Spring 2014

Power in Transit: Examining the Social Construction of Power in Relation to the Perceptions, Interactions, and Spatial Behavior of Passengers on Public Buses

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Organizational Communication Capstone Project

University of Portland

Spring 2014

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how communication practices socially construct and reflect power dynamics on public buses, focusing exclusively on a bus line that runs through diverse socioeconomic regions of a major metropolitan area. Data from participant observations and qualitative interviews were coded to find patterns pertaining to passengers' notions of power on the bus. Findings show that the decontextualized setting of a public bus muddles the sense-making processes of passengers, and in turn, passengers resort to nearly primal ways of understanding their surroundings, with particular focuses on safety and sex. While different demographics (especially men and women) expressed contrasting sense-making techniques to contend with their muddled understanding of other passengers, most passengers exhibited very similar behaviors—particularly, the avoidance of the unknown. This uncertainty avoidance led to more homogeneity and less nuanced understanding of one another, which continued the cycle beginning with a decontextualized setting. Further implications include the criticism of existing research that frames power as a compartmentalized, stagnant, and universally understood entity, for this study demonstrates how collective understanding of power is often changing, hypothetical, and overlapping, especially in low-context settings. Because low-context settings are ubiquitous in society, this study suggests that power should more often be viewed in this effervescent manner.

Public buses have long been a platform for political and social contention. The most palpable example of this tension dates back to the civil rights movement in the United States, in which Rosa Parks challenged the hegemonic societal systems allowing racial dominance, all of which famously began on a public bus. The civil rights movement drove on with the Montgomery bus boycotts and through the perseverance of the Freedom Riders, social activists who took interstate buses into the segregated South to challenge the region's non-enforcement of a ruling that deemed segregated buses to be unconstitutional. Dr. Martin Luther gave heavy momentum to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and played a critical role in the development of these protests (Selby, 2001).

Of course, this oppression stemming from arbitrary power differences did not end with the actions of Parks and other advocates for change. Much more recently, the issue of income inequality in the United States has reached the public consciousness with the help of people from the "Occupy Wall Street" campaign, whose protests have also occurred in public environments. Realizing we live in a world with social inequalities and systems that do not properly serve people of certain races, socio-economic statuses and more, it becomes apparent that the issue of power—of both perceived and real natures—affects reality.

While subjects of history, journalism and general public discourse may often revolve around the macro-systems in which people of varying levels of privilege interact, there is much to learn from studying micro-systems of a similar makeup. Public transit, particularly lines that geographically encompass areas – and consequentially, people – of highly diverse socioeconomic statuses, provide a ready-made sample that can greatly benefit communication studies research.

The communication of a highly diverse group of people in a public space can create, reflect, and maintain certain status quos—oftentimes, all at once. In the following literature

review, I will explore through the lens of social construction theory what communication research has found about the social structures that emerge when people share space, how ways of taking up space can influence perceptions of power, and how certain communication practices can both create and reflect such perceptions of power.

Theoretical Framework

In order to determine the factors involved in situations where people of various levels of privilege share and interact in a public space, I will look to social construction theory. Communication scholars make two important assumptions regarding the concept of social construction: (1) people make sense of their experiences by simultaneously creating and understanding a model of the social world, and (2) language is the most important tool that people use to construct reality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). In conjunction, language and communication (including nonverbal expression and subsequent interpretation) serve as necessities for the creation of reality. Leeds-Hurwitz most eloquently illustrates that advocates of social construction theory view "social interaction as the loom upon which the social fabric is woven" (2009, p. 892), for social construction theory asserts that people construct their understandings of the world in coordination with others. This process of finding meaning does not happen exclusively within an individual, nor does any particular meaning stand alone objectively in the world. Put simply, whatever exists in the social world does so as a result of the actions and words of people talking and communicating together (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

People develop traditions, norms, and beliefs over time through interactions with each other. Thus, different cultures and social groups who interact in high frequency develop their own distinct understandings of the world. These traditions, norms, and beliefs often become invisible to the conscious mind, for these socially constructed understandings can become taken for granted when customs are so deeply engrained in a particular culture. Leeds-Hurwitz (2009)

points out the example of the social construction of gender norms. Margaret Mead attested in the early 20th century that gender roles did not link to sexual characteristics, yet society constantly communicates—through messages in the media, passed down within families, and more—that women and men are expected to act in distinct ways. In this example, communication about gender expectations results in a very concrete reality in which gender roles are firm and expected in society, and people within society often follow these socially constructed rules.

In the vein of readily accepted (albeit arbitrary) gender roles, social construction theory calls for the researcher to be critical of taken-for-granted assumptions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). The researcher would be remiss if she did not constantly ask questions about occurring phenomena instead of making her own assumptions. The researcher must bring humility to her study and not let her biases influence her account for what is happening. In addition, the researcher should be critical about what other scholars assert, for one of the core concepts to social construction theory is the creation and maintenance of collective knowledge—the researcher must become critical about the sources of these ideas in order to more holistically understand the factors at play in collective sense-making.

Just as individual messages about gender add up to real consequences on a societal level, social construction theory helps us to understand the connection between the micro-level, such as specific words, images, and actions, to macro-processes, such as institutions, structure, and society as a whole. This connection compelled me to utilize social construction theory in the study of common social phenomena on public buses. In understanding that communication in its most subtle forms (e.g. choice of seat, posture, level of interaction with other passengers) not only *reflects* larger beliefs and norms, but *creates* them, I hope to gain meaningful insight into aspects about power, privilege, and human connection from observing and interviewing those who ride a public bus.

Exemplary Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, it is imperative to understand what research has found regarding social construction of communities and power, especially through the use of public space. Although I have not come across any studies regarding these factors in an applied public bus setting, it remains helpful to study these variables individually and in relation to each other to help frame my research. First, I will illustrate how communication practices influence individuals' understanding of their environment and how communication shapes individuals' interpretation of rules and social norms. Secondly, I will discuss how differences in power can influence—or even coerce—these sense-making processes, especially how power mediates people's perception of in-groups/out-groups as well as these groups' perceptions of shared space. Finally, social construction theory will become most clear as I discuss how communication behavior affects individuals' perceptions of power, and simultaneously, how perceptions of power affect the communication behaviors of individuals.

