

The Phenomenology of Commuting

HOW OUR CHOICE OF TRANSPORTATION SHAPES OUR WORLD

Brian Macke (UWEC), Reed Steele (UMN), Matthew Meyer (UWEC) | Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies



INTRODUCTION

What do we experience when we're commuting? Does it matter which method we choose? Our study of commuters getting to and from the University of Minnesota (UMN) looked at these questions in an attempt to better understand how a commute could shape the world view of the commuter.

METHODOLOGY

INTERVIEWS AND CRITERIA

- We used interviews to collect qualitative responses to ten questions, notably a description of the commute, positive and negative experiences, and how the method contributes to the subject's values.
- Research subjects were chosen based on commuting distance from UMN and predominant use of one commuting method.
- A total of 9 interview subjects, 3 by mass transit, 3 by bike, 2 by car, and a multi-modal commuter.
- Participants were given gift certificates to a metro area bike sharing system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We reviewed 26 articles, with most being commuting studies performed outside the United States. These papers provided insight into the kinds of topics we should explore in the interviews. The research methodology itself was heavily influenced by the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis developed by Smith & Osborn (2003). This method uses a Double Hermeneutic to examine the participant's meaning of life and relies on their perspective for an insider's view of the subject.

COMMUNITY

- Commuters by bus and bike expressed positive attitudes about fellow commuters being part of a community.
 - Both responded positively when seeing the same commuters on their routes every day.
 - One bus commuter noted how bus drivers with positive attitudes influenced their mood.
- All participants expressed apprehension about others who were not like them.
 - Bus commuters disliked non-campus riders
 - Car commuters disliked other drivers
 - Bike commuters disliked cars



University commuters boarding a bus near campus

CERTAINTY

- Participants responded positively to certainty.
 - Car commuters and their routes
 - Transit commuters and timely busses
 - Bike commuters viewed cars positively when they responded predictably to the presence of bikes.
- Uncertainty led to the most difficulty for commuters
 - Cars: Traffic, accidents, construction
 - Transit: Late/early busses, catastrophic weather conditions
 - Bike: wind, erratic drivers
- Example, Participant 9, a car commuter: "You never know when you're going to get into a car accident and how that's going to impact your day. You never know if you're going to get three feet of snow on the way and that's going to affect your commute."



Bridge work on Interstate 35W near the UMN campus

THE POWER OF CHOICE

- People choose their commuting style relatively quickly and stick with it.
 - Bus commuters choose an optimal route based on schedule and distance to the stop.
 - Car commuters choose highway vs. local road, but may switch depending on conditions.
 - Bike commuters embrace the full-year commute by buying all-weather gear or adjusting at-work attire.
- Participants were angry when their preferred methods and routes were taken away from them.
- Example, Participant 1, multi-modal commuter: "There are many times that I've taken my bike when I could but if the weather turned bad I would just hop on the [discontinued] express bus and get home, put my bike on the bike rack on the front of the bus which was very convenient, which is not a problem. I feel like Metro Transit has taken that option away from me."

TRANSPARENCY

- While in motion, a commuter can experience a loss of focus on the vehicle and time can pass quickly.
 - Car commuters get lost in music or conversation.
 - Bus commuters feel like time disappears when they focus on reading or smartphones.
- Negative influences force the commuter to focus on the method and thus time can pass more slowly.
 - Bike commuters feel body strain during harsh conditions.
 - Car and bus commuters can feel trapped by the vehicle or the road.
- Example, Participant 2, transit commuter: "If I'm working on the bus, the bus seems faster to me. But if I don't want to do anything I just want to watch outside the bus, that's slower."

"THE BUBBLE"

- Bikers tend to expand their attention to more of the external world when the commute is easy
- Drivers tend to isolate themselves in their cars when their commute is easy.
- Transit commuters consistently are inside the cabin of the bus or train and almost never examine what's outside this space.
- Example, Participant 5, bike commuter: "With riding the bike I just go down the greenway because there is a greenway with no car traffic. You can just space out, so to speak. And then you can see things, like green space and it's calm, a relatively calm trip."



Minneapolis Midtown Greenway, a popular commuting route.

REFERENCES

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Smith, J.A. and Osborn, M. (2003), "Interpretive phenomenological analysis", in Smith, J.A. (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, Sage Publications, London, pp. 51-80.