

Social Control on Public Buses

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines whether or not social control exists within the seemingly innocuous environment of public buses. Observational data reveal two primary sets of findings that focus on issues of omnipresent social control and environmental discretion. Efforts to ensure that bus rider behavior largely conformed to transit regulations were present throughout the bus environment. Discretion regarding specific behavior, particularly food and drink consumption, was also found to be prevalent. Limitations and directions for future research concerning social control in public space are discussed.

Keywords: social control, public space, public transit, participant observation

Introduction

Over the past two decades, local governments across the United States have fostered new social control efforts aimed at the regulation of public space (Beckett & Herbert, 2008). As an often essential component of daily life, public space seemingly features a multitude of diversities, including variations in social activities and behaviors among individuals. However, recent developments in urban social control have commonly utilized cutting-edge strategies to enforce strict conformity within various public environments, such as off-limits orders and park exclusion laws (Beckett & Herbert, 2010). This renewed interest in public space regulation suggests that there may be no publicly open and accessible environments immune from the municipal expansion of social control.

In this way, burgeoning social control efforts focused on public space throughout cities may be evident in the public transportation experience. Although earlier research has considered social behavior in the transit environment, this study examines a specific type of urban space – the public bus – to explore the presence and prevalence of social control. What, if any, evidence of social control exists within the public bus environment?

This question is addressed through an examination of the public transportation experience on buses in one Midwestern city. Here, the public space of the city bus is an important aspect of everyday life. Many individuals use the public bus system to travel back and forth from their residences to necessary destinations (i.e., school and work). The existence of social control efforts to ensure bus rider conformity to specific behaviors may offer credence to the apparently increasing regulation of public space.

Social Control

For the purposes of this study, social control is defined as the patterns of pressure a society exerts in order to maintain order and established rules (Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1940). As there is limited empirical work on the presence of social control in public space, the

majority of the pertinent literature focuses on social behavior in public transit environments. However, there are a few social psychology studies concerning social control worthy of note.

Dedrick (1978) indicated that there are two scenarios in which bystanders exert significant social control over individuals violating accepted norms. First, more social control will be leveraged against norm violators when they are neutral rather than apologetic. Second, more social control will be exerted when a third person is hostile rather than friendly toward the violator. When individuals, alone with a norm violator, anticipate association with the same norm violator in the future, they are more likely to exert greater social control over the violator (Kiesler, Kiesler, & Pallak, 1967). However, if individuals are not alone with the violator, they are less likely to exert social control when they are committed to future interaction.

In another study (Kiesler, Zanna, & DeSalvo, 1966), individuals committed to continued group membership were more likely to shift toward accepted group norms than those without such commitment. Most recently, Chaurand and Brauer (2008) developed three field studies to examine the factors that impact the tendency among individuals to exert social control over norm violators. Their results suggest that the feeling of responsibility to exert social control, the perceived legitimacy of social control in the situation, and the extent to which bystanders felt hostile emotions were the primary determinants of social control. The application of social norms has also been shown to be important to the identification of deviance (McKirnan, 1980). When general agreement within a social group exists about what a norm means, it is more likely that a behavior violating the specific norm will be considered deviant in the given social group. The question remains then as to whether or not social control will become evident in the public transit environment.

Social Behavior in Transit Environments

Examinations of social behavior within public transit environments are rather sparse and fragmented. The literature largely appears for two decades, vanishes, and surfaces again. Although public buses were the primary sites of this earlier research, additional studies examined passenger behavior on subways and airplanes (Levine, Vinson, & Wood, 1973; Maines, 1977; Zurcher, 1979). The earliest of the bus studies were two sociological papers from the 1960s, which looked at seating patterns and social interactions among passengers (Davis & Levine, 1967; Davis, Seibert, & Breed, 1966). In both of these studies, the researchers recognized that public buses were to be the locations of significant social activity. This suggests that the presence of social control is likely to exist. Nash (1975) developed a typology of individuals present in the public bus environment and their social activities. He described the bus environment as a mobile community characterized by specific regulations and challenges. Waiting for the bus, hailing the bus, and claiming a seat were identified as essential social behaviors to the bus riding experience. Different individuals on the buses (newcomer riders, regular riders, new drivers, and old drivers) formed an active community.

More recent research examining social behavior in public transit environments has utilized participant observation. These studies have focused on how high school students on trains in Sydney, Australia (Symes, 2007), passengers on buses and trains in Britain (Jain, 2009), and railway riders and workers in the United States (Letherby & Reynolds, 2005) both conformed to and resisted the rules of travel behavior. This suggests that social control efforts may exist on public buses. Other studies have considered transit environments outside of transportation vehicles, such as an urban bus station (Henderson, 1975) and the experiences of transit drivers (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 1999; Slosar, 1973).