Communication Shapes How Individuals Understand Their Surroundings

Frey, Adelman, Flint and Query (2000) studied the role of communicative practices in the construction of people's perceptions of community. In order to do so, the researchers conducted a longitudinal study in which they distributed a questionnaire to a total of 59 residents at a residential facility for people with AIDS over four time periods spanning two years. The questionnaire explored relationships between residents' perceptions of (a) value of collective communicative practices at the facility, (b) health outcomes associated with living at the residence, and the (c) overall value of living at the residence. Responses showed that communication practices in the residence (such as monthly meetings, support groups, and social events) significantly related to the residents' perceptions that the residence home served as a

community—not merely an institution. Also, the value of communication practices significantly correlated with perceived emotional and physical health benefits. While the findings suggesting emotional benefits of communication rituals are rather intuitive, the result of physical benefits of these rituals is more surprising. The researchers propose a possible explanation that some communication practices, such as social events, may cause the residents to be more active, and in turn, heighten perceived physical benefits.

In this Frey et al. case (2000), the idea that people make sense of their reality through social structures becomes clear. The communicative practices at the AIDS residence facility related to the residents' perception of value and understanding of their environment. While some factors in this case (such as self-reporting, uncertainty of cause-effect from correlative practices, etc.) leave room for ambiguity, the study still provides a solid example of how communication affects internal processes, and how these internal processes lead to external realities, such as a tight community.

Communication Shapes Individual Comprehension Social Norms and Rules

While Frey et al. demonstrated how communication practices influence subjective beliefs and fluid concepts such as community, Cheng and Cheng (2012) show how more objective components of society, such as the law, are also subject to the power of social construction. Cheng and Cheng argue that legal interpretation is a social practice, and making meaning in legal settings happens through social dialogue and power negotiation. The researchers investigated different interpretations of legal documents by studying various immigration cases heard by the Court of Final Appeal in Hong Kong. Cheng and Cheng chronicled how conflicting governmental powers in China debated over the legal intent of the country's unprecedented legal document, the Basic Law. Through a careful analysis of the governmental power struggle and varying legal interpretations in certain Right to Abode cases in Hong Kong, the researchers

express, "the interpretation of the same law was not purely a jurisprudential operation, or the choice among different canons of legal interpretation, but also a dialogue demonstrated in various forms, such as power negotiation" (2008, p.446). A close analog to this case would be endless debate over the meaning of different parts of the United States' Constitution; although the document is fundamental to the United States' legal system, people still debate the context and subsequent meaning of certain clauses.

Indeed, we do not live in a vacuum in which the law—which again, is often the ideal concept of objectivity for society—is immune to the subjective nature of interpretation. The reality of court systems and legal decisions are not created and sustained through some "mechanical deduction" (Cheng & Cheng, 2012, p. 446), but through social practices such as dialogue, human interaction, and expression of contrasting ideas. When social construction theory is applied to the creation and understanding of law, which affects how humans act in society, one can limpidly see how micro-level communication processes (such as the discussion of a constitutional document) affect macro-level structures. Both communication about legal matters *and* communication on public buses have implications about social structure, order, and rules. While discussion around legal matters help shape rules on a societal level, communication on public buses helps riders to understand the social norms and proper ways of acting in this micro-environment. A first-time passenger does not get on the bus with a sheet of instructions on how to behave during her ride—instead, she must learn the rules from *communication* (often nonverbal, from the behaviors of other passengers). Yet, it remains unclear at this point how certain pieces of communication (or communicators) trump others in influencing an individual's understanding of social norms—people must ask as to whom has the strongest voice in spreading these seemingly collective ideas.

Sense-Making Processes "Hijacked" through Power Differences

As previously discussed, social construction theory demonstrates how communication creates people's understanding of the world, and this understanding in turn creates and maintains a specific reality. Yet this process—whether it pertains to meanings, norms, or understandings—is usually mediated by the variable of power. Miller-Day (2005) demonstrates how power imbalances in communication can influence meaning-making. The research theorized that dominant members in interpersonal relationships may be able to control the coordination of meaning in the relationship. In a hypothetical example involving a parent and child (in which power imbalances are admittedly extreme), a child may exclaim that a package is blue and the parent may correct the child and assert that the package is teal. Although perception of color is a subjective phenomenon, the child will likely accept the interpretation of the parent (who is dominant in this conversation) to be true, and in turn outwardly affect reality by correcting other children who assert the "wrong" color.

While this child-parent interaction is a simple example with mostly harmless consequences, it displays Miller-Day's idea of *necessary convergence of meaning*. The authors define necessary convergence as "a communication phenomenon representing a specific form of relational intersubjectivity among partners where one member is dominant and the other submissive" (2005, p.2). In the case of an interpersonal, power-imbalanced relationship, negotiating a shared understanding often becomes less cooperative and more coercive: because the dominant partner's frame of interpretation is privileged over the submissive partner's, there are likely unequal contributions to the process of finding meaning. Because this piece of literature only explored the theoretical aspects of necessary convergence of meaning, it leaves room for me to apply the ideas to a more empirical study. Discrepancies of privilege happen often amongst the passengers of public buses – people of different race, sex, and socioeconomic status may often be found sitting next to each other in the small, public space. The idea of

necessary convergence of meaning leads me to explore how perceived power differences relate to social construction on public buses, and what realities these perceived differences of power may be creating and sustaining.

Power Mediates Understanding of In-Groups/Out-Groups

As Miller-Day (2005) demonstrated how imbalances of power could affect meaning-making in general, other studies sought how perceived power influences understanding of identity, and in turn, understanding of in-groups/out-groups. Although these studies do not explicitly use in-group/out-group terminology or theory (perhaps this would sharpen their findings), it remains important to understand the rudimentary tenets of in-groups/out-groups. An in-group is a social category with which an individual strongly identifies, whereas an out-group is a social category with which one does not identify. In this in-group/out-group dichotomy, groups mark and understand their identities through communication and social interaction, such as language and speech styles (including nonverbal), dress codes, rituals, norms, and more (Giles and Giles, 2013); it helps to note that this process is in line with social construction theory. In addition, different groups assign more value to certain aspects of their identity; for one group, speech style can be the core to identity, and for another, cultural heritage may reign. Thus, attempting to understand the essential components of an out-group's identity can be important in understanding how to accommodate the group (Giles and Giles, 2013).

