible level of domestic labour. Moreover, because caravanning involves the occupation of private land, for which the site owner requires a commercial rent, it also entails the sharing of quasi-public space (Martens and Warde 1997) and obedience to a set of rules or conventions governing use of that space. These shared constraints do not lead all types of caravanner to react in the same way. As we have shown, there are significant differences in perception, purpose and use of both site and caravan by different types of caravanner. These differential reactions to the common characteristics of caravanning, inform and generate classifications of practices which permit location of self and others within the social worlds of caravanning.

In the case of caravanners, social differentiation is achieved by and through a play on common ambivalences, which are part of the structure of the practice but also as marked by the social characteristics of the participants. So family fun-seekers have little anxiety, are indifferent to privacy but seek some liminality. Activity seekers seek some privacy but do not feel anxious and try to combine routine (through domestic work in their caravan) with liminality through their chosen activities. Relaxers exhibit preferences for privacy and control, whereas enthusiasts welcome communality and the chance of meeting strangers and fellow enthusiasts. Whether these proclivities are exhibited in other spheres of their lives, for example when at home, is worthy of further exploration.

Finally, caravanning practice corroborates other studies of material culture and leisure behaviour. It is remarkable, given the inherent constraints imposed by the uniformity of the central object, that it comes to be used in such markedly different ways and serves as a basis of meaningful differentiation between social groups. Yet at the same time differential usage concentrates around a comparatively few dimensions, moreover ones which have parallels in other fields of consumption. For example, for some, the caravan is merely useful, a convenience, a means to other ends while for others, it is a source of social commitment, an instrument which confers identity and gives a sense of satisfaction through engagement in a collective practice.

Figure 2 about here

Similar observations might be made about many other items, electronic equipment, automobiles and food, for example, which may be highly symbolically meaningful for some



people but a matter of indifference to others. Caravan usage also parallels other leisure practices in its capacity to serve either very private and personal ends or as a channel for gregarious involvement with other people in public space. The re-classification of our types of caravanner in figure 2 suggests extrapolation to wider fields of consumption behaviour.

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Figures

CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENTIATION	CARAVANNER TYPE			
	FAMILY FUN	ACTIVITY	PRIVATISED	ENTHUSIASTS
SITES	Large, family entertainment park near coastal resort.	Small-mid size, located close to activity site.	Small privately owned, basic but modern facilities.	A field with little/no facilities. Rural location
FORMS OF SOCIABILITY.	Acquaintances with adjacent families.	Sociability based around leisure activity, rather than caravanning itself.	Privatised, little sociability other than "nice polite chats".	Imaginative communalism, sociability key to caravanning experience.
ASSOCIATED PRACTICES.	On site and local resort family entertainment, local popular attractions.	Activity enthusiasms based outside of site.	Practices within the caravan and site, occasional excursions within immediate locality.	Socialising and surviving in a field.
ATTACH-MENT TO CARAVAN.	A temporary holiday base. Low attachment.	Caravan as activity base. Weak attachment.	Caravan as second home. High attachment	Caravan as a comfortable tent. High attachment.
EXTENT OF PERSONALISATION AND CUSTOMISATION OF CARAVAN	None	None, except small modifications to accommodate activity enthusiasm.	Some, particularly in statics. But, customisation not necessary	Minor customisation, object personalised through memories of past caravanning experiences.

Figure 1. A typology of caravanners, organised according to categories of differentiation.

SOCIAL PURPOSE	ORIENTATION TO OBJECT	
	Commitment	Convenience
Private, rational domestic leisure	2	3
Communal, pleasure seeking	1	4

Figure 2: Caravanners and other consumers



KEY:

4. Family fun-seekers. 3. Activity seekers. 2. Private relaxers. 1. Enthusiasts.