Train boarding passengers inbound to Boston at the Fitchburg train station.

Social Order on a Commuter Rail Train:
How trust develops among strangers

BA/MA/Honors Thesis

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I travel all around the city
Go in and out of locomotives all alone
There's no one here and people everywhere...
Here everyone is so vulnerable and I am as well
                     — from the song "Crying", by Björk

Introduction

My train experience

In the summer of 2004 I moved to Massachusetts from rural, northern California so that I could attend a Boston area university that Fall. I quickly discovered that I could not afford to buy a home in Boston, nor in any of its neighboring communities. Like many other people whose livelihood depends upon the Boston metro area, I found myself in Fitchburg, 50 miles away from the city center and dependent upon the Fitchburg/South Action train.

Technically I didn't have to ride the train; I could have taken my car to school. I could have swarmed eastward each morning with a sea of other yawning commuters, dodging acts of road rage, alternating between flying and crawling speeds, and squinting into the rising sun. I could have braved winter ice and snow, gas prices over $3.00 a gallon, and parking fees, all for the luxury of being alone on my commute. But for me, that wasn't much of a choice. Instead I took the train where I could do homework, read, or just gaze out a window.

Public transportation is less developed in the West, and basically absent in the rural areas where I have spent much of my life. Before coming to the Boston area, I had never used a city bus and had only used subways a couple of times. I had never even heard of commuter trains. Needless to say, I was filled with anxiety when I first began riding. I worried about everything from procedures for buying a ticket to strategies of self-protection if the other people on the train posed some kind of threat. I expected to find a fearsome environment, but instead I found it to be

relaxing. After only a couple of months I began to feel like I was an insider. I had a network of "train friends" and acquaintances that included conductors. I had experience enough to know what to expect on the train and to know what was unusual, and managed never to miss my stop no matter how deeply engrossed in my studies I had been during the trip.

Perhaps because I was so unfamiliar with public transportation, the train fascinated me because I noticed that interactions between people on the train resembled friendships, but I could tell that they only existed on the train. There seemed to be increased trust between people who shared a train commute. I soon found out that feelings of increased trust applied to me as well. One night during the Fall of 2004 I arrived in Fitchburg and realized I had locked my keys in my car at the train station. I made a quick decision to ask a fellow passenger for a ride home so I could fetch my spare key. The person I chose was a stranger: a woman whom I recognized but had never spoken to. Much later someone asked me rhetorically why there is so much trust on the train. The question made me think of that night I had hitched a ride. I wondered what it was about sharing a train ride that had made me trust this woman enough to solicit her help though I knew nothing about her. I realized we were not merely strangers; somehow sharing the train had built a relationship between us. But what kind of relationship and how had it happened?

The answer is that there is a system of social order in place on the train which promotes relationships of trust between strangers. This paper identifies and analyses this system. I will explain how public places are managed by the people within them, which includes but is not limited to, how strangers in those public places are managed by each other. I am concerned with public spaces filled primarily with strangers, those public spaces which are found more often in urban than rural areas. In this paper I differentiate between "space" and "place." The reason is because I think of places as geographic locations. Here I prefer to talk of public spaces, because

their boundaries are governed by the extent of their social order, or, the system of behavior expected among people in public spaces. Anyone will admit to the existence of expected behavior if they have heard a mother exclaim to her child, "That is *not* how to behave in public!" This paper will examine social order in the contexts of fear vs. trust, and safety vs. danger. I will examine how people organize themselves in public spaces, asking what behaviors mean in those spaces, and why. I will show how some behaviors are encouraged, and some discouraged, in order to create a shared sense of social order. I will show how, in a place with very little individual control, people place value on the choices they are still able to make. The public space I will examine closely, of course, is the commuter rail train.

Public Spaces and Fear

Public spaces are characterized most importantly by their access. Public spaces, in other words, are open to everyone in a community. In urban areas, this naturally means that many people in that public space will be strangers to each other. With no restrictions on who can be there, the possibilities of who might show up are conceptually limitless. It could be unnerving to consider that people might show up who speak in an unfamiliar language, or wear clothing that is perceived to be indecent. It could be uncomfortable to think that authority figures might show up and watch everyone there. This discomfort is a source of conflict to users of public space.

