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Train Travel as an Adventure

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Train Travel as an Adventure

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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With Honors

Department Of

Sociology

By

Stormy Kara

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Train Travel as an Adventure

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Train Travel as an Adventure

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Northern Illinois University

SOCI 490 – Independent Study/Honors Capstone

Dr. Jeffery Kidder

INTRODUCTION

The train is often seen as a slow, old, and antiquated mode of transportation, and the prevalence of train travel in the modern-day United States is nowhere near where it once was. Other methods of transportation, such as the airplane or the automobile, have taken over as primary choices for travelers in the country. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (2022) reported approximately 80,400,000 trips were taken by airplane in July 2022, compared with just 2,500,000 trips taken via intercity rail in the same time period. However, more than 300 intercity trains operate daily via the quasi-public corporation Amtrak and serve over 500 different cities and municipalities across the United States (Amtrak 2023). As such, there is still an obvious demand for rail travel in the country, and Amtrak is continuing efforts to expand their network. In this paper, I argue that the use of intercity rail service allows riders to experience what I call the active co-presence with other passengers by permitting a unique freedom of movement while traveling. Additionally, I provide evidence for the ways intercity rail increases social connectivity in rural areas that otherwise have few transportation options by the private automobile.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transportation in Rural America & Social Capital

Individuals living in rural municipalities often have few options when it comes to travel. Many rural areas often lack passenger service, be it intercity bus or rail, or an intracity public transit system. Although approximately half of rural counties in the United States had some form of public transportation as of 2002, these systems are often small, infrequent, and poorly connected to other systems and intercity transport (Stommes & Brown 2002). Therefore, the car

is the dominant transportation method for many rural inhabitants and is a necessity for sustaining rural life by providing access to essential services and material resources (Berg & Ihlström 2019).

In general, rural areas provide less potential economic opportunities for young professionals. Due to this, there is an observable “rural youth exodus” out of rural communities (Carr & Kefalas 2009: 1). This exodus includes highly educated individuals, causing an “education gap” where educated populations concentrate in cities seeking greater potential opportunity and mobility. Therefore, it is difficult to fill educated job positions in rural areas such as doctors or teachers, and it may not be viable for small towns to keep these essential services open. This often requires rural residents often to travel farther to access these services.

The car is also necessary for many in rural areas not just to survive, but to thrive. In tandem with allowing access to essential services, the car provides access to community events, gatherings, and social inclusion and capital. Social capital is defined as the connections and relationships among and between individuals, and it provides a range of positive social and economic benefits (Gray, Shaw, and Farrington 2005). Individuals can accrue this capital by attending social events in their community and connecting with fellow residents. Oftentimes in rural areas, these events are only accessible by car. Co-presence is needed for high social capital, and as such social capital in rural areas is extremely dependent on access to automobility (Urry 2002).

This automobility dependence causes an issue, since rural counties often have a higher median age than urban counties – as mentioned above, younger Americans in these areas commonly choose to leave rural communities for the opportunities of more urban areas (Carr & Kefalas 2009; Dize 2019). Since the car is the primary method of transportation in these rural

areas, older Americans in these communities often are reluctant to stop driving, lest they lose their freedom of mobility. Individuals that stop driving (or cannot drive) are less likely to take part in community activities and are more likely to miss important medical appointments, resulting in social isolation which threatens mental and physical health (Dize 2019).

Transportation & Co-Presence

The car. The car has had an extreme and lasting effect on both the physical and social architecture of modern life in America. Classic, pedestrian-focused urban architecture has given way to postmodern, quickly read, driver-focused signs and surfaces; Sheller and Urry (2000) invoke visualizations of the infamous Las Vegas Strip as an example of the latter. The way individuals interact with the urban landscape has also been altered. The spatial liberty of the car has caused “the dispersal of places across space” (p. 742). Essentially, things are farther because the car allows it. Dense, walkable urban centers have given way to sprawling suburbs and soaring highway interchanges. An average one-way commute in the United States was almost twenty-eight minutes, and round-trip commutes up to an hour or more are common (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

Regardless, for many, the car is a symbol of personal freedom (Sheller & Urry 2000). The car is a private space, insulated from the public space outside. The car also provides access to a seemingly limitless number of places at nearly any time, and it allows the driver to feel in control of their mobility. As Sheller and Urry (2000) argue, both the spatial stretching of places and trends in architecture and urban planning (for example, drive-thrus and drive-ins keeping people in their cars for longer) have reduced social co-presence in public space. As such, public space has largely been eroded by the car, both by its required infrastructure and the ability to

provide seamless, isolated journeys between places (also see Bissell 2009). In short, the car trip is largely an isolated experience.

