A STUDY OF SYMBOLIC RELATIONS IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Abstract
This paper presents an anthropological, exploratory study of the microsocial world of public transport. Our research focuses on the symbolic relations that are being established (verbally or nonverbally) between urban transport travellers that do not know each other and the consequences these relations create. Modern urban configuration forces large numbers of individuals to share public space every day. When this space becomes restrictive, symbolic relations and interpersonal behaviors such as territoriality and personal space management become clearer. Due to overcrowding, public transport is the scene of one of the most restrictive public spaces in a city. The challenge was to observe and interpret daily, casual behaviors through a sociological and psychological scheme, following the methodological tradition established by Erving Goffman and the other symbolic interactionists. Finally, our study generates a number of hypotheses and explanatory models for common practices and behaviors in trams and metros regarded from a symbolic perspective.

Keywords: *public transport, symbolic relations, symbolic interactionism, observation, interpretative scheme*

Introduction

As Marc Auge stated, we live in an era of scale reversals[1]. Along with the other social sciences, anthropology enrolls in this logic, practicing with ever-more perseverance the attention for present and proximity. The accent increasingly falls on *daily* and *contemporary* "*in all the aggressive and disturbing aspects of reality at its most immediate*"[2]. The scale overturn that leads to the emphasis of the *daily* is interpreted by Michel de Certeau as distancing from the hegemonic and generalizing[3] discourse that used to dominate the social sciences. Vintilă Mihăilescu regards the rediscovery of the *daily* as „*a way to bring forward and put under spotlight everything that was left behind, neglected or deemed insignificant by the grand theories*"[4.]

Auge discusses the difference between what anthropology describes as *places*, as opposed to simple *spaces*. Thus, places are relational, historical and concerned with identity, while simple spaces are recognizable by the absence of social and symbolic relations. Consequently, these become *non-places*[5]. The economic and social dynamics that are specific to supermodernity create *non-places* such as the transit spaces, which people use for functional reasons determined by the urban configuration.[6]

Practicing the same dedication to microsocial, this paper sets to investigate the nature of the relations that occur between individuals in such *non-places,* or transitory spaces that simply connect places and are described by the absence of the intentional social relations. In a synthesis about the progress in the sociology of transportation Glenn Yago underlined the absence and necessity of research on the psychology of personal relations in public transport.[7]

The subject of this paper is, therefore, the psychological and symbolic interpretation of daily personal interactions that take place in public transport. We see public transport as a space of routine

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[1] Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 12
[2] Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 31
[3] Vintilă Mihăilescu, "*Introducere*" la *Etnografii urbane*, coord. Vintilă Mihăilescu (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 16
[4] Vintilă Mihăilescu, "*Introducere*" la *Etnografii urbane,* 16
[5] Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* 34
[6] Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 94
[7] Glenn Yago "*The Sociology of Transportation*". Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 9 (1983): 185

and somewhat ritual interaction, which makes a fertile study material for the researcher interested in what is common and daily. Our ethnographic observation sets to create an explanatory model for the aforementioned type of interactions and bring new data in this field by generating a number of new hypotheses and explanatory models. We sought to conduct a microsocial, interpretative analysis of social interactions following the flexibly-structured research method "patented" by symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. Our main hypothesis before pursuing the study was the existence of symbolic relations and of a certain spatial structure of the means of public transport that was derived from the constant negotiation of power between individuals.

Paper content

Regarding from an evolutionary perspective, the natural type of human community is the tribe. The closest correspondents in present times are the rural communities, where "everybody knows everybody". Desmond Morris[8] demonstrates the city is a modern, artificial construct that forces individuals that do not know each other to manage and share a multitude of common or *public* places. An interesting sort of dynamics occurs: the way people handle each other`s presence when they do not know each other, they have no preset rapports, but only a common space that needs to be shared. But what happens when that space becomes narrow, restrictive? In this case the symbolic relations of power become more noticeable. These relations occur, most of the times unconsciously, between individuals forced by the urban configuration to relate to each other`s presence. They have no other reason to interact but their very presence in the same space.