All public spaces introduce conflict (Goffman 1963, 1971, Hall 1966, Jackson 2004, Jacobs 1961, Lofland 1973), and trains are no exception. This conflict stems from unfamiliarity, competition for resources, lack of control/autonomy, and strangers. On the surface, one can see that public spaces are relatively unfamiliar compared to a person's home or workplace, and that can heighten one's uncertainty while they are there. Since public spaces are shared spaces, that

means resources available in that space will also have to be shared, introducing the possibility of competition for resources (Altman 1975:182). The presence of as few as two people in a public space can signal a possible conflict. Lack of control is a quality of public space because they are designed for the service of many, meaning that individuals must sacrifice individualistic needs and wants. A common example of the lack of control in a public space is when a person requests that the temperature in a room be turned up or turned down, only to be "out-voted." Theoretically, a space that is uncontrollable could become disorderly, which is a frightening thought for many people.

Since public spaces are open to nearly everyone, an individual can sense their lack of autonomy. If public spaces are supposed to serve the needs and desires of the many, then individuals may be required to sacrifice their particular needs or desires. People in public spaces are often concerned about whether or not they even have the right to voice their opinions or complaints for fear of impinging on the autonomy of others using the space. Furthermore, public spaces are areas of accessibility where individuals may be vulnerable to the approach of unwelcome strangers who wish to talk, or distracted from conversation by unwelcome strangers (Goffman 1963:197).

And finally, in an urban public space, people are usually strangers. "The city then, among all the other things that it may be, is also a world of strangers," says Lyn Lofland, "a world populated by persons who are personally unknown to one another" (1973:3). When a person is a stranger, very little information is available to indicate that they are a "safe" person, or one who is trustworthy. The use of public space requires negotiation amongst its occupants for different uses of that space; therefore it becomes important to be able to trust fellow strangers enough to negotiate with them. The combined effect of unfamiliarity, competition for resources, lack of

autonomy, and strangers can make public spaces frightening. Since the spaces are public, official rules governing the uses of them can be limited, and this creates a need for social management to occur in order to achieve a collective sense of safety. Without order and control of the space as well as the strangers there, there is potential for chaos! This is why public spaces are places of conflict and can be a source of fear.

At the root of fears in public spaces is the individual lack of control. Being in an unfamiliar place with limited resources is only a problem when one is not in control of that place. The most uncontrollable aspect of public space is the other people – the strangers. Though it is not the case with everyone, fear of strangers is widespread, even earning itself a word to describe it: xenophobia. People are afraid of strangers even when danger of crime or victimization is statistically more likely to come from someone who is known (Hale 1996, Ibarra 2003). Part of what makes strangers so fearsome is that one can't be sure if they are safe or trustworthy. A stranger's behavior is unpredictable, one can't track them down if necessary, and one can't tell if they will be subject to social pressure, or have any accountability.

Everyone in a public space begins as a stranger among strangers, but if the same people occupy the same public space over and over, this relationship almost always changes over time. The reason the relationships change is because these strangers spend a significant amount of time together. It becomes apparent that breaking "strangers" down into different categories is necessary as strangers become known to each other over time, making the label "stranger" no longer purely accurate. It becomes additionally important to distinguish different kinds of strangers because different social rules and expectations apply to these different categories. Here I will use three distinct categories of strangers based on the degree to which one is unfamiliar: *stranger*, *familiar stranger*, and *friendly stranger*.

For the purposes of this paper, the term *stranger* will be the one closest to its most common meaning: those people who are completely unknown and unrecognized, or not recognized very well. Strangers are people that will not see each other again, or will see each other infrequently. The initial reaction to strangers is to assume they will go away soon. They may never be seen again, and as long as there doesn't appear to be an immediate threat it doesn't make sense to expend too much energy trying to find out if the strangers will pose a threat or not. Most likely, strangers will not even take significant notice of each other; they will be merely another anonymous human being among others belonging to a larger group of strangers. People in a large group of strangers remain constantly aware that they are surrounded by strangers, but the individuals within the group of strangers rarely elicit a positive or a negative reaction. As long as individual strangers remain indistinguishable from the others by not drawing attention to themselves, they are of very little consequence in the daily life of the other people sharing that public space. Strangers will go out of their way not to notice each other, or to appear not to notice each other.

