

Mitigating Tension on Public Buses

The Reason Behind the “Musical Chairs”

Camille Koué
Georgetown University
Professor Ribes
May 13, 2013

Introduction

I have been a dedicated public bus rider for close to a decade, choosing to forego the underground tumult of the metro for the heightened sense of community I experienced above ground on the public buses of Washington, D.C. Observing human behavior on public buses is a favorite past time of mine, and one behavior in particular piqued my interest, the classic dance of musical chairs, the strategic taking and offering of seats on the bus. I wanted to better understand the motivations behind the relinquishing of seats, and so I turned the attention of my research to the behaviors surrounding the priority seats on public buses. My field site was limited to D.C. Metrobuses. These are the public buses owned and operated by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). This excluded the D.C. Metro, any and all private buses, as well as the D.C. Circulator bus, another type of public bus in D.C. which is a public-private venture.

Priority seats are the seats at the front of the bus which are generally understood as being reserved for people with disabilities and for the elderly. I initially chose to focus on only these seats because most of the “musical chairs” I had observed took place around the priority seating, likely because relinquishing these seats to a certain criteria of people, the disabled and the elderly, is perceived by the broader public to be required by law. Often these seats are relinquished by one person for another person without controversy, as a seated passenger quickly vacates his priority seat for someone who he, for some reason, feels should sit in the seat instead of him. However, sometimes conflicts emerge, in small ways, such as a person who feels deserving of a priority seat quietly requesting and quickly receiving one from a person already sitting in such a seat, or in larger ways, for example when multiple bus riders get involved in the discussion over the “rights” to priority seating. While seeing almost no examples of the latter while riding the bus, I found multiple examples of this type of dialogue online during my research.

There came a point in my study when it became clear that I needed to broaden my object of research from priority seats to all seats on the bus. After conducting several interviews, I realized that containing my research to priority seats was not the correct object of research for what I was actually interested in. I was interested in the motivations behind the relinquishing of seats in general. Thus, I adjusted my object of research accordingly, and broadened the scope of my research object to include all seats on the bus. However, my underlying question remained the same; what motivates public bus riders to relinquish their seats to someone else?

As described in my findings section, I went on a theoretical journey. At first, I believed that the act of relinquishing a seat was based on moral judgements and so I was viewing the act through the lens of right and wrong. I was trying to understand how people categorized concepts such as “disabled” and “elderly” in an attempt to explain how their morality motivated them to give up their seat. During this process I was able to identify some interesting themes, such as the use of visual cues, like a cane or grey hair, to determine the “technical fit” of someone into a disabled or elderly category. However, there emerged an entire other category of emotional cues which I wasn’t able to understand for quite some time. I had the feeling that there was a theme that connected the visual and emotional that I hadn’t yet uncovered.

After further research, the theme emerged: organizational motivation. As one of my interview subjects put it, there is a need to “control...the chaos of riding public transportation” (Vasey Coman, personal communication, April 10, 2013). By the end of my research, I came to view motivation in a way far from how I had initially been looking at it. Instead of being motivated by morality, I realized that the act of relinquishing a seat was motivated by the desire to organize a disorganized environment, made so by vague social rules. The absence of clear rules leads to a constant renegotiation of space and relationships on the bus. This in turn leads to a sense of disorganization that creates a build up of tension, or stress, on public buses. The act to relinquish or not relinquish a seat is an attempt at mitigating this tension, and controlling and organizing a chaotic and disorganized environment.

Literature Review

In the academic literature, the word “stress” is often used in place of the more colloquially used “tension” to describe a sense of mental unrest. In “Toward A Sociology of Public Transit,” the first sociological analysis of public buses, authors Davis and Levine (1967) acknowledge the disorganization and stress associated with riding public transit. They write that “Short trips on public transit frequently exhibit stressful sociological characteristics....Transit riders engage in various small conflicts and in low-level, but persistent and focused, games of anticipation,” (Davis & Levine, 1967). Davis and Levine (1967) highlight the lack of clearly defined social rules by describing the consequences of such uncertainty, the constant readjusting of positioning and renegotiating of relationships that goes on on public transit. They write that a “Lack of social structure is...characterized by frequent rearrangements and redistributions of passenger complements as riders enter and depart....Behavior in public transit situations exemplifies a range of human conduct that obtains when...individuals are not guided in their actions by established and reciprocal role relationship” (Davis & Levine, 1967). They attribute the motivation of passenger behavior to riders’ “exit-orientation,” their total focus on, from the moment they enter the bus, exiting the bus (Davis & Levine, 1967). What Davis and Levine (1967) do not do is connect the dots between “lack of social structure” and “exit-orientation,” which is what my research does. By going a step further, my research explains the motivation for actions taken while riding the bus, focusing on seat relinquishing, but more generally including things like “exit-orientation.”