Many studies show that the social construction of identity and the oft-resulting in-group/out-group dichotomy can lead to animosity rather than a desire for accommodation – especially when a power imbalance is involved. Aden, Pearson and Sell (2007) explored how students in a college town socially construct the representation of whom they deem "townies," or local residents who are not affiliated with the college. The researchers note that 44% of students come from families with a gross income of over $80,000, while the county in which the

university is located has the highest percentage of its population living in poverty in the state.

The researchers conducted a total of 66 interviews with students at the university to ask open-

ended questions such as, "How would you describe a townie to someone back home?"; "What do

they wear? How do they talk?" and "Where are you likely to see a townie?" Trends showed that

students described "townies" as people who were dirty, wore plain and out-of-style clothing, and

who spoke "poorly." Students also expressed a feeling of being trespassed upon by "townies,"

saying that the town residents hardly left the area, did little but sit around and watch students,

and intruded upon a turf that students perceived as their own. In contrast, students perceived

themselves as upwardly mobile and in control of community spaces that surround the university.

While Aden, Pearson and Sell's study gives a thorough insight into in-group/out-group

and power dynamics, a weakness in their methodology must be noted. The use of rhetoric such

as "they" (such as in the questions, "How would you describe a townie to someone back home?";

"What do they wear? How do they talk?") automatically signals an in-group/out-group, and

could bias respondents. These questions also inadvertently refer to "townies" as if they were a

species of animal that the researcher is trying to dissect. Especially in a critical study, which

examines imbalances of power, the researcher must be careful that he or she is not exacerbating

the very problem that he or she is trying to examine. In my own methods and interviews, I will

try to preserve the dignity of all subjects—both those interviewed and those discussed in

interviews—by being conscientious and neutral with my language.

Power Mediates Understanding of Shared Space

Aden, Pearson and Sell (2007) refer to the work of theorist Henri Lefebvre as presented

by McCann (1999) to discuss how controlling the representation of a perceived out-group also

controls the spaces in which the out-group is deemed "out of place." Lefebvre (1991) sees space

as a political entity. He proposes a triad of interrelated concepts to understand the concept of

spaces: *representations of space, spaces of representation, and spatial practices*.

Representations of space refers to conceived space, or how those who plan and map up the space

describe it (Aden et. al (2007) compares this concept to the zoning and architecture of a

McDonalds restaurant). *Spaces of representation* is lived space; it refers to the lived experience

of people within the space and how objects within the space are used symbolically (comparable

to McDonalds' golden arches and uniformed employees communicating meaning to those within

the space). *Spatial practices* refers to the perceived space in which people negotiate their own

understanding of *representation of space* and *spaces of representation;* in other words, spatial

practices involve how people grapple with spaces that are conceived by others and circulate in

the communication of others (people may perceive the space of McDonalds as a place to get

enjoy a meal while others recognize it as a place to get sustenance when nothing else is around).

Although these descriptions of space can be a bit esoteric, the importance resides in

Lefebvre's emphasis that the intersection between the conceived, perceived, and lived spaces

results in an always-changing, complex relationship. To bring this assertion back to the original

theoretical framework, space is a socially constructed, and, often a political, debated

phenomenon. When placed against the backdrop of the power imbalances in both Aden et al.

(2007) and Miller-Day's (2005) studies, it becomes clear that socially constructed spaces—

especially those that encompass varying levels of privilege—can often become arenas that

exacerbate in-group/out-group dichotomies.

Communication Behaviors Influence Perceptions of Power

The work of Lefebvre and Aden, Pearson and Sell highlight the fact that space is

political. Yet it remains important to explore the specific actions people employ in these

constructed spaces, for the manner in *how* someone behaves in a public space may also lead to a

social construction of reality—specifically a reality in which some people are perceived to have

more power than others and are treated accordingly. Carney, Hall and LeBeau (2005) examined

which verbal and nonverbal communication traits people associated with high or low power. The

variable of power was defined as both (1) a characteristic akin to a dominant personality and (2)

a role or rank within an organization. Researchers asked participants to imagine hypothetical

people of high or low power (researchers gave example of a boss for high power or a subordinate

of low power at an advertising firm), to rate to what degree these people would display each of

70 different nonverbal behaviors provided on a list on a scale ranging from "never" to "always."

The most significant results showed that people believed high power individuals lack motivation

to pay attention to their partners (the people with whom they interact with), are more likely to

engage in gaze (overall, when speaking, and in negative gaze or glare), and are more likely to

behave freely with respect to touching and invading others' space.

     This study by Carney, Hall and LeBeau demonstrates yet again how communication—in

this case, nonverbal behaviors—leads to internal processing of meaning and, in turn, an external

reality. Those who appear to hold more gaze and who feel more free to encroach upon other

people's space may or may not *actually* hold more power and may or may not be trying to exert

power. However, this communication—intentional or not—creates a reality in which others

sense power. This cycle of communication, interpretation, and belief formation is self-sustaining.

In line with social construction theory, simply *believing* that certain people hold more power

may actually *give* them more power, because others will treat them accordingly: subjective

interpretation creates an objective, external reality. Translating concepts of power and space

(perceived, real, constructed, or otherwise) from the macrostructure to the microstructure is

essential to understanding social dynamics and realities on a public bus.

     However, similar to my qualms with Aden, Pearson and Sell, there remains room to

criticize of aspects of Carney, Hall, and LeBeau's methods. Presenting the idea of a subordinate

at an advertising firm and assuming participants will view the hypothetical person as having low power is ignorant of privilege and power. An advertising firm is a rather upper-class environment to be employed, and thus, people from different backgrounds may (a) not be familiar with what dynamics within an office job look like or (b) assume the hypothetical subordinate to have more power than the researchers intended. It is worrisome how many authors of critical studies are ignorant to the ways in which they exert their own privilege, for it counteracts the power imbalances they may wish to fight and likely influences the results of their studies. To preserve the dignity of this critical study, I will try to be mindful of my own privilege in how I design my interview questions, how I speak about groups on the bus in interviews, and how I interpret my data.