When someone is a stranger, but easily recognized, as in the commuters mentioned above, they are *familiar strangers.* Familiar strangers are the most common category of strangers on the train. It is a concept coined by Stanley Milgram, who explains that "familiar stranger is not the absence of a relationship, but a special form of relationship, that has properties and consequences of its own" (1977:53). He says that familiar strangers exist because perceiving them is easy and quick compared to talking to them. Milgram believes that urbanization brings so many sights, sounds, and smells into our daily lives that, due to sensory overload, simple recognition of strangers is all we can handle. It's a diluted form of interaction used as a type of self-protection mechanism (1977:53, also Altman 1975:178). Familiar strangers are people who

easily recognize each other because they see each other repeatedly – often in a particular context such as on the train or waiting for the train at the platform – but they do not interact (Milgram 1977). What familiar strangers know about each other is limited to what can be observed, such as one's approximate age, gender, and stops where they get on and off the train.

In some cases, the lack of interaction with a familiar stranger for any amount of time makes it less likely that they will ever talk to each other. Milgram suggests that a person would be more likely to ask a complete stranger for the time than from a familiar stranger (1977:3). However, some interesting dynamics occur with a familiar stranger that would not be likely with a complete stranger. First of all, there can be an increased sense of social responsibility to a familiar stranger. If there is some kind of a problem, a bystander will be more likely to help a familiar stranger than a stranger (1977:53). In a public space, a person needing help will expect the familiar stranger to help. And while familiar strangers develop what Milgram calls a "history of non-communication" (1977:3), their shared history is actually conducive to communication out of context – say, if they saw each other at the airport, as has happened to me before. Also, familiar strangers will often talk to each other in times of crisis (Milgram 1977:4).

Contrary to Milgram's findings, people are sometimes affected in the opposite way when confronted with a familiar stranger many times. Some people feel a social obligation to speak to a person who is recognized, feeling that it is disrespectful not to (Goffman 1963). Perhaps making eye-contact many times but lacking an accompanying gesture of peace makes the continued meetings start to become awkward. One may feel inclined to smile or greet a familiar stranger in order to make clear that there is no threat. Certainly there is an expectation that if one person extends a greeting, the other person must return it. After a period of time, when familiar strangers begin to smile or nod at each other in greeting, it is a stage I call *friendly strangers*.

"Friendly strangers can be thought of as successful mimics of our genuine friends," says Seabright (2004). They may greet each other with "good morning" each day. Snippets of small-talk may become part of their regular routine. Conversation is nearly always brief, and kept impersonal, including things like compliments on clothing, or a complaint about the weather. Friendly strangers do something that strangers never do, and that is to admit that they notice things about each other. For example, a friendly stranger may say, "I notice you get off at the Brandeis stop. Are you a student?" Friendly strangers can dispense with efforts made by strangers to imply that they do not notice each other. This important point indicates that they acknowledge that the other person will notice them as well, and thus they implicitly agree to commit themselves to participating in the social system.

Friendly strangers assist in the management of others in public places. Whereas a stranger can be unpredictable, a friendly stranger is at least one who observes social niceties and therefore can be reasonably expected to respond to social pressure. This, and the repeated friendly gestures, makes friendly strangers more predictable and thus they seem more trustworthy. It is not important whether or not the stranger actually *is* trustworthy – just that they are perceived to be (Henslin 1968). A perception of trustworthiness reassures others that a friendly stranger is not likely to pose a threat or require diligent monitoring.