In “Social Control on Public Buses” authors Connor and Tewksbury (2012) focus on how informal social control expresses itself on public buses. They define social control as “patterns of pressure a society exerts in order to maintain order and established rules” (Connor & Tewksbury, 2012) In Erving Goffman’s analysis of social interaction in public spaces in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he describes social organization through his projected self definition principle:

“Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact

to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be, and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals" (Goffman, 1959).

With this principle he argues that social organization relies on people representing themselves authentically and in return being treated appropriately. Applying this principle to Connor's and Tewksbury's (2012) definition of social control illuminates the process that riders go through, individually and as a community, of establishing and clarifying rules on public buses. This definition and principle working in tandem also help to explain the need for rules and the consequences of vaguely defined rules.

In 1999, researchers presented a paper at the International Conference of the Stress and Anxiety Research Society which elaborated on the two established stress-coping techniques of problem-focused and emotional-focused, by viewing stress management as multidimensional (Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, & Taubert, 1999). Their research produced a Proactive Coping Inventory that consisted of seven scales: the Proactive Coping Scale, the Reflective Coping Scale, Strategic Planning, Preventive Coping, Instrumental Support Seeking, Emotional Support Seeking, and Avoidance Coping (Greenglass et al., 1999). Two of these coping scales, Preventive Coping and Avoidance Coping, appeared in the behaviors of bus riders' actions regarding seat relinquishing. Preventive Coping, they write, "deals with anticipation of potential stressors and the initiation of preparation before these stressors develop fully" (Greenglass et al., 1999), while Avoidance Coping "eludes action in a demanding situation..." (Greenglass et al., 1999). Stress management behaviors are clearly applied by individuals riding public buses.

Methods

The primary goal of this study was to understand the motivation behind seat relinquishing on public buses. Data was gathered through participant observation, extant texts, and interviews. The first few weeks of the study were dedicated to participant observation. I rode many different bus lines in Washington, D.C. at different times of day and noted the interactions I witnessed around priority seat relinquishing.

There were two types of extant texts that I incorporated into this study, online documents and prior research. I searched the Internet for articles that had been written about conflicts surrounding priority seating issues on D.C. public buses. I found several blogs on the subject which provided a wealth of content in their comments sections. I took these online comments and coded them. These comments provided me with a rich data set from several dozen people discussing their attitude towards relinquishing priority seats. After coding this data I was able to form categories. However, as Kathy Charmaz (2006), one of the world's leading theorists of Grounded Theory, argues, online content is difficult to theorize from exclusively because it can lack sufficient context. In order to substantiate the online data, I conducted in-person and email

interviews. The second type of extant texts I looked at were prior research which is discussed in the Literature Review section of this paper.

I conducted five interviews; two women and three men, all with a history of riding public buses. The first woman was a new mother who had ridden the D.C. public bus system throughout her pregnancy. The second woman was a young professional who rode the bus as a common form of daily transportation in San Francisco. One man I interviewed was a D.C. Metrobus driver. The two other men were young professionals who use the public buses often as a form of transportation around D.C. As Charmaz (2006) writes, grounded theory questions need to be open enough to allow information to emerge from the answers, so I used very open-ended questions, asking my interviewees to tell me about their experience riding public buses and explain to me their thought process when it came to giving up their seat. Consistent themes appeared across all three forms of data collection.

Findings

While studying my original object of research - the act of relinquishing a *priority seat* on a public bus - early themes emerged: avoidance, proaction, technical fit, and fairness. The first two themes, avoidance and proaction, were ways in which people dealt with the stress of seat relinquishing. They were often mentioned in the online comments and interviews, and are consistent with stress coping techniques that have been identified in prior research (Greenglass et al., 1999). In the online comments, a number of people wrote about never sitting down in order to “avoid issues” (Alpert, 2012). Also discussed was the tactic of avoiding eye contact, the idea being that if someone doesn’t notice a disabled person on the bus, they won’t have to get up for that person (Alpert, 2012). The mother I interviewed said that she would “sometimes see people trying to avoid eye contact” with her when she was pregnant, so as not to have to confront the conflict of relinquishing, or not, their seat to a pregnant woman (Personal communication, February 20, 2013). Proactive people, on the other hand, worked hard to prevent tension build-up by staying alert. They were quick to identify people who might need their seat and quick to relinquish their seat. Many proactive people believed that those sitting ought always to ask those standing if they needed a seat. As one commenter put it “‘Miss/Ma'am/Sir, would you like to sit?’ is all it takes” (Alpert, 2012). Another commenter wrote “Especially if you're in priority seating, you need to be paying attention to the people standing around you” (Alpert, 2012).