The train. Compared to the car, other transportation methods such as the train or the plane offer a unique travel experience. Individuals travel together on these modes, and as such the experience and behaviors of the passengers are markedly different than they would be in the car. Sometimes, this difference can cause a negative social experience. As Bissell (2009) shows, being in the same space as others can cause an alienating effect as passengers negotiate for space, and the close proximity to others can cause feelings of vulnerability. Railcars as a space rely on a “game of social interaction” as passengers enact performances in order to feel more comfortable while traveling together, such as sitting at an angle away from another passenger or creating a “safety bubble” around the self by utilizing headphones (p. 58).

However, train or plane travel can also be a positive social experience. Passengers can feel a sense of solidarity or collectivity from events experienced by all passengers. For example, a delay may cause passengers to attempt to form connections with fellow travelers in order to ascertain information, or to manage the vulnerability the self feels as a result of this disruption (Bissell 2009). These disruptions, while frustrating, cause a shared sense of collectivity, and the reliance of passengers on others reduces alienation and “opens up [the] space” (Bissell 2009: 62). There is also an implicit trust between travelers – such as asking a fellow passenger to look after one’s belongings, whether verbally or implicitly, while they use the restroom.

Although the close proximity to strangers can be alienating and uncomfortable for some, the collectivity and shared performances of passengers cultivate an atmosphere of co-presence and sociality. An otherwise unrelated group of individuals comes together for the purpose of

travel and are bound by the norms and values of that method of transportation. Jain (2009) discusses the bus door as a “portal” to begin the journey, and that disembarking from the bus releases the individual from the connection with the other passengers. This idea of the transportation vehicle as a portal can be extended to the train.

Summary

Rural areas often have few choices when it comes to transportation, and the car is often the only viable option for residents of these communities to sustain their livelihoods and social capital. This automotive dependence causes the relatively older populations of these areas (due to youth exodus) to continue driving and reduces the potential social capital of those who do not or cannot drive. As a method of transportation, the car is an isolated, private space that allows for freedom of mobility but lower co-presence in public space. In contrast, the train journey is a social experience with high co-presence among riders.

DATA & METHODS

The data for this paper comes from semi-structured interviews with Amtrak train station attendants (N=1), station volunteers (N=2), and city officials (N=2) in northern Illinois, as well as informal interviews with Amtrak train passengers conducted during intercity rail journeys (N=14). I also conducted approximately ten hours of participant observation while on trains and in stations. Interviews with train passengers were conducted on two separate dates across three different trains: the long-distance westbound #3 Southwest Chief and eastbound #4 Southwest Chief between Mendota and Princeton, and the short-distance state-supported westbound #381 Illinois Zephyr between Mendota and Galesburg. The passengers were asked where they were

going and why they were taking the train, how they accessed the train, and what they liked or didn't like about their experience with the train. The station attendant, volunteer, and city officials were asked about their connection to train service in their respective communities, what benefits they perceived the train brought to their communities, and whether the train was important for that community.

The individuals interviewed spanned a wide range of demographics. On-train interviews were conducted with college students, young adults, middle aged adults, and older adults. Of these, twelve interviewees were female, and two were male. The station attendant interviewed was an older male, and the station volunteers interviewed were an older male and a younger male. The city officials were a male city clerk and a female transit director.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Why Take the Train?

The interviews conducted revealed common themes as to why individuals take the train, and why cities and towns invest in this method of transportation. A common reason for taking the train (especially over driving or flying) was the ease and convenience of the train. Not having to worry about traffic or parking at their destination was a common refrain (especially as many passengers were en route to Chicago). When asked why they took the train, one respondent said "...I mainly took it over driving [...] because I think it's easier than getting on the highways and worrying about traffic."

Another popular reason for taking the train was its relative low cost compared to other methods. Individuals utilizing the train over driving don't have to potentially pay for parking at their destination, and don't have to worry about paying for gas. The train is also cheaper overall

than flying – booking a flight from Chicago to St. Louis a month out would cost a traveler about \$125 base fare, while Amtrak between the two cities can be as low as \$25 for coach. As another respondent said they took the train because they “couldn’t afford to fly.” Another said they “...like the fact that I can pay very little money for [the train].”