Curiously, all three of these levels of strangers can keep up their relationship at a static place for years. By this I mean that daily interaction does not necessarily mean the relationship progresses to something more intimate and personal over time. Milgram and Altman may have an explanation for this, when they point to the possibility of sensory overload. It would be overwhelming to become friendly with too many people on the train. Friendship always comes with expectations of reciprocity, and even friendly strangers can appropriately make personal

comments like "It looks like you are limping," which are designed to receive a response. The advantage of keeping the relationship between two commuters to a minimum is that they can remain quick and easy.

Though it may be possible and appropriate to keep a relationship with a stranger from progressing, people seeing the same strangers day in and day out realize that their future will include these people. They have a relationship with that public space, and with the myriad strangers in the space, whether they choose it or not. This means the potential for conflict, and all its associated fears, will be a significant part of their future. In order to keep these fears manageable, the people must be managed, not avoided.

Social order

The way to deal with potential conflict and the fear of feeling out of control is to create a system of social order. Social order, like public space, is designed to serve the needs of as many people as possible, while acknowledging that individual desires may be forfeit. This system of order is generally unspoken, or "understood" by those they apply to, and this could be in response to pressures on a public space to be open to all. Written rules would not serve every individual, and rules about behavior might go against the spirit of a public space. A benefit of understood rules is that they can't be officially protested because they technically don't exist. Understood rules are also flexible by not being recorded, and can change as the needs of the social group change, which makes them especially useful.

Boundaries

In order to organize an area and its occupants, first the area has to be defined; its physical

dimensions as well as its social characteristics must be described. Any set of rules must apply to someone, so boundaries must be drawn around those who are subject to the rules. The more restrictions placed on a person the more limited their options for managing a public space become. Two aspects of boundaries are their physical and social dimensions. A way to create order within physical boundaries is to flex one's ability to make choices about the use of the physical space. Erving Goffman mentioned that "freedom of choice within a class of required conduct may blind the individual to constraint regarding the class as a whole" (1963:7). Occupants of public space may not necessarily be blind to their limitations, but may choose to put energy into making choices about things they do have control over. In this situation, identifying and taking advantage of whatever choice is still available is a way to mitigate possible negative effects of being aware of having limited options.

Identifying choices that are within individual control within a public space can be comforting to people, but can't create a system of order among a group of strangers. A system of social order is necessary to provide a range of appropriate social behavior which will satisfy as many people and as many needs as possible. Within physical boundaries then, we need to examine the limits of social boundaries. Simmel shows that social boundaries need not exist at all, so the process behind the creation of boundaries becomes important (1908). The process which shapes social boundaries in public spaces begins within an area in which communication exists. Erving Goffman uses the term *copresence* to describe people who are close enough to exchange information (1963). This term refers to people who are close enough to each other to send and receive communication – being able to see one another, for example. He explains that when people are copresent, they are constantly communicating and even give off information unintentionally (1963:13). In my analysis, the social boundaries of a public space are to be drawn

around those who can communicate this system of understood rules amongst each other.

Fortunately, a public space is suited to the creation and maintenance of social order. "Copresence renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another," says Goffman. "Public order, in its face-to-face aspects, has to do with the normative regulation of this accessibility" (1963:22). One strategy to manage strangers in public spaces involves choosing whether or not to interact with them and consequently encouraging or discouraging strangers from approaching or interacting. Any commuter can increase or decrease their level of interaction with people nearby by sending signals that they are interested or not interested in interacting, or what I call engagement. There are many ways to send signals to others through the use of body language, eye-contact, and speaking (Altman 1975, Goffman 1963). People choose whether or not to engage with others, and at what level, and by making these choices, they manage their social environment.

Refusal to interact with strangers is a management strategy frequently used in public spaces. There is a problem for people who choose not to engage, however, and this is that it is not socially appropriate to refuse to interact with others in public. It may be acceptable to refrain from engaging someone, but when approached, it is not acceptable to refuse to respond. This behavior sends the message that one is not subject to social pressure, and therefore they label themselves as untrustworthy. People will want to avoid being labeled untrustworthy, so when someone prefers not to engage with others they send messages to discourage others from approaching them in the first place, and they need to send these messages in a way that protects them from negative social judgment.