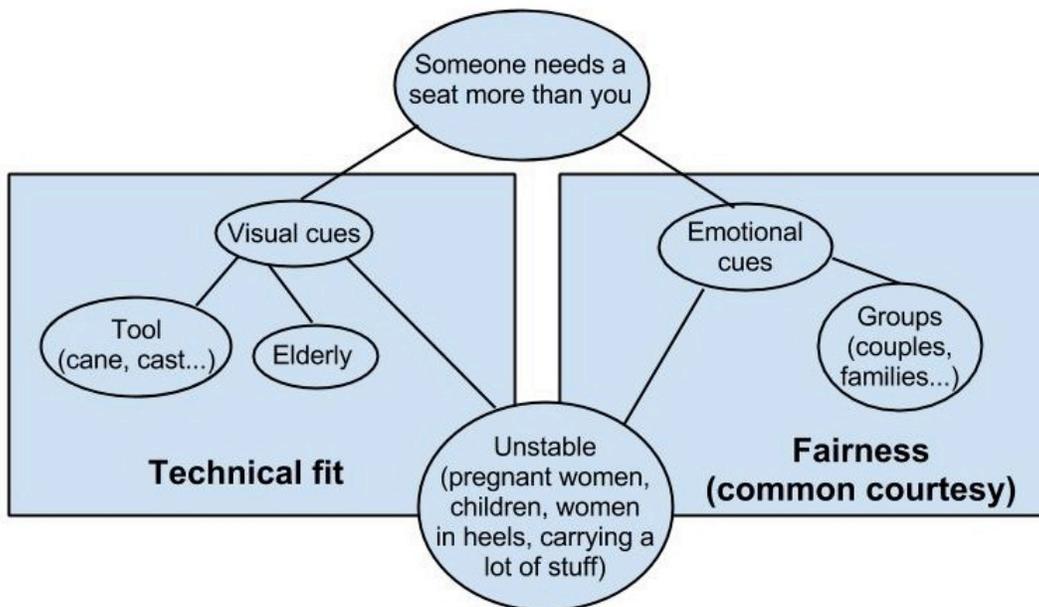
The second two themes, technical fit and fairness, were ways in which people determined whether or not they were going to vacate their seat for another person. In order to flesh out these two categories I created a chart (Figure 1). These categories were based on visual cues and emotional cues. Visual cues provided proof, like canes, limps, and grey hair, to determine if someone “technically fit” the definition of a person who had the “right” to sit, such as a disabled person or an elderly person. These types of visual proofs were important because many people commented that they were often unsure if someone was disabled or elderly and felt uncomfortable offering a person a seat for fear of offending that person. For example, offering a woman a seat because she looks pregnant worried many people, because if she was not pregnant the woman might be offended by the gesture. Also, offering an older looking person a seat

implies that they look too old to stand stably, and they might take offense to that insinuation. Some people discussed ways in which they tried to make their circumstances more obvious, so as to assuage any confusion a seated rider might have over their condition. The mother I interviewed said that she would unbutton her coat in order to expose her pregnant stomach (Personal Communication, February 20, 2013). On the online comments, one person wrote that she wears a disability bracelet and clearly displays it on the bus (Alpert, 2012).

Emotional cues were more nuanced and difficult to understand. Certain circumstances seemed to triggered something in some seated passengers that made them feel someone else would “benefit more” from a seat than they would, as it was described several times in online comments and interviews I conducted. These circumstances tended to revolve around groups of people, such as couples, friends, and families. There was a strong feeling among some that keeping groups of people together was important.

Also interesting to note, as you can see in Figure 1, is the existence of another group of people, which I called the "unstable" population. People in this group belonged in one category or the other based on individual interpretation. Pregnant women were a hotly debated issue. Many felt that pregnant women should be considered disabled. Others felt that pregnant women should not be considered disabled, even though the majority of these people still believed pregnant women deserved a seat.