Starting from Auge`s vision of *places* and *non-places*, we sought to investigate, through an ethnographic study, the human relations and symbolic dynamics generated by the public transport. Albeit these relations are not intentional, we will seek to demonstrate they are inevitable, and to investigate the rules by which the simple presence of several individuals in the same space will start a process of symbolic negotiation of their relations.

The role that Max Weber ascribed to sociology was to analyze and interpret human behavior and interaction. Symbolic interactionism, one of the dominant sociological paradigms of the 20th century, states that daily life consists of interactions based on exchange of symbols. The research method put forth by the most prominent symbolic interactionist – Erving Goffman – was largely based on observation and interpretation through dramaturgic methaphors and parallels with theatre. This research approach has created perhaps the most original, popular and relevant forms of symbolic interactionism. The research we have conducted is part of the same observative – interpretative tradition started by the symbolic interactionists. Another important methodological aspect linking our study with this paradigm is the generation of multiple and dynamic hypothesis.

Discussing the role of the public transport system, Yago stated: "*Transportation centrally affects the relationship between physical space and society. (...) changes in transportation affect the organization of human activity in urban and regional space, structuring the built environment, spurring urban growth, and ordering the relationships among cities in a national urban system*"[9]. The urban transport network is a good indicator of the spatial limits of a city. Usually, when a certain transport system reaches its limit and cannot match the growth rhythm of the city anymore it is complemented by a different mean of transport that is able to cover the new city limits.

The means of transport are selected by the city dwellers through a rational process influenced by their social and spatial ranking in the urban configuration. Yago shows that, for example, the wealthier dwellers have a smaller probability of using public transport, choosing to travel by car, instead.[10] In the absence of similar studies about the Romanian urban communities, we find ourselves

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[8] Desmond Morris, *The Human Zoo* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 55

[9] Glenn Yago "*The Sociology of Transportation*". Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 9 (1983): 171

[10] Yago, "*The Sociology of Transportation*", 176

constrained to extrapolate the findings of usually American studies, such as Yago`s. However, Bucharest`s polynuclear configuration as well as the high variations in architecture and social structure lead us to the assumption that the travel routines of Bucharest residents are probably more manifold than those of American dwellers living in more simply-structured cities. Identifying the dominant travel corridors would presumably be more difficult as we would have to deal with three different means of public transport and a private one.

Several studies conducted in the last decades were aimed at discovering the effects if public transport on city dwellers. Bateman and Brown show that overcrowding, traffic congestion and subway breakdowns create dehumanizing environments that may erode urban dweller`s sense of identity. [11] Milgram shows transportation-related stress, overcrowding, traffic congestion and noise may contribute to *psychic overload*[12]. Stress is also responsible, by Lundberg, for much of the aggressive or inappropriate behaviors that occur in public transport. [13]

Another interesting study regarding social interactions in public transport belongs to Susie Tanenbaum[14]. Her ethnographic study was conducted for three years in the New York subway and followed several categories of subjects, from musicians and simple dwellers to salespersons and the subway staff. One of the main findings was that subway music performers facilitate social interactions by creating connections between strangers that would otherwise have no pretense to interact.

