

*Silas Archambault wrote the following piece for Professor Karen VanGundy's Sociological Analysis class. Silas used this paper as a starting point for research he will be conducting in the summer of 2007, which will be funded by SURF (Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships).*

## **Defining the Public: Planning and Reduced Mobility**

While the automobile is the preferred method of transportation in today's modern society, not all individuals can or want to own a vehicle. Yet, public transportation in the United States and other modern societies often fails those who use it. It is less convenient, efficient, and reliable than a personal vehicle. This is very much because transportation planning in these societies favors private transportation- creating the assumption that everyone can, or wants to, own a personal vehicle. The research questions are: Why is the automobile the preferred method of transportation? Why is public transportation less efficient, reliable, and convenient than private vehicles? Lastly, What groups of people have reduced mobility and why? This literature review will highlight some of the sociological theories that have been created to address these questions. The 'driver-car', 'automobility', and the 'car culture' will be explained. The theories will then be applied and used to explain the impaired mobility experienced by certain groups.

Several groups have impaired mobility due to current transportation system. Groups explored will be recent immigrants, women, low-SES rural families, suburban commuters, disabled individuals, low-SES urbanites, and Atlanta's African Americans in the 1950's. On all accounts, it will be shown that the mobility of the group members is impaired because the transportation system was not created and maintained to suit their needs.

The mobility impairment experienced by certain groups in society by transportation planning can be explained through a social conflict perspective. Policy and law makers generally cater to the rich few rather than the masses. Thus, transportation systems often reflect the needs of the white, male, rich demographic. Transportation has an interlocking nature with socioeconomic status. It is in the

best interest of the powerful to remain the most mobile, and thus, the mobility of other groups is secondary.

This paper will begin with the historical background and the political underpinnings of the rise in private transportation. Then, some current sociological concepts which surround this topic will be discussed. The concepts will then be applied to specific examples of reduced mobility. Finally, an article exploring ways in which transportation planning methods were intentionally used to disrupt mobility in the 20<sup>th</sup> century will wrap up this paper.

### **Historical Background**

It is obvious that Americans like their cars. In 1960, only 29% of households owned a car, but in 1999, 72% did (Dant 2004, 161). There has been a consistent shift towards the private vehicle as the preferred mode of transportation (Dant, 2004; Goldstein and Kurt, 1964; Langan, 2001). However, it is not clear how much of this shift is accountable to changes other than consumer preference.

What is clear is that a factor in the preference for private transportation planning was a systematic dismantling of privately-owned public transportation systems in many urban areas by U.S. car companies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Whitt and Yago, 1985). This was achieved through 'buying out' of the public transit companies by automobile manufacturers. Once owned, the systems were simply shut down, or let to fall into disrepair until they became widely unpopular. By destroying the competition, the public transportation system, car companies helped to create the rise of *car culture* (Whitt and Yago 1985).

Whitt and Yago (1985) also claim that the car manufacturers lobbied congress to create an extensive interstate highway system- one which could only be used by private vehicles. The state highway system was created, and private transportation planning is very popular within governmental organizations such as the DOT. This argument has base in the social conflict theory. Those with money and power also have control over mobility. It keeps the poor poor and the immobile immobile.

However, it cannot be measured how much the success and prevalence of the highway system

was due to car manufacturer lobbying. In any case, and undoubtedly, the best way to travel is by private vehicle (Langan 2001). The dismantling of transit systems during the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly changed the way people get around.

### **Sociological Relevance and Foundation**

Some researchers such as Dant (2004) believe that the car changes the way people interact. His concept, the 'driver-car' is a new creature of sorts, one whose actions are neither that of the driver or of the car. The driver-car can be aggressive, risky, and rude, while the driver does not identify with these traits. In this way, a car is a form of symbolic interaction. Dant (2004) believes that the risky driver-car is responsible for the high rate of vehicle mortality. That is, cars give the drivers a false sense of security, causing them to act in ways they would not normally.

This is quite different from public transportation, which is a group experience, and a passenger only decides *where* to go, not how to get there. While on public transportation, a passenger actually interacts with other passengers. This is very different than a driver-car meets driver-car interaction, which distorts the ways in which people would interact face to face (Dant 2004). Public transit is a group experience while driving is a personal experience. As mobility and independence are of growing importance in the United States and the world, it is important to note how the methods of transportation affect how people interact, and thus, further shape society.