Figure 1



After realizing that what I was studying was in fact the action of relinquishing any seat on the bus, I broadened my object of research to include all seats, not just priority seats. Around this time, I identified a new theme emerging from my interviews. This new theme revolved around

organizing a disorganized environment, and I began to adjust my understanding of the motivation behind seat relinquishing from a moral motivation to an organizational motivation. This theme emerged when one of my interview subjects told me that "giving people who are traveling together seats next to each other seems to help control some of the chaos of riding public transportation..." (Vasey Coman, personal communication, April 10, 2013). She later repeated the idea of public transit being a chaotic environment, and she described actions taken by people on public transit as ways to control this chaos (Vasey Coman, personal communication, April 10, 2013). In other words, actions taken by people on public transit, such as seat relinquishing, are done out of a desire to organize an environment that is inherently unorganized due to unclear rules. The "technical fit" and "fairness" categories are vague, and as the "unstable" population highlights, people conceptualize these categories differently. As Figure 2 shows, based on the data gathered from online comments and interviews, all the "rules" regarding seat relinquishing on public buses are unclear, they are based on individual interpretations and are constantly being renegotiated as people enter and exit the bus.

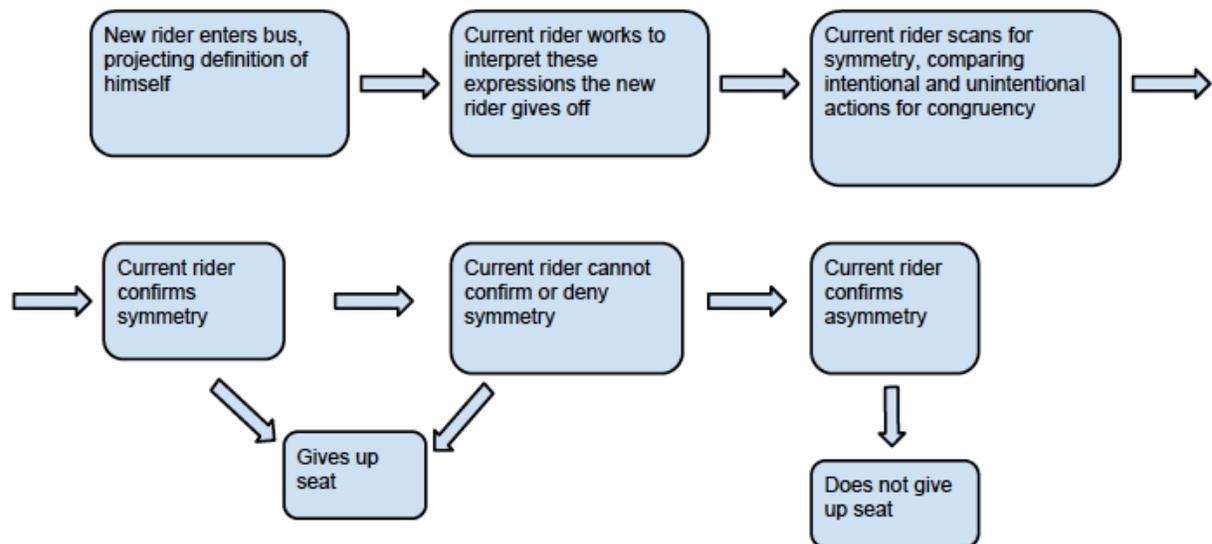
Figure 2

Clearly defined rules	Vaguely defined rules (individual interpretation and constant renegotiation)
	Disabled
	Elderly
	Women
	Women in heels
	Pregnant women
	People carrying a lot of things
	Children
	People with children
	Groups/couples/ families

Goffman's (1959) projected self definition principle does an interesting job of explaining how people go through the process of clarifying vague rules, and Figure 3 shows how Goffman's (1959) principle applies to my research. As a new individual enters the bus, he projects a definition of himself to the current riders. For example, if a disabled person enters the bus, the "expression he gives off," meaning the visual cues he supplies, is one of a disabled person (Goffman, 1959). The other riders perceive the new rider as disabled via these visual cues, such

as a limp or the use of a cane, and are socially required to take this person at face value and assume the disability is authentic. However, we do go through a quick authenticity verification process, Goffman (1959) argues, in which we scan for “symmetry,” for the person’s intentional and unintentional projections to agree. For example, when a disabled (unintentional) person enters the bus, if he immediately looks (intentional) for a seat, his intentional actions help us confirm his unintentional circumstance. With symmetry confirmed we are likely to give up our seat. If we identify asymmetry we are more unlikely to give up our seat. However, if we cannot confirm or deny symmetry we are still likely to give up our seat because as a society we live by the projected self definition principle, and assume that the projected self is the true self and thus we are morally responsible to take a person at face value and react in the morally appropriate way. This provides almost a formula for a type of public transportation organization. In shows how, in a public setting in which strangers are interacting and trying to follow informal and vague social rules, we attempt to bring clarity to these rules in order to impose organization.