Perceptions of Power Influence Communication Behavior

As a type of inverse study to that of Carney, Hall and LeBeau, researchers Leffler, Gillespie, and Contay (1982) also studied the relationships between perceived status and communication behavior, but had participants play the role of positions with certain statuses (as hypothetical teachers and students) and subsequently recorded what behaviors were exhibited. Status was found to significantly structure nonverbal behavior. In general, those were assigned to enact a high status position (e.g. teachers) were more likely to claim more direct space with their bodies, spoke more profusely, and attempted more interruptions than those assigned to low status positions (e.g. students). Also, those enacting higher status were more likely to intrude upon partners (through pointing, touching, etc.) noticeably more than people enacting low status. The researchers also tested for gender differences, which produced significant results: when enacting high status, men took up more horizontal space, touched more frequently, and laughed less often than females when enacting high status.

Looking at Leffler et al.'s study in conjunction with the work of Carney et al., it becomes apparent that *power is created and maintained by communication*. This concept, when applied to the works of Lefebvre and Aden et al., shows that the triad of space, perceived power, and communication all play a role in sustaining a hegemonic environment in which those with power communicate, influence, and subsequently construct concepts of space. Simultaneously, those with high power are likely to take up more space (literally, by sprawling out, and figuratively, by infringing upon others) with nonverbal communication, consequentially obtaining *more* power. The cycle continues when this power is internally recognized and externally sustained by others, whose beliefs outwardly influence reality as shown by social construction theory.

Research Question

While previous research has elucidated the variables of power, space, and nonverbal communication individually, questions remain as to how the three of these interact, especially through the lens of social construction theory. In addition, research involving communication within the environment of public buses is largely untouched. Thus, I sought to answer the following research question:

R1: How do communication practices, especially in regards to use of space, socially construct and/or reflect perceived power dynamics on public buses?

Method

Participant Observation

Lindloff and Taylor (2011) describe two "parallel paths" of participant observation that guide a study: (1) Researchers skillfully perform routine practices that are employed by other group members and (2) researchers can create vivid and theoretically relevant accounts of their

experience. Because public buses are quite literally routine, and because I sought detailed implications in a setting that appears to be outwardly simplistic, participant observation was a fitting method to reach my research goals.

I sought to answer my research questions over a period of two months by spending close to four or five hours a week (spread over two or three days per week) on a specific bus line that runs directly from low-to middle income neighborhoods, through the financial district of downtown, and into one of the most affluent areas of its state. I chose this bus particular line because I had observed high diversity amongst passengers regarding race, age, and gender. Also, from my observations prior to this study, people came from widely varying socioeconomic statuses; while I realize I cannot confirm this factor for individuals from mere observation, potential insight comes from the neighborhoods in which people board and exit the bus, general appearance (mainly regarding clothing, cleanliness, etc), and types of technology used (cell phones, iPads, etc).

I rode the bus at different times of day in order to observe a larger sample of the population that typically rides the bus line, but spent most of my observations in the late morning and late afternoon. I conducted my participant observations by discretely observing and recording my surroundings in a notebook, or typing notes into my cell phone when a notebook was not available. I began by looking for general patterns of behavior and communication, although patterns became more specific once I acclimated to the scene around me and could focus on smaller and more nuanced details. During this observation process, I paid particular attention to behaviors pertaining to use of space and expressions of power as based on the literature in these topics.

The access to the scene in which I performed participant observations was quite easy due to the bus being a public place. Cost was also not an issue, for I personally took care of the

minimal travel expenses involved with bus tickets. I recognized that my discretion in making and recording my observations was imperative to the wellbeing of the passengers as well as validity of my study: people would likely have behaved differently if they felt they were being watched (and especially in a small space such as a bus, passengers could feel confused and threatened).

Qualitative Interviews

Because qualitative interviews are able to "go deeply and broadly into subjective realities" (Lindloff and Taylor, 2011, p.172), I employed this process as the second part of my method in trying to understand the complex, diverse perspectives of other passengers on public buses. Though I designed one interview guide to be used for all three interviews, emerging patterns during my interviews caused me to modify the initial interview questions to ask the interviewee his or her perspective on these emerging themes. Thus, while many of the interviews discussed similar themes and natures, certain parts varied from person to person. I recorded interviews with my cell phone and transcribed each file accordingly. All interviews took place in quiet, private places indoors at the university through which I knew the participants. All interviewees were debriefed about the study after each interview, and I opened the conversation up to questions for each person.

Treating interviewees ethically was crucial. In line with IRB standards, I had all interview participants sign consent forms prior to being interviewed. The consent forms discussed the general aim of my study, the risk involved, and my contact information. All information of interviewees (including bus line and geographical locations) has been confidential and I have used pseudonyms in this final paper. I have also kept interview questions at what I estimate to be an appropriate comprehension level for my participants (I varied this level in whichever ways seemed necessary) so that the interviewees felt respected and so the study would not be compromised by variables such as miscomprehension.

Due to the foreseen difficult nature (and accompanying privacy issues) of interviewing people whom I randomly encountered while riding the bus, I chose to interview people whom I knew regularly ride (or had regularly ridden) the particular bus line I hoped to study. I conducted three interviews—all were people who I knew from a small private university. Two of the interviewees were students, and one was an employee. Of the two students, one lived on campus, and the other commuted. The employee used the bus as his main transportation to travel to and from work. Of the two students, one was a white male and the other was an African-American female. The employee was a middle-aged, Hispanic male. The three of these people make up a small, but diverse representation of people who ride this particular bus line: the sample provided me with a mix of race (which was at times, admittedly ambiguous, such as in Robert's case), sex, socioeconomic situation, neurotypicality, and reasons behind riding the bus.

The first participant was Lisa, an African-American senior and athlete at the university who primarily used the bus for recreational purposes, such as shopping or trying to get off-campus. The second person was Robert, who works as a dishwasher at one of the eating facilities at the university. Robert expressed financial hardship as a reason for riding the bus, and often used it to travel between his home and his two jobs. Robert outwardly looks Caucasian, but is in fact Chilean (he expressed this dichotomy in my interview with him). The third person was Tom, a junior at the university. Tom is a Caucasian student who reported that he primarily takes the bus as a way to commute to school and back home, for he lives off campus. Another important aspect to note about Tom is that he has Asperger syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism that can lead to difficulty interacting socially. While Tom reported some actions on the bus that may not be generalizable to the actions of others of similar demographics (such as white males) due to his social difference, he represents a significant population of non-neurotypical people who ride the bus—people whose actions affect the bus environment in very real ways.