Because prior research is admittedly limited, participant observation on public buses will provide additional, necessary insight into the social behavior among individuals in the

transit environment. It will allow a richer examination into the public transportation experience, with potential implications for social behavior among transit users. Further, such data may reveal if and how the presence of social control impacts social behavior.

The Present Study

The present study attempts to identify whether or not social control may exist within the seemingly innocuous environment of public buses. Through participant observation as a bus passenger, analytic focus centers on the potential presence of social control, as well as how social control agents and structures may enforce behavior conformity among bus riders. Evidence of social control (or lack thereof) will help identify motivations for social behavior on public buses and promote a greater understanding of the public transportation experience.

Methodology

Data for the present analysis was collected through participant observation while riding three different bus routes through a major Midwestern city. Prior to data collection, the researcher rode each of the three bus routes, surveying the physical and social environment. In this way, the researcher became familiar with the general characteristics of the routes, drivers, and passengers. This opportunity was also used to determine the most suitable vantage point from which to observe bus drivers and bus riders, as well as the most viable locations (bus stops) from which to enter and exit the environment. Following the trial run, the researcher, as complete participant, spent several hours each weekday riding the three divergent bus routes. These differing travel itineraries permitted the researcher to observe a large number of bus drivers and bus passengers. Further, the three bus routes were traveled at various times of day (morning, afternoon, and evening) to increase generalizability.

Data collection occurred in September, October, and November 2011. The estimated time spent riding on each bus route was approximately 15 hours, for a total of 45 hours of observation. The researcher recorded observations of bus drivers, bus riders, and the bus environment by taking periodic field notes (usually every 10 to 15 minutes). After exiting a particular bus route, the researcher immediately sought out a nearby area from which to safely review his notes and elaborate these raw field notes into a more developed set of notes. These developed field notes consist of the primary data for analysis.

Research Settings

Each bus route was markedly different, reaching diverse areas of the city. The first route operated largely within downtown areas, whereas the second route was defined by transportation authorities as a crosstown route that traveled through several recreational parks and suburban neighborhoods. The third route served a university community, as well as large shopping locations.

The buses themselves were fairly uniform. Bus riders entered the bus through a single automated door on the side of the bus, and bus riders would immediately meet the seated bus driver following their entrance. There was always a fare box located here, and bus riders would slide bus tickets or cash fare into the receptacle. Approximately thirty-six seats were potentially available, most typically separated in two columns by an aisleway, with four adjoining seats in the back. Windows existed alongside each row of seats, and a second exit door was often placed in the middle, on the same side as the front entrance door. Metal railings protruding from the ceiling and floor, presumably for standing passengers, were also common within the bus environment.

Findings

Observational data yielded two primary sets of findings that focused on issues of

omnipresent social control and environmental discretion. Actions undertaken by bus drivers and the strategic physical environment within buses represented efforts to ensure that bus rider behavior largely conformed to transit regulations. In addition, discretion regarding specific behavior in the bus environment existed, impacting travel activities among bus riders.

Omnipresent Social Control

Even in the most innocuous of environments, omnipresent social control may exist. This proves to be the case for the public transportation experience on buses, where bus riders are constantly subjected to mechanisms and processes of behavior regulation. Both bus drivers and the bus environment itself function as discernible social control agents and structures, enforcing behavior conformity among bus riders.

Bus drivers are the most obvious agents of social control. Upon entering the bus, individuals find themselves face-to-face with these public transportation gatekeepers. Here, prospective passengers must follow protocol to access the bus environment. Potential bus riders, in order to cross this initial threshold, are expected to produce travel fare in the form of exact monetary currency or authorized passes. Adult cash fare is \$1.50, and monthly travel passes are \$42.00. Students and employees from the local university can also obtain access through university identification cards. Those without such means, however, are rejected by bus drivers, unable to achieve ridership. Two men having insufficient funds were turned away, and one elderly woman without exact change was refused entry to the bus. But for obedient individuals, dropping the appropriate amount of money and brandishing bus passes, admission is likely to be achieved. Money in the form of coins was the most commonly observed method for obtaining access.

Only prospective passengers displaying invalid or expired passes potentially jeopardize their future status as bus riders. Several individuals were witnessed producing expired bus passes, and on each occasion, these would-be riders were told to exit the bus immediately. "You're going to have to get off," instructed one bus driver, as the prospective

passenger showed an apparently expired bus ticket. Other times, bus drivers simply shook his or her head in disapproval, indicating that presented bus passes were invalid or expired. In each scenario, bus drivers relegated prospective passengers with invalid or expired bus passes or tickets away from the bus environment. Most bus drivers, as guardians of public bus access, work to maintain compliance with bus access procedures.