Adler (1989) writes that “train travel has come to be nostalgically cultivated as a slow-paced alternative to the airplane” (p. 1378). Although travel via train often takes longer than traveling by car or plane, many respondents lauded taking the train as being an “experience”, or an “adventure.” One claimed that “there’s nothing like taking the train”, and a few mentioned that taking a train journey (especially long-distance) was a longtime want for them. The train allows a unique visual and social travel experience not found on the plane. For example, the train provides up close views of the passing landscape – especially in the aptly-named observation car. Long distance routes which cross visually appealing parts of the country (such as the Pacific coastline, or across the Rockies) are popular.

The accessibility of train travel was also a common theme. One interviewee disclosed they were legally blind and unable to drive, so Amtrak was their main method of intercity transport. Amish individuals commonly take Amtrak to access medical services, one respondent told me. I observed a few Amish families utilizing the train and overheard that one family was in fact using Amtrak to access medical services. There were many examples of residents of smaller communities utilizing the train to travel to Chicago and to have access to entertainment, professional opportunities, and more that they otherwise might not have. The reverse is also true; the train provides access to these smaller communities and their unique businesses and events that may not be found in the city. This accessibility aspect of the train will be discussed later in this paper.

Factors Against Taking the Train

A common grievance of passengers on the train were the delays commonly experienced on the journey. In fact, several of my informal interviews were completed while the train was making unscheduled stops in between stations. As mentioned earlier, although this collective experience can create a sense of solidarity between passengers through reliance on others (Bissell 2009), delays do cause frustration and stress (see van den Scott 2009 for a discussion on flight delays in Arctic Canada). Long-distance routes are often more delayed than shorter routes, and this unreliability can be discouraging to potential riders. The station volunteer recalled a time when a particular long-distance train was twenty-one hours late. A few passengers expressed their frustration with delays. When asked what they don't like about the train, one passenger said: "I don't like the stops [...] when we got on it, it was like a four-hour delay."

Another complaint from passengers were annoyances from other passengers. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the nature of train travel creates a potentially uncomfortable situation due to the close proximity to strangers. One passenger remarked they were annoyed by other sleeping passengers, saying "[I don't like] everybody snoring when I'm trying to study." A few lamented the difficulty of finding a seat – one passenger that was part of a group said "[it was] hard to get a seat for us to sit together." When I took the train to administer these interviews, I had to sit next to a stranger every time. The unfamiliarity and alienation of the train trip is uncomfortable to some as they negotiate for personal space (Bissell 2009).

Train Travel as an Adventure

Social nature of the train. Traveling by train is a markedly different experience than traveling by plane or automobile. The train provides a relative freedom to move around – a passenger said they felt more “autonomous” on the train than on a plane or in a car. This, combined with the close proximity with others, provides an atmosphere where, as another interviewee put it, “anything and everything can happen.” Although the co-presence with other passengers is only temporary, it’s still an important and unique aspect of train travel. Social connections with fellow passengers are especially important on long-distance trips, as passengers may be sharing a space for multiple days.

The inclusion of a lounge/observation car on many long-distance Amtrak routes can be a great facilitator for social interaction between passengers. While allowing passengers to view the landscape as it passes, it also provides a gathering spot for individuals – it’s a public space within the method of transport. The lounge car acts as the liaison between coach passengers and passengers with roomettes or bedrooms; it’s a space for the whole train. Passengers can develop a sense of collectivity with other travelers in the lounge car, and the landscape has the potential to provide a catalyst for conversation and enjoyable moments of co-presence.

Many of my informal interviews conducted on the long-distance Southwest Chief trains were done in the lounge car, since the car serves as a gathering spot and potential interaction with other passengers on the train is expected. The space is also very conducive to generating a sense of collectivity among passengers – during one of the unscheduled stops mentioned earlier, I observed passengers in the lounge car sharing their frustration about the delay with each other. Such connections are made in an attempt to manage the vulnerability the self feels as a result of the disruption (Bissell 2009).

Although less direct than the lounge or dining car, the negotiation for space and performances between passengers during the journey also contribute to active co-presence. Although dependent on the length of individual journeys (for example, performances between two individuals sitting next to each other in coach for a couple days will have a different effect than those sharing a row for only a few hours), any length of proximity will lend itself to the performances acted out by the passengers. For example, while I was in my seat in a coach car, one passenger walked through the doors connecting the train cars which allowed the clicking and noise of the tracks and cars to be heard in the car. This was just after the train had resumed moving after its unscheduled stop, and one passenger jokingly remarked it was “the duct tape”. Even though they were in coach, they still looked to form a connection with other passengers.