Analysis

The question guiding the analysis of the data was: How do communication practices, especially in regards to use of public space, socially construct and/or reflect power dynamics on public buses?

Lack of Context Muddles the Sense-Making Processes of Other Passengers

The data shows how low-context environment of a public bus can cloud passengers' sense-making processes. It remains difficult to understand the complexities of other passengers due to the (a) temporary, quick nature of the setting, (b) social norms that steer people away from verbal interaction with each other, and the (c) difficulty in determining even basic demographics such as race, socio-economic status, etc. For example, Lisa detailed the lack of verbal interaction between passengers as a result of the temporary nature of the bus:

> Mmmm, I don't think people have too much small talk…not usually, but sometimes. It's not like you never see it. You'll see people casually talk to people by them, but usually most people are on the bus and off the bus. Like, on the bus for like three stops and get off the bus and it's not that long of a period of time. So you can't have too much of a conversation, too in depth. Unless you know them personally, like you're gonna get off at the same stop.

Lisa elaborated on the nature of a public bus versus a plane, and why people on planes may be more likely to talk to each other, explaining, "You're forced [to talk to the other person]. You know when you're taking off, you know how long the flight's gonna be," signaling that the certainty that of sitting next to someone for a specific amount of time and knowing that all passengers are on the ride from beginning to end more easily permits comfortable situations for talking.

In addition, certain values and norms of the city in which this bus line is based also

muddled passengers' capabilities to properly sort others into categories, particularly due to

fashion trends (second-hand clothing) and emphasis on protecting the environment—the latter

which brings into question whether riding the bus is a necessity (as it is for many) or simply a

preference. Explaining how fashion trends can prevent someone from interpreting another

passenger's socio-economic situation, Lisa explained:

> In [this city], somebody's outfit can be $1000 and it looks like $2
> to me. They can have the most expensive torn down-jacket ever
> that looks like they got it from somebody's backyard sale, and it's
> like from Nordstrom or something. **So it's kinda hard to tell, but
> you *can* maybe kinda tell.** Like you can tell from the real, real
> low class to the middle class, but after that it's still kinda hard to
> tell.

While Lisa's account shows the difficulty to interpret the nature of her surrounding passengers

due to recent sartorial tastes, it also shows that one *can* still see differentiation between

passengers and attempts to sort them into certain strata.

This lack of clarity is exacerbated by the city's values and focus on sustainability and

conservation of energy. Because public transit keeps cars off the road (and as a result, less

carbon emissions), many people ride the bus not out of necessity, but as a choice. Lisa

elaborates:

> I mean, not everybody who's riding the bus doesn't necessarily
> need to ride the bus. Especially in [this city], because it's all about
> saving energy. There's professors that I've had who talk about
> riding the bus. And they make enough money to have a car if they
> really want, or they only have one car in their whole household
> because of "[This city] Green."

Lisa recognizes what I call the "smoothing of power" due to lack of context on the bus. Lisa's

cues that usually help her to make sense of her surroundings—including other people—are not as

sharp on the bus as they would be in a higher context situation, such as a college campus or in

certain neighborhoods in the city. Being a bus rider seems to not have a clear accompanying

identity partly because the reasons why people take public transit stretch beyond economic

necessity.

Muddled Sense-Making Influences Actions of Bus Passenger*s*

In line with social construction theory, people make sense of their experiences by

simultaneously creating and understanding a model of the social world. When the link of internal

sense-making becomes weak, as it does on a low-context setting of the bus, it has a direct

influence on people's actions in reality. For Tom, the uncertainty of other passengers can invoke

anxiety in interaction:

> Naturally it's always a bit of a risk [to talk to others on the bus] because when dealing with someone whom you don't really know anything about, it's hard to know what their humor is, what their interests are… there's always an element of guess work for lack of a better word, involved in trying to carry a conversation. Sometimes it doesn't work and sometimes you get weird looks. But for my part, I'm the kind of person that really loves talking to people and seeing what their viewpoint in life is.

When asked how he chooses which people to talk to, Tom's communication with others was still

influenced by his internal sense-making. He said,

> I generally talk to people on the basis of whether I get a good feeling or for lack of a better word, for whether they might be receptive. And I guess what goes into that is kind of, their facial expression, obviously not angry or hostile or aggressive, but more than that, how do they look? In terms of how they dress, or is it their posture open. Body language–wise. And as far as how they dress goes, it's not that I look for specific people or dress, but it's more like, what does their outfit say about them that would make me feel that they'd be willing to talk. Like if it looks like they've come from the gym—hot sweaty muggy—they'll probably not be in the mood.

In this response, Tom shows the cyclical nature of social construction: the way other passengers

communicate with him on the bus (albeit nonverbally and likely unknowingly) affects his

internal understanding of reality. This internal understanding of reality in turn influences Tom's

external actions, and results in his willingness or unwillingness to communicate with other

passengers.

Another important aspect to note about Tom's response are the conditions upon which he

decides to engage with other passengers. All depend upon people's nonverbal behavior and

general appearance. Of course, it makes sense that Tom depends on these simple cues since

complex understandings of other passengers are hindered by the low context of the bus (as

explained by Lisa). However, it remains important to note that the difficulty in sense-making

causes Tom to resort to more rudimentary—almost primal—ways in determining which actions

to take (e.g. looking at passengers and "facial expression" and if they are "obviously not angry or

hostile or aggressive"). This phenomenon of resorting to simple internal ways to sort reality will

be key in understanding dynamics of privilege and power later on.

Feelings of discomfort in acknowledging and contending with privilege differences

The low context, always-changing environment on the bus affects my own sense-making

abilities and causes me to feel anxiety about it. I found myself feeling uncomfortable ascribing

what race and socio-economic status to other passengers in an attempt to look at privilege

dimensions. Yet, even though my categorization was for research purposes, relying purely on

physical characteristics often made me feel judgmental and averse to classifying people in

certain ways. I wrote notes such as:

> I notice that none of the interacting passengers on the bus
> seem to be of different races; white people are talking to and
> recognize white people, black people with black people,
> Latinos with Latinos, etc. Yet, I have to note that races feel
> ambiguous to me. Perhaps because of my white privilege, I
> feel uncomfortable ascribing race to other people, and
> furthermore, I avoid considering the possibility of mixed race
> altogether!