To Americans, independence and mobility are considered deep-rooted rights. After all, the American dream is that people can come to the country, work hard and make their way, moving up in the world. As America is a nation of immigrants (and in fact, this is the main reason it just topped 300,000 residents), the culture reflects those values. The rate of public transportation use declines the longer an immigrant has been in-country (Heisz and Schellenberg 2004). Even if the immigrants do not come to the United States (or Canada, in the case of Heisz and Schellenberg's study) looking for independence and mobility, they soon learn to appreciate them.

Automobility, a concept used by sociologists such as Featherstone (2004), helps to illustrate

why the United States has developed into such a 'car culture'. Automobility is the combination of autonomy and mobility. Thus, automobiles are the embodiment of the American dream. Their widespread, everyday use is a testament to the capitalist ideal. Cars are both objects of desire and what drives and makes that desire possible (Dant 2004).

A personal vehicle enables more autonomy than the current public transportation system (Langan 2001). A car also can go longer distances and faster than a human being can propel oneself, even on a bike (Dant 2004). Anyone who can drive has the same mobility opportunities as the next person (short of intercontinental travel). In this way, cars have a great 'equalizer effect'. I coin this term because I feel it is the political justification for the current preference for private transportation planning in the US. If everyone could drive, the transportation system would be completely equitable.

### **Those Who Do Not Drive**

It follows, then, that individuals dependent on the public transportation system will have reduced mobility. Clearly, public transportation is not the 'choice' form of mobility, so the system is not funded as well, and does not have the social support it needs to function well (Langan 2001). Yet, there are multiple reasons why an individual isn't driving. There are disabilities ranging from muscular to optical to psychological which can prevent individuals from receiving a license (Langan 2001; Yago 1983). Simply, age can prevent an individual from driving, whether they are too young or too old (Law 1999). Cars are also very expensive to own, especially when most states (save NH) require car insurance. This is perhaps the biggest barrier for individuals. While a *family* might own a vehicle, also, it might not serve all family members needs simultaneously- thus necessitating a second car or use of public transportation (Schafft 2006; Fernandez and Su 2004; Goldstein and Mayer 1964).

As any transportation planner will tell you, however, there are plenty of problems with automobile travel. Sweezy (1973) presents a few examples. First and foremost is parking. People want to be able to get anywhere, quickly, with their car. In order for that to happen, parking spaces need to be close to all social centers. Often times, commuters to cities will drive to the city, park, then take a

light rail system to their section of town. It would be easier if the individual just took the train from their home to work. There are also major problems concerning traffic congestion, pollution, and what even President Bush calls our “unhealthy addiction to oil” (Bush 2006). Thus, not all people who choose to use public transportation *have* to use it.

There are a number of reasons individuals would *rather* take public transportation over private. The individual might be afraid of driving and prefers the job be left to 'professionals'. An individual might need to get around so infrequently that they feel a car would be wasteful. Even an individual who travels often might feel like using personal transportation is energy inefficient and would rather take public transportation for the sake of politics/the environment. It could even be so simple as the individual enjoys the opportunity for chance social interactions while on public transportation (Yago 1983).

However, with a few exceptions such as within a city with extensive public transportation facilities, most people feel like they would like to have a car if they could. There is a general feeling that public transportation is *innately* inefficient (Sweezy 1973). Also, there is a strong stigma associated with public transportation use. The public often associates public transit use with poverty or the legal loss of a driver's license. With this mentality, riding public transportation seems to be a punishment.

### **Disabled Individuals**

In order to drive, there are certain qualifications that a person must meet. If one does not meet these specifications, they cannot drive, and thus, they become dependent on the public transportation system. Disabled individuals are perhaps the most dependent of all public transportation users. Langan (2001) has found that since the ADA (American Disabilities Act) was instated, it has widely been recognized that disabled individuals need public transportation and that public transportation *has* to serve the disabled. However, bus lifts and station elevators are often broken and poorly serviced. The failing accessibility makes it inefficient for all riders- disabled or not, because it holds up the

system. Also, interstate bus companies like greyhound are not responsible for being handicapped accessible which inhibits long distance travel for the disabled.