Figure 3



When viewing motivation in this way, what I had defined as “categories” and “themes” I redefined as, taken from Conner’s and Tewksbury’s (2012) definition of social control, "patterns of pressure a society exerts in order to maintain order and established rules." I initially thought I was going to uncover information on how people acted on their sense of right and wrong on public buses. In the end, the theory I developed posits that actions taken on public buses are motivated more by a desire to organize than by morality. People were establishing these categories, or patterns, such as “technical fit” and “fairness,” not to help them make moral judgement calls so much as to help them mitigate tension on the bus. This tension impacts where on the bus we sit, where we stand, when we sit, when we relinquish our seat and when we don’t.

In order to flesh out the force of tension, I mapped out tension on public buses (Figure 4). The redder the area, the more tension exists. Because there are a limited number of seats, most of

the tension revolves around seats. The most tension exists around the priority seats because people in these seats have the most social requirement to relinquish their seats, and are thus more unsettled. They are aware, in general, of their responsibility to pay attention to other passengers and offer up their seat if they need to, and of the increased possibility that they will be asked to relinquish their seat. People sitting in any aisle seat will also experience a bit more tension than many other riders, since they also have an increased social responsibility to relinquish their seats if necessary. People sitting in the back of the bus don't have to worry much about offering their seat to anyone, because people who need seats are usually offered them towards the front of the bus, and people who are standing do not experience the tension of social responsibility surrounding seat relinquishing, but do experience the general tension of "various small conflicts and...games of anticipation," as Davis and Levine (1967) describe. The place on the bus where the least tension exists is the window seats. People in those seats are blocked in and thus nothing much is expected of them. They are not expected to pay attention to other passengers and scan for people who might need a seat because they are not expected to give up their seat. The other seated passengers are expected to give up their seats first.

Figure 4



Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the motivation behind seat relinquishing on public buses. Through participant observation, coding of online comments, and interviews, this research identified the motivation to be organizational. People riding public buses are motivated in their actions by the need to organize a disorganized environment. This disorganization is due chiefly to the absence of clearly defined rules. Rules regarding seat relinquishing do exist, but are based on visual and social cues that are interpreted differently by every individual and are

constantly being renegotiated as people enter and exit the bus. Furthermore, more accurately than describing them as “rules,” they are “patterns of pressure” (Connor & Tewksbury, 2012) that society has developed over time, based on cultural elements like Goffman’s projected self definition principle, as well as policy decisions that mold our reactions to certain groups of people, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act which enforces disability accommodations on public transit. These patterns of pressure are used by public bus riders to “maintain order and established rules.”

This research is in its preliminary stage. More online content coding, observation, and interviews need to be done until the theory is fully formed. Research could also be done in different social environments. The type and existence of tension may change with the environment. Tension on urban public buses, for example, may be different than that on rural buses. Also, tensions on Southern public buses may be different than on Northern. Racial tensions may affect motivations in certain ways in the South that they don’t so dramatically in the North, as well as the more chivalrous tendencies of the South might increase tensions around women in ways that do not exist as much in Northern cities. However, identifying different types of tension may be beyond the scope of this research. Verifying that tension exists and that mitigating this tension underlies the motivation for seat relinquishing on public transit is the first step.

If validated, this theory could be applied in the design of public buses. By incorporating information gleaned about the role and location of tension on public buses into the design of public buses, we could possibly design-out this tension, or create a bus in which priority seating is more likely to be available or relinquished when needed. However, designing-out the tension could also be rather catastrophic to the functioning of public buses. The system operates rather smoothly. People who need seats usually get them. It is likely that this systems runs as well as it does not in spite of but because of the constant tension, which keeps riders alert, searching for, as Goffman (1959) would say, symmetry, and keeps us, for the most part, offering our seats to those who need them.

References

- Alpert, D. (2012, May 15). Give up your seat on the bus or train to those in need. *Greater Greater Washington*. Retrieved from: <http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/14803/urban-etiquette-when-to-give-up-your-seat-on-the-bus/>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Connor, D. P., & Tewksbury, R. (2012). Social control on public buses. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 4(1), 1-13.
- Davis, M., & Levine, S. (1967). Toward a sociology of public transit. *Social Problems*, 15(1), 84-91.
- Everline, P. (2010). 5 ways transit riders can make transit more accessible. *Greater Greater Washington*. Retrieved from: <http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/6872/5-ways-transit-riders-can-make-transit-more-accessible/>
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Greenglass, E., Schwarzer, R., Jakubiec, D., Fiksenbaum, L., & Taubert, S. (1999). The Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI): A multidimensional research instrument. Presented at the 20th International Conference of the Stress and Anxiety Research Society (STAR), Cracow, Poland, July 12-14.