As we have already mentioned, the main methodological inspiration for our ethnographic study relies in the model that was promoted and enhanced by symbolic interactionism. This was synthesized by Herbert Blumer through the following phrases: "*Symbolic interactionism is a down-to-earth approach to the scientific study of human group life and human conduct. It lodges its problems in the natural world, conducts studies in it and derives its interpretations from such naturalistic studies. If it wishes to study religious cult behavior it will go to actual religious cults and observe them carefully as they carry on their lives*".[15] He also underlines society exists *in action* and this is how it should be researched. This should be the starting point of any empirical study[16]. The observational research „borrows" its exploratory character from the anthropological tradition: the researcher seeks to discover new data without „tying himself" to a rigid set of hypothesis. He tries to respect the natural world conditions and to not induce any major changes through his presence. His interest is diffuse at the beginning. Any aspect of the group`s life can fall under the researcher`s scrutiny. [17]

We, therefore, chose to conduct an exploratory research of the everyday, casual interactions in public transportation, namely trams and metros. These two means of transport were selected because they are perhaps the two most representative spaces of public transport in Bucharest. They were also relevant to our research due to their fundamental difference: one travels underground while the other travels above. Our starting point consisted in the analysis of the interactions and nonverbal behavior.

While we had almost no rigid hypothesis besides the existence of symbolic relations that may determine a certain perception of the spatial structuring, we decided to follow a few dimensions:

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[11] J. R. Bateman and J. W. Brown, *Urban planning, transportation, and human behavioral science.* Guidelines for New Systems (Chicago: Barton-Aschman Assoc, 1968), 2

[12] Stanley Milgram, "*The experience of living in cities*", Science 167, (1970), 1461-68

[13] O. Lundberg, "*Urban commuting: crowdedness and catecholamine excretion*". J. Hum. Stress 2/3 (1976): 26-32

[14] Susie Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subways of New York.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995)

[15] Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism – Perspective and Method* (University of California Press, Ltd, London, England, 1969), p.67

[16] Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism – Perspective and Method*, 3

[17] M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edition (Sage Publications, 2002), 260

- The natural display of individuals; possible grouping criteria (such as age, gender, social status)

- The existence of possible variations in the homogeneity or disparity of travellers in different areas of the city

- The occurrence and functioning of prosocial and antisocial behaviors

- Possible patterns in the emergence of social interaction between strangers

- Attitudes and behavior towards individuals with a special status: baggers, security staff and ticket inspectors

- The management of impression (in Goffman`s terms) and the management of the personal space

The study was conducted over a period of six months and it resulted in a larger quantity of data, out of which we will only present the most relevant part.

The means of transport were selected with regard to the length of their route and the variations in the areas they cross. We sought trams that would offer a convenient posture for observation and note-taking, and that would cover several socially-diverse areas. We finally selected three main tram lines (55, 5, and 21) that cover a large part of the city and offer a center-outskirts transition. In selecting the metro lines we used the same criteria that would maximize the variation of the individuals, the attitudes and the behaviors we would observe, but in the end we conducted our observation along all the city`s metro lines.

The research findings

Much of the social scene of the public transport can be explained through age and status. The first notes of our observation show a traveller`s placement inside a tram is closely determined by these factors. This becomes visible when a traveller has to choose a seat inside the tram when there are many empty seats to choose from in all areas. Younger people are more likely to select the back segments of a tram, while the front segment tends to be preferred by the elderly. In the center segment of a tram you will most often find younger people, and also the *white collar class*, active people involved in intellectual activities. The *blue collar* workers (the ones involved in physical labor) would usually choose the back segment.

At the metro, while on the waiting platform, the most hurried travellers are more likely to sit next to the platform limit. The same pattern is also present inside the metro, the most hurried choosing to sit near the exits. The management of the personal distance is highly visible inside the metro. The metro travellers seem to be more permissive in this regard compared to the tram travellers. Overcrowding seems more tolerable inside a metro. Nonverbal cues of territoriality and the protection of one`s personal space are less present when compared to a tram. We hereby advance the hypothesis of an unconscious acceptance of reclusion which is driven by the closed configuration of the metro space. The perception of architectural closure weakens one`s expectations of personal space. This would explain why the same level of overcrowding will produce less conflict (verbal or nonverbal) in a metro than in a tram.