Celeste Langan's article "Mobility Disability" (2001) explores the 'built environment' which can create and diminishes mobility differences between people. Langan makes a clear argument that the transportation system in the United States is simply not *made* for handicapped individuals.

Accessibility needs to be built into the design of transportation systems, instead of laid on top. This is translatable to why city bus systems are inefficient. The buses run on a system designed for private transportation, not for buses which need to fight their way back into traffic after each stop. A well-designed rail system is quite efficient because the trains are not a 'secondary' use of the tracks. They are the reason the tracks were created, and thus, the system is efficient.

Transportation systems (and indeed, the world at large) are rarely designed with disabled individuals in mind. Certainly, if they had been, the individuals would cease to be disabled (Langan 2001). Retrofitting public transit for disabled individuals is expensive, and even with the ADA, disabled individuals have extremely limited mobility.

### **Public Transportation and the 'Public'**

As we can see from disabled individuals, even public transportation is not always designed with the 'public' in mind. Lopata (1980) gives accounts of women in Chicago and their experiences with the public transportation system. Often, the women have to take 3 buses to get to a destination. Also, it is very difficult to carry groceries or children on the buses and commuter trains. Lopata explains this difficulty as a result of the system being designed for working men. The transportation system favors destinations that 'working men' will need, and not those of a mother. Also, working men will carry, at most, a briefcase, but a woman might be carrying a diaper bag, groceries, and a toddler simultaneously. This makes it difficult if not impossible to get around in the city.

The transportation system in Chicago is supposedly one of the best in the world. However, with the accounts of these women, it becomes necessary to ask 'for whom?' when public transportation

systems are created. Women think about, experience, and use transportation differently from men. (Law, 1999) Like in many walks of life, transportation systems are designed for men and are assumed to be translatable to women. Clearly, this cannot be done. If men carried children and groceries as much as women perhaps the system wouldn't disadvantage women *or* men because it would be designed for both. If transportation systems best serve working individuals who cannot afford cars, it is unlikely a non-employed individual could afford private transportation. Thus, the women Lopata and Law speak of use the systems out of necessity.

It is easy to see, in this case, why people prefer private transportation. The automobility one receives with a car is much more satisfactory than three buses and a diaper bag. In order for public transit to be effective, it must meet the needs of its riders. As we've already established, Americans want autonomy and mobility (Featherstone 2004) which means bus stops at the right places at the right times (Lopata 1980; Law 1999).

### **Choosing Public Transportation**

Some individuals prefer to use public transportation over private. For example, a study done in a Canada by Heisz and Grant (2004) shows that there is a positive association with immigration and public transit use. However, they also found that the longer the immigrant stays in the city, the more likely they will be to own a car. The reason Heisz and Grant offer are that many immigrants come from areas of Europe with very efficient public transit systems. They might then expect efficient systems in Canada. The declining prevalence of use over time is accounted for by disenchantment with the system and acceptance of the 'car culture'. Also, immigrants tend to come into cities and then disperse to less dense areas over time- areas with poorer public transportation systems- necessitating a car (Heisz and Grant 2004).

While this is a different country, the transportation culture is very similar to here in the United States. The fact that immigrants become more likely over time to choose private transportation shows the pervasiveness of the 'car culture'. Clearly, the United States and Canada draw immigrants who

share the values of 'independence and mobility', or will at least accept those ideals and incorporate them over time.

Also, like Heisz and Grant (2004), many American sociologists are finding residential mobility to be increasing (Fernandez and Su 2004; Goldstein and Mayer 1964; Schafft 2006). It seems that with greater affluence, there is a corresponding increase in daily physical mobility (Fernandez and Su 2004). In this way, the car might be 'driving' individuals towards a more dispersed life (Dant 2004; Sweezy 1973).

### **Choosing Private Transportation**

People move around the United States for all kinds of reasons. However, residential mobility is often tied to economic factors (Fernandez and Su, 2004; Goldstein and Mayer, 1964; Schafft, 2006). Schafft (2004) shows in that the moves are not always a choice. In fact, in the sample of moves made by families in a poor post-industrial town, Schafft (2004) divides reasons for moving into 'push' and 'pull' factors. For poor families, the reasons for moving are almost always 'pushes', such as eviction or breakup with an intimate partner. Thus, the moves, unplanned, are often to less ideal locations. These new locations have worse access to jobs, resources, and community areas. Poor families often do not have cars, therefore they have very limited opportunities. In this example, social conflict is causing families to move, quite literally, yet they are still plagued with daily immobility.