Although most prospective passengers become successfully admitted riders, they continue to encounter drivers throughout the travel experience. Most drivers actively work to monitor riders during their commute. Drivers commonly scan bus occupants through large mirrors, which are often mounted above their heads in such a way as to enable drivers to view the entire bus environment. This surveillance is most common at bus stops and traffic lights. A driver, in her late thirties, constantly used a mirror to watch behind her. The mirror allowed her to direct an elderly man to a specific open seat, and it also permitted her to see children standing and jumping in the aisle. Many riders are aware that drivers are observing them through these mirrors, keeping careful watch over collective behavior. "He's looking at you, to make sure you behave," stated one adult passenger to his younger travel companion. Another female rider was heard talking to her female travel partner about the male driver's seemingly disrespectful gaze through the mirror, suggesting that his steady looks were perceived as invasive and threatening.

When the bus becomes idle, most often at bus stops and traffic lights, it is not unusual for drivers to partially turn around and glance at riders. One driver, in his mid-forties, consistently turned his head to view bus occupants at each bus stop. Although most drivers did not examine riders this way each and every time, it was done frequently among the majority of drivers. However, many riders are also conscientious of this surveillance strategy. These passengers, aware of driver habits to turn around and look at riders, generally refrained from prohibited behavior while the bus was idle. And yet, once the bus was in motion, these riders were more likely to engage in prohibited activities. Several passengers were observed discarding food wrappers and soda cans on the floor during times

when drivers were less likely to monitor them.

Many drivers also regulate ridership behavior along routes through verbal commands. Announcements regarding upcoming bus stops inform riders of the appropriate time to approach door exits. "Third and Broadway! Now calling for Third and Broadway!" is a common type of pronouncement that can be heard. Following such a declaration, riders planning to exit at this specific stop are expected to promptly leave the seats and approach the doors. Another announcement – likely an admonishment – will be delivered to those riders violating this exit etiquette. "If this isn't your stop, sit down!" scolded one driver, after a male passenger decided to get too close to the exit door. The continual presence of watchful and authoritative drivers serves to accomplish rider conformity to established bus behavior.

Besides drivers, buses themselves are strategically outfitted to facilitate the social control of its occupants. Attentive riders will immediately notice the presence of multiple security cameras within the bus environment. Several riders are cognizant of the fact that these monitoring devices exist. "Those cameras," said one elderly passenger, "they never go away." Buses were equipped with at least two conspicuous surveillance cameras, each seemingly focused on one (left or right) side of the bus. However, buses with three or more cameras were also observed. Nonetheless, no matter where riders decide to position themselves, it is impossible to escape the presence of these monitoring devices. Even on evening commutes, strong interior lighting illuminates the entire bus environment, leaving riders sufficiently exposed to the watchful eye of these cameras (and drivers).

Posted notices and warnings also represent social control inside buses. Dispersed throughout the bus environment, but primarily on front and back walls, these signs advise passengers to avoid specific behavior and conduct themselves in certain ways. Numerous announcements, in the form of bright red adhesive signs, border the walls and windows, reminding riders about prohibited behavior. The most common notice found here, typically on the front wall above the bus windshield, indicated that "smoking, eating, drinking,

weapons, alcohol, radios, and disrespectful conduct” were not allowed. Additional signs are sometimes affixed to railings and windows, and they are often much smaller in size. “No smoking” signs and “watch your step” notices were near-universal artifacts within public buses.

Further, the advertisements on the walls of the bus environment are indicative of social control. These public announcements attempt to exert control and order on human behavior. Attorneys, doctors, and other business elites utilize these paid announcements to advance their own interests. Passengers on the bus are often directed to make a telephone call to purportedly obtain legal advice, medical treatment, and job skills. The displayed telephone numbers are specifically designed for easy recollection. “Call 1-800-I-Am-Hurt,” instructed one personal injury attorney’s advertisement. Other advertisements tell riders, in three to five words, to perform a specific activity. “Apply now” and “help kids, volunteer today” were common messages aimed at riders.

Although drivers and the bus environment represent and facilitate social control, riders themselves largely do not exert social control on one another. Most individuals riding the bus are heavily involved in the activities of sleeping, reading, or gazing out the window. It is not unusual to find riders engaged in a novel or studying the world outside the bus. Others spend their travel time intimately with technological devices, such as cell phones and music players. In this way, riders are often oblivious to the behaviors of others. A twenty-something male passenger was observed openly rolling a cigarette, and no riders seemed to notice.

Discretion in the Bus Environment

Where there is social control, discretion typically exists simultaneously. This is true within the bus environment, where discretion also impacts specific passenger behavior. Representing discretion in the bus environment, both drivers and riders exercise choice and make critical decisions about what behaviors and activities are appropriate.