My discomfort continued to be apparent in other parts of my field notes observations, such as, "Of all the women who have bags on their adjacent seat, two are white, with one with perhaps of a lower socioeconomic status (non-smartphone, tattered looking clothing) Lord, I feel uncomfortable ascribing someone to be of a lower socio-economic status…" I knew my reasons for attempting to categorize others are not malicious, but my scribbling still reflected a sense of unease in this sense-making process. Similar to Lisa's expression that it "it's kinda hard to tell, but you *can* maybe kinda tell," I am able to pick up on nuances that may have led me to a correct classification of my surroundings, but the themes of privilege and power filled gaps in my knowledge with anxiety.

The notion of anxiety in contending with power and privilege differences became especially apparent in regards to race. When I asked Robert about certain race dynamics and seating on the bus, he responded, "I mean, if I see like black people on the back of the bus, there's high school kids that get on the back of the bus and kind of hang out with the same crowd, I could see that" with a very hushed tone and leaned in closer to me. This sense of wanting to be conspicuous did not appear any other time in the interview, even regarding other demographic features that may make someone uncomfortable, such as class.

Tom also physically showed discomfort when talking about racial diversity; while he appeared very candid in the rest of my interview with him, when the topic of valuing diversity arose, his answer felt incredibly rehearsed and almost forced. He said:

> I mean, really, I think it's a brilliant thing. The more you know about the way that different people think, the more, the easier it is I guess, to um, see the flaws of one's own reasoning and say, okay well, my speaking partner has a good point here, I hadn't considered that. This is especially the case in talk about privilege, not just racial privilege, but gendered privilege. I only have what I experience personally. And it's, it's any information I get

> is basically second hand. It's still better than nothing. So
> that's definitely a case that, uh, that it's more diversity
> than I'd normally get and , that's brilliant. A wonderful
> thing. I mean its…. I think I'd be poorer without the
> exposure to different people's viewpoints

While the content of his answer recognizes value in diversity, his uncomfortable tone and body

language seemed to contradict his words. However, Tom did seem to show genuineness and

vulnerability when discussing his *hesitance* interacting with diverse populations. Puzzlingly,

Tom actually volunteered to speak about race, when I usually had to probe the interviewee on

this topic. He shared:

> And I'm willing, on the subject of color, **unfortunate
> implications aside**, to say that it's more **difficult for me to
> strike up a conversation with people of other ethnic groups**
> for the reason that, as the kind of white guy who doesn't want to
> offend anybody, I normally try to y'know, um, be very careful
> about what sorts of question I ask. And if I do ask questions that
> could potentially be… questionable… I usually preface it by
> saying, 'well I'm curious what is your opinion on this because
> I'm trying to learn what other people believe.' So. **Because I
> don't tend to inflict conflict on the bus.** Because if it actually
> came down to a physical tussle I wouldn't be the kind of guy
> who would win even if it's an older dude.

This single answer has many implications that speak to Tom's constructions of power and

privilege, especially regarding race. Firstly, Tom's verbiage of "…the subject of color,

unfortunate implications aside," reflect a mindset that race carries a negative connotation, which

later, we see that this construction influences Tom's communication behaviors, causing him to

be "very careful" with someone of another color and "not wanting to offend anybody."

Additionally, Tom's construction of race—and perhaps his perceived risk in interacting with

people of different races—becomes more clear when he insinuates that asking the wrong

questions with someone of another color could lead to "a physical tussle." In line with social

construction theory, Tom tries to make sense of interacting with people who are dissimilar from

him, and his internal perceptions (e.g. the belief that interacting with someone of another race

involves risk) affect his external communication (e.g. acting very carefully around people of

other races). While the ripple effect from these two variables remains unclear, social construction

theory ascertains that Tom's manner of communication constructs the mindsets of others—

perhaps for people of color, who may feel uncomfortable that Tom seems to act so gingerly

around them. When I prodded Tom as to why he feels the need to act so carefully around people

of other races, he said,

> It's because I don't want to… it's because I don't want to
> be condescending. It may be right that some possible, on
> some level due to privilege, but in all honesty another part
> of it is, that in being raised with fairly idealistic ideals, I
> think it's from back when I was in grade school, I didn't
> often y'know, have the sense that other people
> experienced things differently from me, so I actually
> tended to, at least now, try to treat them as, you know, one
> of us.

This response is also packed with cues that elucidates Tom's social construction of race. The

rhetoric of "condescending" implies power difference—a power difference that exists in which

Tom is in a higher position. His construction that there are power differences leads him to

communicate in a certain way. In examining what led Tom to construct this idea of power and

race, it is important to note his comment, "I didn't often y'know, have the sense that other people

experienced things differently from me." When one is raised believing that everyone lives life

similarly, it is easy to attribute the difficult situations that people of color experience as a result

of *internal* weakness, rather than external, circumstantial conditions (such as poverty). Also,

Tom employs language that clearly insinuates a construction of in-group/out-group, saying "I

actually tended to, at least now, try to treat them as, you know, one of us," meaning white

people. While his intentions may try to bridge differences and build tolerance, Tom's answers

still hint that people of other races have different levels of power than white people, and in line

with social construction theory, this belief influences how he acts with people of other races.

Sex and power difference affect seat choice

While discomfort contending with race on public buses is apparent from the data, the

theme of power and sex also unearth some results worth examining. When asking Lisa whom she

would most likely sit next to on the bus, she expressed that men's physical power played a part

in a preference to sit next to women:

> But I guess if there's a girl and a guy and I feel like they're
> both clean, one's left one's to the right, and I feel like
> they're both clean, I'm probably going to go sit next to the
> girl.
> *Why is that?*
> I don't know. Just 'cause I feel more comfortable. I don't
> know. It's just, the background of guys. Like, a guy is
> supposedly physically stronger than female, not necessarily
> that they're stronger than *me*, but it's just like, I just feel
> more comfortable sitting next to a woman rather than a
> man.