Many times, however, people do move for 'positive' reasons. One such example, moving from the 'busy city' to the 'quiet suburbs' is a common and increasingly popular trend in the states ( Fernandez and Su, 2004; Goldstein and Mayer, 1964). With personal transportation, commuting to work from remote locations is much easier. As Fernandez and Su (2004) found, the higher skilled the worker, the longer the commute. There is a positive relationship between income and distance between work and home. Many high-profile jobs are in the city, but poverty is also much higher in most US cities than the surrounding suburbs ( Fernandez and Su, 2004; Goldstein and Mayer, 1964). This is because individuals with low economic resources have corresponding low transportation resources, and

residential location has a large influence on job availability. The inner city does not have many low-skilled jobs, perpetuating the poverty of the local residents.

Studying the Providence/Pawtucket area in the early 60's, Goldstein and Mayer (1964) found evidence much like that presented by Schafft (2004) . While workers with higher incomes were moving out of the city in droves, lower income individuals moved into the city because of low rent. For the low-income worker who could afford cars, they would often work in the suburbs they moved out of. This reflects a 'push' in that the suburbs were becoming too expensive to live in, and that made the city affordable. For those without a car, a downward spiral of immobility and unemployment likely followed moving (Goldstein and Mayer 1964). Transportation is another interlocking part of the social class system. The better the transportation, the more advantaged one is, and the more advantaged, the better the transportation opportunities.

### **The Power of Planning**

So far we have seen how transportation planning has given some groups better mobility than others. We've also seen how socioeconomic standing and mobility have an interlocking and synergistic nature. It's been shown that transportation systems rarely meet the needs of every individual. However, transportation planning can even be used as a tool to *create* disadvantage within certain groups. (Bayor, 1988).

In Atlanta during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, planning was a method utilized by lawmakers to preserve and institute racial segregation between blacks and whites. “In Atlanta, the 'city too busy to hate'... there was a strong connection between race and highway-road planning.” Highways, businesses and parks were purposely built over black neighborhoods to create racial barriers. In one instance, the “Atlanta wall” (Joan Browning, *The Southern Patriot*, Jan. 1963), an actual road barrier was created to prevent driving from the black side of a neighborhood to the white side. The disadvantage caused by this discriminatory transportation planning affected mainly black neighborhoods. However, the planning during this time has precipitated the horrendous state of the Atlanta transportation system

today. Now, no one can get in, out, or around the city without hitting hours of traffic. Transportation planning is very powerful. When it is used with only private vehicles in mind, many people are left by the wayside. However, when it is used only to *prevent* mobility, all parties suffer.

### **Conclusion**

The creation and maintenance of the 'car culture' in the United States has a complicated and winding history. There is evidence that the prevalence of personal vehicles was forced rather than chosen by the American public. However, the preference has a clear effect on present-day transportation planning. Cars have a great 'equalizer effect' in that everyone with a car can get to all the same places. However, there are many people who choose not, or can not operate a car. Being a user of public transportation puts an individual into an instant state of reduced mobility, and often disadvantage. However, that disadvantage can be compounded depending on your age, gender, location, and needs for destinations.

Clearly, transportation planning in the United States is far from being 'all-inclusive'. Each area has its own transportation challenges. If we are to live in a 'car culture' in which public transportation will only serve those who cannot drive, the public transit systems need to tailor to the needs of the riders. This would require a large-scale expansion, and an accompanying push to improve public confidence in the system. The half-hearted support of public transportation helps no one, and traps individuals in a cycle of reduced mobility, both geographic and socioeconomically.

More comparative studies of successful public transportation systems in other countries need to be done. Also, research on American's perspectives on public transit would help identify areas of improvement. Lastly, research on the social politics of transportation needs to be done. The sociological research on transportation is severely limited. How we move about in and relate to the world is the basis of transportation, and integral to sociological study. As we become ever more mobile, it is important to discover what that ultimately means for society.

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