Despite their rigid management of the bus environment, drivers are responsible for

the most prevailing form of discretion. As important gatekeepers of public transportation, drivers are in the position to exercise choice, having the power to select individuals as occupants for bus travel. Although the bus environment explicitly forbids food and drink (and numerous signs instructing riders of such exist throughout the bus), it is not unusual for prospective passengers with such items to become accepted members of the ridership. Many times, individuals having food and drink containers in hand enter the bus and successfully cross the initial threshold. Fast food bags, fast food cups, and soda cans were the most common items accompanying entering passengers. Others actively involved in eating and drinking also frequently achieve status as bus riders. Candy bars and hamburgers were the most commonly observed food items eaten, whereas soda in both cans and bottles were the most frequently witnessed drink items consumed. Further, litter and other debris commonly found on bus floors indicate that driver discretion largely surrounds eating and drinking activities. Food remnants, fast food bags, soda cans, and restaurant napkins are everyday odds and ends left by riders on the bus floor.

Besides drivers as gatekeepers, riders also demonstrate discretion. Riders largely do not participate in the enforcement of conformity. Perhaps the pervasive nature of bus social control renders rider efforts unnecessary. Nonetheless, this collective discretion exercised by riders may explain how the aberrant behavior of some passengers occurs. Although most riders are involved in solitary activities during their commutes, several others were observed playing loud music and discussing their sexual activities with other passengers. One rider talked loudly on his cell phone for over fifteen minutes, and his conversation included an excessive amount of profanity. Still, there was no overt action taken by the other riders. The decision by the majority of riders to avoid social control allows this exceptional behavior to take place.

Discussion

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to identify whether or not social control exists within the seemingly innocuous environment of public buses. By means of participant observation, this research identified that social control and its accompanying agents and structures were actively incorporated into the public transportation experience on buses. Specifically, observational data revealed the presence of omnipresent social control and environmental discretion. Environmental discretion was also found to be prevalent. The results of this study lend support to the existing literature about social control in public space, provide insights into the presence of social control on public buses, and suggest directions for future research.

Evidence from participant observation revealed the presence of omnipresent social control on public buses. Drivers served as social control agents through their bus access procedures and active management of riders, whereas the bus environment itself was designed as a social control structure. Consistent with earlier research, which found that transit drivers have developed special mechanisms for controlling passengers (Slosar, 1973), drivers were the most obvious agents of social control. Drivers acted as gatekeepers to ridership, visually monitored the behavior of riders, and utilized verbal commands to manage rider movements. In addition, the finding of multiple security cameras within the bus environment as evidence of social control is congruent with prior research concerning public surveillance (Slobogin, 2002; Welsh & Farrington, 2009). More research should continue to examine the impact of public surveillance through technology, as these investigations will show its influence on social control efforts. Further, the finding that transit riders were primarily engaged in solitary travel activities is well-documented (Lyons, Jain, & Holley, 2007; Ohmori & Harata, 2008), potentially explaining why riders do not exert social control on other passengers. This collective discretion exercised by riders may also indicate that riders are not committed to ongoing relationships with other riders (Kiesler et al., 1967). More research should consider the collective activity of transit passengers, in

order to more clearly define their relationship to social control within transit environments.

Discretion in the bus environment accounted for another primary set of findings. Drivers were responsible for the most prevailing form of discretion on buses. Consistent with earlier research, which found that people in powerful positions have the ability to exercise discretion (Mastrofski, Ritti, & Hoffmaster, 1987; Munro, 1999), drivers were in the position to exercise choice, as they had the power to select individuals as occupants for bus travel. Although the bus environment seemingly prohibited food and drink, it was not unusual for drivers to allow prospective passengers with such items to become accepted members of the ridership. Future studies should examine whether or not drivers simply regard the presence of food and drink as insignificant violations, discriminatorily allow certain individuals to violate regulations, or act as ineffective social control agents altogether. Riders also demonstrated discretion, as they largely did not participate in the enforcement of conformity. Often times, those without perceived responsibility to exert social control, such as riders in an environment ripe with social control agents and structures, may be reluctant to engage in active norm enforcement (Chaurand & Brauer, 2008). Thus, future studies should look at the perceptions of riders, to assess whether or not such public transit users believe they have the power to respond to deviant behavior.

It is recognized that this research has limitations. Sample selectivity is the concern. Field observation time is limited in duration (45 hours) and represents the public transportation experience from only one Midwestern city. Despite the fact that omnipresent social control and environmental discretion were dominant themes emerging from the data, these findings may or may not apply for public transportation experiences in other communities.

Ultimately, this paper attempted to provide a description of the omnipresent social control and environmental discretion existing on public buses. By understanding the presence of these social forces, jurisdictions may be able to more effectively understand the travel experience of public bus users, as well as their dominant travel behaviors. By

understanding the public transportation experience, jurisdictions can more effectively tailor their efforts toward the refinement of busing services. This may allow the improvement of the public transportation experience.

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