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Habitus and the loser cruiser: How low status deters bus use in a geographically limited field

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ABSTRACT

Buses are often described as a low status mode of transport, or as a mode of transport of last resort. They are widely regarded to be the province of the most socially and economically disempowered members of society. What is unclear is whether the low status of buses deters wider bus use. This paper explores the interplay between status and habitus, suggesting that an anti-bus disposition (an ingrained feeling of incompatibility with bus use) deters bus use amongst a middle-class group of managers and professionals. Further, it proposes that this anti-bus disposition operates in a geographically limited field; that is, people who are deterred from bus use in one location may quite happily use buses in another. The paper concludes with brief recommendations on how to address an anti-bus disposition and encourage bus use.

1. Introduction

There is considerable consensus in academic literature that buses are a low status mode of transport (Beirão and Sarsfield Cabral, 2007; Ellaway et al., 2003; Goodman et al., 2013; Green et al., 2014; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Musselwhite and Haddad, 2010; Sadalla and Krull, 1995; Stokes and Hallett, 1992). Although bus use appears to be entirely normal in some cities—such as London (Steinbach et al., 2011)—bus users are more commonly described as being amongst the most economically and socially disempowered members of society (Angrosino, 1994; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Guiver, 2007; Hiscock et al., 2002; Jain, 2011; Pooley et al., 2013; Sadalla and Krull, 1995; Shaw and Docherty, 2014). Cohorts of bus users are described as including disproportionately large numbers of older people, single mothers, recent immigrants, ethnic minorities, domestic service workers, people on low incomes, and people with disabilities (Angrosino, 1994; Green et al., 2014; Sheller and Urry, 2000). The absence of higher status social groups from buses is sometimes starkly emphasised:

> No manager and no male professional used the bus. (Root et al., 1996, p. 25).

> In many big cities, going to work by bus is a perfectly appropriate thing for even the most affluent of business people to do. But in our city, the bus is the very embodiment of stigma. (Angrosino, 1994, p. 21).

The association between buses and low status leads to buses often being regarded as a mode of transport of last resort (Angrosino, 1994; Clayton et al., 2016; Green et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2012; Root et al., 1996; Shaw and Docherty, 2014). In the context of Christchurch, New Zealand, buses are sometimes referred to as "loser cruisers", implying that only a "loser" would catch a bus (Meadows, 2012; Moore, 2010). This sentiment is echoed in the alleged quote of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher: "A man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure" (Hansard, 2003). There is little evidence that Margaret Thatcher ever spoke these words (McKie, 2005), but this phrase is often repeated as an illustration of the low status of bus use (see for example Hansard, 2003; Shaw and Docherty, 2014).

Although the low status of buses is widely recognised in some parts of the world, there has been little research assessing whether this status influences bus use. Some authors, however, present arguments that implicitly assume bus use to be influenced by status concerns. For example, Moore (2010, p. 149) argues that "widespread use of the bus will never occur if it's viewed as the 'looser cruiser'", and Shaw and Docherty (2014, p. 36) report that, in many places, buses "have become viewed as a 'last resort' means of transport…and are not the kind of travelling environment that many car drivers would be willing to consider".

In addition, several authors have described certain transport initiatives as distancing bus use from low status and so facilitating increased bus use. Such initiatives include the introduction of free bus travel and the creation of a norm of bus use (Goodman et al., 2013); the creation of park and ride services, primarily used by people who own

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cars and so who do not share the status of carlessness (Shaw and Docherty, 2014); and the development of bus services targeted specifically at wealthy and middle class patrons (Jaffe, 2014; Jain, 2011; Leap Transit, n.d..). Despite all of these indications that low status is thought to deter bus use, there is very little systematic, published evidence discussing the influences of status on bus use.

Application of the concept of habitus may help to shed light on the influence of low status on bus use practices. The concept of habitus, popularised by Bourdieu, refers to the way in which a person's socialisation embeds in them a set of durable tastes, habits, and dispositions that then guide their later choices and practices (Bourdieu, 1984; Clarke et al., 2003; Sallaz, 2010; Setten, 2009). Habitus is neither immutable nor deterministic, but it "ensures that individuals are more inclined to act in some ways than others" (Setten, 2009, p. 1). This paper argues that extended socialisation—in a context in which bus use is associated with low status—might result in durable tastes that deter bus use.

The influence of habitus results in certain practices feeling as though they are second nature (Hitchings, 2012; Setten, 2009; Shove et al., 2012). This influence can go unnoticed precisely because the resulting practices "appear 'natural,' 'sensible,' or 'reasonable'" (Pred, 1981, p. 8). One of the few studies to consider habitus in a transport context focused on cycling in London. The authors concluded that the influence of habitus on transport practices could be difficult to observe:

> Traveling in general is performed in ways that are not consciously considered as gendered, or ethnic, or representative of particular class segments. In London, one simply prefers to walk, or uses public transport, in ways that can appear natural. That these dispositions are part of a *habitus* is only visible in the breach, when normalised routines are disrupted, as they are when one considers taking up cycling. (Steinbach et al., 2011, p. 1129).