The "social landscape" inside a tram is somewhat more heterogeneous than in a metro. The easier access inside a tram (the possibility to travel without a ticket) and the absence of the guards (who patrol some of the metro trains) can explain the presence of individuals from more social categories inside a tram. We have found a category of "travellers without a destination" that use the tram as a shelter. They often travel until the end of the tram`s route where they are coerced to exit, only to take the first tram coming from the line`s end.

Observing the prosocial behaviors inside the tram we found their frequency is higher in the front and median segments of a tram. Two indicators pointing towards this conclusion are the level of cleanliness and the number of the seats offered to other people. The elderly and the physically challenged individuals will very often choose to sit in the first segment of the tram, denoting a more or less conscious knowledge of this fact. The "renegades", the socially marginal (such as the

"travellers without a destination" category) or the baggers will most often choose the back segment of the tram. The metro seems to spatially repress the marginal individuals towards the front and back limits of the wagons.

The people in the back segment of the tram are more likely to use a louder voice. They also are more likely to be more expressive through the use of inflexions and imitative words. Besides the social and demographic factors we have already mentioned as influencers of one`s position in a tram, there still is not enough to explain why people in the vicinity of the driver`s cabin will usually talk lower than in other parts of the tram. Thus, we presume this fact is explained by the functional authority of the tram driver. This allows him to monopolize the aggressive behaviors. In the cabin`s area the driver will often be the loudest and most expressive individual. The travellers behind the cabin will quietly accept his informal leadership and unconsciously seek the protection that comes from the leader`s proximity. This self-preservation behavior could explain the higher frequency of the older travellers in the first segment of the tram, near the driver`s cabin. The elderly are generally less able to protect themselves of aggression, thus they are more prone to look for exterior protection. Also, the marginal individuals, the ones that feel in opposition to the social norms (such as beggars) are more likely to choose the back side of a tram because the driver`s authority is weaker in there. Because of the inhibition of aggressivity determined by the driver`s authority in the front segment, the nonverbal dominance and aggressivity cues are usually more present in the back side of a tram. The personal space is also larger in the back side. People will usually seek to distance them more from the others compared to the front side. We believe that can be seen as a more intense need of protection that translates in a need for a larger "buffer zone". Again, the need for protection is smaller in the front side of a tram because of the driver`s authority.

Aside from their perceived authority and aggressive monopoly, the driver`s involvement in the "tram`s social life" is limited. On the contrary, most of them use different tactics of isolation from the people behind, by covering the cabin`s interior window with clothes or ornamental objects. If their concern with the world behind is uncertain, there is a certain preoccupation for taking hold of the cabin space through various forms of personalization, often religious. We assume this practice carries indicators on how the driver would like to be treated when working, and, consequently, how the travellers should behave in his tram. We hold as an argument Rapoport`s point of view expressed in a study on the effects if built environment on human behavior: *"people react to environments in terms of the meanings the environments have for them"* and *"the meaning of an environment is generated through personalization, through taking possession, completing it, changing it".*[18] He underlines the social character of symbols and their role in connection to status, social order and the individual`s place in it: *"the basic point that symbols communicate, that they are social, that they are related to status and represent the social order and the individual's place in it, are all notions that can be studied in other ways-notably through nonverbal communication"*[19].

The metro drivers do not seem to have a similar status or influence on what happens behind them, compared to the tram drivers. In their case the authority does not seem to bypass the limits of their cabin. There are two hypotheses we have in this regard: their posture is not elevated, compared to the tram driver, so they lack an important cue of domination. Also, their perceived authority derived from the driver`s role is divided by two, because the metro drivers always work in pairs. The metro requires two people to perform the same role for which the tram requires only one.

Observation of nonverbal behavior in public transport will generously show cues of territoriality and protection of personal space. There are a number of behavioral patterns that accompany the breach of one`s personal space. Most often this state of perceived inadequacy is minimized by eluding the intruder or intruders` look, like a symbolic negation of the uncomfortable

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[18] Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment - A Nonverbal Communication Approach*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1990), 21
[19] *Rapoport, The Meaning of the Built Environment - A Nonverbal Communication Approach,* 48

position. Besides the gestures that indicate a desire to escape, individuals offer cues of nervousness and self-preservation. For example, overriding one`s personal space will usually result in a more alert rhythm of breathing.