It is important to note how Lisa did not express that she had *experienced* men being stronger than

she is, but instead uses language such as "supposedly" and "not necessarily that they're stronger

than *me*." These bits of language point towards a *collective* knowledge—that men have power

over women—on which Lisa depends on to make choices. Again, in line with social construction

theory, it has been communicated to Lisa that men are stronger than women, and this

communication influences her internal sense-making processes. In turn, her mental processes

influence her actions—in this case, her seat choice on the bus—which communicate to others in

the external world.

My own observations on the bus also reflected that sex—and perhaps power differences

behind the concept—plays a serious role in seat choice. From my field notes, I noticed:

> A few men on this bus ride alone seemed to have started to sit next to me at different times when the seats get more filled, but then they hesitate and move along. I wonder what their internal thought process is, and why they continue on. Perhaps the seat itself seemed appealing, but when they realize a younger woman is in the seat, they do not want to come across as intimidating or abusing power.

Also from my field notes, it stood out to me when a younger black man in baggy clothing sat next to me when the bus was almost full and my adjacent seat was one of the last vacancies. While he was one of the only men in all of my observation sessions who had sat next to me, he sat completely facing away from me, and rested on as far on the edge of the seat as possible. Of course, these actions alone cannot determine the reasons behind avoidance, but in line with the rest of the data (which I will elaborate on subsequently), the actions of these men on the bus hint at awareness of power difference and actions thereafter.

When speaking my colleague, Peyton about this curious finding, he told me that he, too, is less likely to sit next to a woman than a man on the bus if both options were available. When I asked him why, he initially told me, "I don't know. I don't want her to think there's sexual tension or anything." I pried him further, and he said, "Well, maybe it's more about intimidation. I don't want the woman to be intimidated." Key points of this response (a) are the initial part of the sense-making process, in which Peyton attributes sex as a factor of his seating choices and (b) his secondary realization that the idea of power difference affects his seat choice. Both Peyton and Lisa expressed their preference to sit next to their same sex, both reasoning that power played a role in this preference. However, Peyton saw the power difference as having a sexual nature to it, while Lisa expressed a mostly physical nature (though sex can certainly play into this idea of physicality).

Sex and power difference: Men see selves as initiators, women as consenters

Although men seemed to overcompensate for their power differences by creating extra physical distance from women, data shows that men may infringe upon women in other, nonphysical ways. In speaking with Tom, he spoke about making small talk with women on the bus:

> In terms of positive, um, outcomes, you'd be surprised how many people— for women especially—if you tell them that they're attractive, they're looking worn out from their day, and you tell them. 'Hey. You're beautiful. Don't let anybody tell you any different.' It usually, but not always, tends to brighten their day a bit—Because if a complete stranger is giving them some sort of validation, then it's like, 'you've totally broke me out of the, you know, bad mood.'

This response is peculiar in the sense that Tom guesses—and almost assumes—that the woman will take a compliment on her appearance positively, and that it will be a form of "validation." The idea of a comment on physical appearance as validation implies that the woman would not be valid without this man's compliment. In addition, because the compliment is about physical appearance, it implies that the woman's validity, or worth, is boiled down to her appearance or sexual vitality.

However, although Tom seems confident that the compliment will be received positively by the woman, his words still show a great deal of *uncertainty*. In the above quote, he said "It usually, but not always, tends to brighten their day a bit." Also, when I played devil's advocate and asked Tom about whether the woman actually feels like she needs validation, he responded, "Yeah. It's not that I can't tell that people are uncomfortable, but it's harder for me to say because they're uncomfortable because of this, or are they uncomfortable because of something else?" From this response, it sounded like Tom was aware that his comments to women can make them uncomfortable, yet this risk seemed worth it to him to continue with his same actions. This relates to Lisa's statement of ambiguity of other riders, with her phrase, "so it's kinda hard

to tell, but you *can* maybe kinda tell." Women communicate with Tom in ways that may express

discomfort, and but this communication seems to get warped in Tom's sense-making process so

that he can continue to feel like he is doing a positive thing by complimenting other women.

This idea of imperfect information affects the social construction of passengers on the bus, for it

clouds their sense-making processes and forces them to rely on rudimentary ways to understand

other people. Thinking that women enjoy attention on their appearance is a simple understanding

that dilutes the complexity of women—but perhaps the low context of the bus binds people into

this kind of thinking, as discussed earlier.

While men may make assumptions that a woman will appreciate compliments on

their appearance, further data shows that men may see women's eye contact as flirting—

and lack of eye contact as avoiding men's advances. When asked whether men and

women act differently from each other on the bus, Robert immediately said "Of course."

When I asked him to elaborate, he responded:

> Um, guys would probably be more laid back, sitting in the
> back of the bus, checking everybody out, and the women
> are probably get on the bus and try to not make too much
> eye contact or flirt with anybody.
> *Why do you think that is? Where do you think those*
> *differences come from?*
> I don't know. It's just a normal thing for girls not to pay too
> much attention to any particular person on the bus. They
> might think they're flirting with them maybe and trying to
> get [the men's] attention. If you start making too much eye
> contact with people, they may think you're trying to talk
> with them or something. But guys are different; they're
> going to look at everybody and go like oh, you wanna talk
> to me—okay!

When unpacked, Robert is essentially saying that women try to protect themselves from extra

attention from men by not making eye contact. But in contrast to Lisa's perspective, who may

avoid men because of underlying fear of physical safety, Robert sees women's avoidance of men

as a subsequent avoidance of flirting—something with a sexual overtone. By saying "[guys] are going to look at everybody and go like oh, you wanna talk to me—okay!" Similar to Tom, Robert seems to see men as the initiator and women as consenters. This expression insinuates that if women make eye contact with men, they will see themselves as giving into men's always-present sex drive—which is a stereotype of men as well as women. In this, Robert frames men as people who are not afraid to encroach on another's personal space or attempt to make a somewhat sexual connection.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that, although public buses provide a wide diversity of people in a very small space, the communication and interactions that tend to occur within this space do not appear to foster deeper understandings between people of different demographics, and this lack of complexity sustains power differences. The communication that people participated in *about* their interactions on the bus reflected only shallow understandings of other passengers, both in terms of individuals and of groups (as described by race, sex, or age). With social construction theory in mind, these shallow understandings appeared to simultaneously reflect and construct power dynamics amongst passengers: in a simple explanation of the system, participant observations and qualitative interviews showed that the majority of people on public buses tend to avoid interacting with passengers of other demographics (especially race and sex). This tendency of more homogenous interactions influences the passengers' internal sense-making processes, for they may continue to resort to rudimentary stereotypes of the other that are presented and understood by society on a greater scale. In turn, these stereotypes—which often insinuate power differences—make it less likely for passengers to interact with people from other demographics.