In London, a person may appear to simply prefer to walk or use public transport; in other locations, other modes of transport may appear to be preferred but may equally be subject to the discrete influence of habitus.

One important feature of habitus is that it operates on a non-conscious level. Responses to habitus usually appear to be unthought or "prereflexive" (Sallaz, 2010, p. 323). As Bourdieu explains, "the schemes of the habitus…owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466). That habitus operates on this non-conscious, non-discursive level is one of the reasons for habitus often going unnoticed. Individuals often do not recognise their own habitus, and research may struggle to access that which cannot be directly observed and which is rarely discussed. It may be easier to identify the implications of stigma and social norms, which are more often defined as conscious and explicit (Deacon, 2006; Goffman, 1963; Hewstone and Martin, 2008; Link and Phelan, 2001; Simon and Trötschel, 2008). Habitus, however, provides for a more subtle and less consciously mediated influence of status associations.

Bourdieu describes habitus both being influenced by, and influencing practices within and across 'fields'. A field is a relational space in which people struggle over the distribution of some kind of capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 2009; Jenkins, 2002; Swartz, 1997; Wacquant and J. D., 1989; Webb et al., 2002). For example, in the field of commuting people might struggle for symbolic capital through commuting in ways that accord them more status or prestige than their peers. It is—intentionally on Bourdieu's part—difficult to define where a field starts and stops and what exactly it includes (Wacquant and J. D., 1989). This makes the concept difficult to pin down, but in a practical sense, allows for evolving (rather than rigidly defined) social situations and for appropriate fields to be identified for any given research question. On a very basic level, it can be helpful to think of a field as a social context to which a piece of research refers. This research considers the broad field of everyday transport in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Christchurch is New Zealand's second largest city and the largest city in the South Island (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). It has a population of just over 340,000 and has a polycentric urban form that was compounded by a series of major earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 that significantly damaged city centre infrastructure and disrupted public transport networks (Bogunovich and Budgett, 2014; Buchanan et al., 2006; Steele, 2018). Transport is heavily dominated by private car travel, with around 84% of people's journeys being made by car (Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy Partners, 2009; Statistics New Zealand, 2015). Public transport in Christchurch consists primarily of bus use; the city also has one public ferry service to an outlying settlement. Christchurch currently has no urban rail provision.

User surveys have recorded high satisfaction with Christchurch bus services (Environment Canterbury, 2016). A more general survey (that included respondents who had not recently used a bus) showed more mixed perceptions of bus services, however, more than half of respondents agreed that buses were easy to access (73%), safe (67%), frequent (59%), affordable (55%), and reliable (54%) (Colmar Brunton, 2016). Despite some positive perceptions of buses, Christchurch buses are commonly referred to as "loser cruisers" (Meadows, 2012; Moore, 2010) and discussions of the low use and poor image of buses abound in local media (Anderson, 2015; Harris, 2018; Mitchell, 2016; Small, 2016; Steele, 2018).

Despite the difficulties inherent in researching habitus, this paper presents evidence to suggest that habitus influences bus use in Christchurch. Although research participants argued that they did not reject bus use because of its low status, their habitus appeared to incorporate status associations that lead them away from the use of bus services. The remainder of this paper uses a framework of habitus to explore the influence of low status on bus use in Christchurch.

2. Methods

Research participants were recruited through Toastmasters public speaking clubs.[1] Toastmasters are predominantly highly educated, well paid, managers and specialists (Toastmasters International, 2013)—people whom we might expect (following Angrosino, 1994; and Root et al., 1996) to be unlikely to use low status bus services. I gave a speech explaining the research and asking for volunteers at six different Toastmasters clubs in Christchurch, New Zealand. There are over thirty Toastmasters clubs in Christchurch and at the start of the project participating clubs were chosen for convenience; later clubs were chosen purposively to ensure a diverse participant cohort in terms of age and gender. For example, to fill an emerging gap in the participant cohort I visited one club known to have a high proportion of young adult members. Thirty-two percent of those who saw the recruitment speech volunteered to take part.

A cohort of 32 people participated in the research. This small group was not representative of the wider population but was appropriate for in-depth, exploratory, research using qualitative methods.[2] Many of the participants were working aged managers and professionals with above average incomes. None of the managers or professionals used a bus during a travel diary period. Five participants did report bus use in their diaries; two of these participants were technicians, two were students, and one was an unpaid carer. Overall, around 3% of the journeys recorded in participant diaries, were taken by bus. This is broadly comparable to the share of journeys made by public transport in New Zealand (Ministry of Transport, 2015).

Each participant took part in a focus group designed to investigate

[1] For more information about Toastmasters visit www.toastmasters.org.

[2] For examples of similar approaches, see Brown, 2012; Cook et al., 2016; Meth, 2003; Middleton, 2010.

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