We have identified two forms of isolation in travellers: spatial – when one chooses to stand in the most remote area of a tram or metro wagon - and social, when one avoids interaction with others by exhibiting specific indicators of reclusion, such as headphones, handling the telephone or "diving" into the lecture of newspapers or magazines. These types of isolation cues are much more present in the case of younger travellers compared to the other age groups. Another reason for the desire of isolation seem to be the "overloads". The travellers carrying heavier objects usually enter the back segment of the tram because they estimate they would be less likely to disturb the others in that side. However, when entering an empty tram, two people carrying a large box will almost always sit in the back. If the same people would enter the tram without any overload, their placement option will most likely be different. One possible reason for this is the perceived association of overload with lower status and manual labor, which would influence the individual into thinking his most appropriate position at that moment is in the back segment of the tram (the *blue collar* segment).

The metro clock has facilitated the investigation of a specific dimension of the perception of time: the attitude towards waiting, or towards "useless time". The waiting generates nervousness signals that climax when the clock resets, after ten minutes from the departure of the last metro. There are several approaches in handling the waiting stress. They are influenced mostly by how much each individual values his time in that moment. Thus, the travellers that value their time most tend to look more often to the metro clock and stand closer to the platform limit. The others are more likely to rest on the chairs while waiting for the metro. Another nonverbal pattern is linked to the relief gestures when the train`s arriving sound is heard from the tunnel. Such gestures are groans or sudden turns of the head.

Beggars and ticket inspectors represent the social types of exclusion and coercion. The travellers tend to regroup and rethink their territoriality when confronted with their presence, and seek to avoid contact through such gestures as turning the head away in a symbolic denial of their presence. In the *intruders'* category also fall the travellers that force their entrance in an overcrowded tram or metro. Confronted with the intruder`s entrance efforts, the travellers inside the tram or metro will adopt a *team behavior* (in Goffman`s terms) or solidarity by spontaneously generating a group norm that defines the acceptable crowding degree and sanctioning the intruders. Once they manage to force their way into the tram or metro, the former outsiders will adopt the same team behavior and sanction the ones that try to enter after them.

Ticket inspectors usually tend to avoid the back segments of the tram, probably sharing the same perception of a higher risk of aggression and deviance. Together with the drivers, the ticket inspectors are the only ones that share a formal role in the tram space, and the only ones that rely on a formal authority. However, if the inspector`s authority is coercive, the driver`s formal authority is more reminiscent of a *low-status gatekeeper*. Returning to Auge`s terms, we may observe the tram represents a *place* for the driver and the inspectors, and only a symbolic space for the rest of the travellers.

Conclusions

In decoding the symbolic relations established in public transport we left from a set of dimensions that were extended over the course of the research. The study generated an important number of hypotheses and explanatory models for some of the behaviors that were observed. A simple passage through Bucharest by public transport will, in most cases, offer an image of the social diversity of the city. Travelling and observing frequently and persistently the same means of

transport will emphasize, in time, recurring behaviors of the same individuals and offer different cues for interpreting these.

The main findings of this study rely on the symbolism of the relations established inside means of public transport. The spatiality specific to trams is mostly induced by the driver`s perceived authority. Also, the isolation and self-preservation behaviors are some of the most relevant findings that would benefit from further research.

We sought to test our hypotheses by discussing with a number of frequent travellers, but their inputs were merely seldom relevant. Much of the behavior we observed and interpreted proved to be unconscious and instinctual, rather than rational and intentional.

The natural follow-up to this study would be extending it to even more means of transportation from different cities and eventually verifying the hypotheses through experimentation and quantitative data.

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