Freedom While Moving. Many of those interviewed mentioned how they chose to take the train because it was a different experience than flying or driving. One couple interviewed said they took road trips often, but that “one of us is always driving. [...] We can’t do this. Relax, have a drink, both look out the window.” When asked why they took the train instead of driving or flying, another interviewee said that the train was “more relaxing.” These responses speak to the uniqueness of train travel – the individual does not have an active role in their mobility. This, combined with the relative autonomy allowed on the train, creates an atmosphere conducive to social interaction and active co-presence.

A few respondents said they chose to take the train for modal variety, either because they hadn’t taken the train before or hadn’t taken the train in a while; one passenger said: “[we thought] oh, we’ve never taken a train trip, let’s do that.” Another said, “We drove last time [...] so we took the train this time.” And another passenger summed it up nicely, saying: “[train

travel] is like, kind of an adventure [...] we've flown a lot, generally.” The uniqueness of the experience of train travel from other methods of transportation (as well as its freedom and autonomy) is appealing to some looking for a modal shift or new travel experience.

The Accessibility of Train Travel

As discussed earlier, a benefit of rail travel is its accessibility. Individuals who cannot or do not wish to drive can utilize the train as a method of intercity transport. The legally blind interviewee who regularly utilized Amtrak is a great example of this. The Amish who use Amtrak to access medical services is another. With respect to rural and small communities served by rail, the train can provide access to entertainment, opportunities, and services to the entire population of these communities. Most of the station volunteers and city officials I spoke with mentioned how both residents from their respective communities and individuals from nearby municipalities would come there to take the train up to Chicago.

By providing a link to a world-class global city such as Chicago, the train can provide the benefits of the city while allowing individuals to reside in these smaller communities. Although driving (or flying, if the option is provided by a nearby regional airport) is an option for the majority of residents, many may choose to travel by train due to the reasons explained earlier – cost, convenience, autonomy, etc. A station volunteer recalled how there were “a bunch of people [in the station] this morning, they were going up to Chicago, there were a couple of ladies that were going up to a play tonight.” The city clerk remarked that an early train to Chicago from their community was popular “because people can then either go to a play, go to museums, they can do shopping, go to meetings, and still be able to come back the same day without too much change to the schedule.”

The train also provides a link between these smaller communities as well. By providing a relatively convenient and cost-effective method of transport between these communities, individuals may be motivated to attend local events or explore businesses in these other towns. For example, one passenger said they took the train just a half hour to enjoy breakfast in a nearby community. The city clerk mentioned that without the train, their community “would have the fight harder to get that tourism attention.” And the transit director for another community along the route discussed how their community coordinated with Amtrak and another municipality to run a special holiday service, connecting with holiday festivities in each town. The transit director also said:

[The train] makes higher education accessible to people, knowing that they can come to a place, especially with being a state university, you're going to have the tuition that might not be as high as well as cost of living to live in. [...] it makes higher education accessible to people knowing that they have a way to get to and from wherever their home base is, [...] that opens up people's ability, being able to see like where they choose to live based on having access to that sort of transportation.

By allowing easy access for students attending that university to the experiences and opportunities of Chicago (and easy access to home for students coming from communities along or near the route), the train makes attending that university more viable for prospective professionals. In fact, Amtrak caters to the student population, providing a 15% discount for students traveling within the Midwest.

CONCLUSION

The unique social transportation experience provided by the train sets it apart from other modes such as the car or the plane. By permitting passengers to move around the train while the train is in motion, and by providing a public social space as part of the train, the train allows for

passenger autonomy while moving and active, social co-presence with other travelers. Many passengers call this unique social experience an “adventure,” and the allure of this adventure combined with the relative convenience and cost effectiveness make the train a popular method of travel for many.

The train also provides another transportation option to residents of rural or less urban areas. The train is an accessible alternative to the car and allows individuals who may not be able to drive mobility and connection. More broadly, the train connects rural areas to larger urban areas, providing the benefits of a global city while allowing individuals to reside in a smaller community. These smaller communities are also connected by the train, linking these communities and motivating individuals to attend local events or explore businesses in these other towns.

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