One common theme that seemed to make it difficult to break this cycle of *preference for homogeneity—use of stereotypes—continued preference for homogeneity* was the lack of context on the bus: through my own expressed frustrations and from certain points in interviews, internal sense-making of passengers was often muddled with the awareness that (a) recent "raggedy" fashion trends and the ubiquitous value of sustainability made it difficult to sort out other passengers, and (b) that the temporary nature of a bus ride would deter people from interacting with others in any meaningful way. In line with social construction theory, people's internal sense-making affects their outward interactions: when people either consciously or subconsciously reason that an interaction with another passenger may be more difficult due of this lack of context (and perhaps perceived difficulty in beginning a conversation), they may choose to avoid certain passengers altogether.

Because social construction theory states that people make sense of their surroundings through social structures (cf. Frey, Adelman, Flint & Query, 2000) it is intuitive that people have trouble making sense of their surroundings when social structures are unclear—usually, one may be able to estimate certain demographics of other people (which can consequentially result in a more hierarchical mindset, especially with more quantitative values such as socioeconomic status). But when the ability to rank and order becomes unclear, people may feel more lost.

In part because of this lack of context, passengers tend to resort to more rudimentary ways of sorting people where the gaps in understanding remain. Data from the interviews showed that some of these sorting methods, such as extra attention on clothing, were utilized by people of varying race, age, and gender. Body language was also a noted as a way to make sense of one's surroundings—some participants noted how facial expressions and open/closed posture affected whether they avoided certain people, which is a nearly primal way of navigating through a situation. Also, my female interview participant expressed a need for safety on the bus

frequently in her answers, and although she initially expressed no preference for which sex she would sit next to, eventually she reasoned that she is more likely to sit next to a female because men are physically stronger than women—once again, importance of safety affected actions of passengers, which is yet another primal need.

Time and time again, the data showed that males and females generally sit next to those of their own sex if they have an option—and this behavior was even more prominent with men. Surprisingly, men often expressed sex as an underlying factor to avoidance, which was in contrast to the women's perspective of safety. Men tended to see physical avoidance between sexes as an avoidance of sexually charged situations (e.g. eye contact as flirting, men avoiding sitting next to women to prevent the impression of sexual tension, etc). In this mindset, men seem to believe that they have a certain power over women that is likely to intimidate the woman if he gets too close to her in a small space. However, the backdrop of power for men had sexual themes—whereas for women it revolved around safety and feeling physically vulnerable.

A particularly interesting point about these different perspectives on avoidance was how the possession of power existed almost entirely in the hypothetical realm. My female interviewee had an idea that men are "supposedly" stronger than she is (and even though this may be a biological tendency, there was other language such as, "even though they aren't necessarily stronger than *me*"). Thus, even if this woman recognizes that an *individual* male may be physically weaker than she is, her construction of the physical strength of *men as a group* is so unrelenting that it still leads her to avoid sitting next to men as a whole. Also, many of the men in the data, who are likely to never exert sexual power in an violent or extreme sense, still physically avoided women because they believe that women will perceive the situation as sexual—even though they likely have not heard women express similar ideas. These patterns

show the pervasive and sustaining nature of collective ideas of power, even when these collective ideas are unlikely to come to fruition.

The more I delved into this study, the more I found the previous literature on issues pertaining to space and power as problematic. While the findings of this study showed power to be complex in its hypothetical, ambiguous, overlapping and contrasting nature, other studies viewed power in a very prescribed and compartmentalized way. Other studies explicitly provided context in their designs, such as Carney, Hall and LeBeau describing imaginary individuals in a very concrete career, such as employees at an advertising firm, or Leffler, Gillespie, and Contay presenting people in simple teacher/student roles. While these methodological choices might make sense in order to find easily comprehensible results, these high-context, simple settings that lead to seamless sense-making processes simply do not translate into most environments in the real world.

When it comes to shared space, it seems that Lefebvre's notions more accurately reflect what reality: the intersection of conceived, perceived, and lived space is an effervescent, ever-changing, and infinitely complex entity. The findings of this study show that while power structures seem to be constant and unchanging on the surface, the underlying mentalities that sustain this power, as supported by social construction theory, are complex, shifting, and often contrasting from one another. This notion of fluid and oft-contrasting mentalities of power is especially germane to the public bus setting, for the de-contextualized space dilutes understanding of roles, social expectations, and interpersonal nuances.

Understanding that a low-context setting can muddle sense-making and cause people to use less nuanced, almost primal ways of making sense of their surroundings, it becomes particularly troubling to consider the implications of our continually-modernizing society. As people spend more time on the internet, interactions often become more anonymous (such as

user commentary on YouTube, political forums, etc.), and less nuanced (such as "liking" a post on Facebook without any further comment). Integrating these recent transitions with social construction theory points to a future in which people will continue to have difficulty in their sense-making processes—but instead of this difficulty being limited to a bus ride, it may be pervasive other areas of their lives. The link between difficult sense-making and resorting to rudimentary sorting processes leaves room for a future that is not in progression, but in regression. Although technological trends may seem trivial, they are likely creating more barriers to understanding our own humanity and the nature of those around us.

Conclusion

While the choices of passengers on public buses initially appear to be simple and without much thought, findings show that these seemingly straightforward interactions are guided by a multifaceted and oft-contrasting collective idea of power. The low-context setting of a public bus disrupts and confuses the sense-making processes of passengers, and in turn, passengers resort to underdeveloped sorting methods that reflect primal focuses such as safety and sex. These underdeveloped sorting methods are problematic in that they reflect contrasting ideas as to whom holds what kinds of power—and though diversity in beliefs is not inherently harmful, the data shows that these contrasting ideas of power drive people to avoid each other. Troublingly, this distance (and subsequent non-nuanced understanding) may perpetuate the cycle of imperfect information guiding people's choices and sustaining unfounded power structures.

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