One common method of doing this is through the use of tools that Goffman calls "involvement shields" (1963:39). Involvement shields can be an actual shelter that offers people

privacy, such as a bathroom, but it can also be any device used to disguise socially unacceptable behavior like the desire to avoid interacting with others (Goffman 1963:39-42). The most effective involvement shields are those which are sanctioned for that very use, are perfectly legitimate, and are not necessarily an attempt to disguise deviance at all. For example, reading a newspaper is a respectable social behavior. Someone who wants to avoid others may therefore read a newspaper. By reading the paper, a person avoids eye contact and becomes less approachable. If someone wants to talk to that person, they have to get the reader's attention and interrupt him or her. Interrupting a person is another socially inappropriate behavior, and strangers are often reluctant to do it. Common modern involvement shields include newspapers, headphones and cell phones.

Faced with the unsettling prospect that in a public space one has little control, an individual will often develop a sense of a space around themselves that is considered personal, and even private, that exists within the greater public space. Therefore a second strategy for managing others is to create a boundary around oneself in which an individual has complete autonomy and the right to keep others out. This personal space will vary according to the needs of the individual, the relationship between the individual and the people nearby, and the circumstances of the public place (e.g. we expect to be much closer to strangers in a rush hour subway than at an RV show). Personal space boundaries are shaped using things like area, smell, and sound.

Areal boundaries are the limits of distance that people are willing to allow others to approach within. In other words, a stranger can come only so close, and then a person will employ strategies to adjust the distance between them to a more comfortable space. If someone comes closer, that person will receive some kind of feedback. Most likely the other person will

move backward enough to readjust the distance. This type of spacing, often likened to "birds on a wire," has been well-documented among people in public places (Altman 1975, Hall 1966, Lofland 1973). Boundaries of smell and sound are shaped in a similar way, and are the limits at which an intrusion will be tolerated. For example, a crying child will often cause strangers to move away to a distance where the volume of the crying is no longer bothersome.

Edward T. Hall introduced the concept of *proxemics* to describe measurable distances between people that, when invaded, will cause people to react (1966). Hall breaks these measurements of space into categories of intimate distance (6-18 inches), personal distance (1 ½-4 feet), social distance (5-12 feet), and public distance (12-24 feet), indicating different requirements depending upon the relationship of the people involved (1966). As Hall indicates, comfortable personal space will vary according to the relationship between the people involved. The more intimate their relationship, the more comfortable they will be when one invades the other's personal space. In fact, when people are comfortable with each other, their personal space requirements will often be decreased (Hall 1966). In a public place, where people are strangers to each other, personal space preferences will be at their maximum. If there is a constant demand on individuals to allow strangers within the boundaries of their personal space, then individuals are quick to "mark their territory."

When a person has a sense of their own personal space or territory, called a "pod" by one of my informants, then they feel they have the right to define and defend its boundaries. Irwin Altman claims that "boundary-regulation behaviors" are set in motion when people want to create a desired level of privacy (1975:192). These territorial behaviors such as intrusion, blocking access to resources, and general social interference, also serve as management strategies when privacy is invaded, designed to restore a balance between desired privacy and

privacy actually achieved (Altman 1975). Altman, as well as Barth (1993) and Rosenbloom (2006), find that territorial behaviors are a response to crowding.

When people have a clear sense of what they believe are appropriate boundaries of personal space, and what constitute invasions of that space, they also develop "unspoken rules" that must be followed to respect these boundaries. In the same way that people expect strangers to follow the unspoken rules about involvement shields, and respect individual choice not to engage, it becomes important to have others follow the unspoken rules about invasion of personal space. People who have a sense of these rules will do what they can to fit in and behave accordingly, believing that the benefit is to further the public order (Barth 1993:351). But sometimes people don't behave according to those rules and others respond by attempting to help them fit in, or attempting to teach the rules by looking for additional opportunities to approve or disapprove of that person's behavior.

Through different kinds of boundary definitions, people can imagine an ideal public environment that they would like to occupy. It would be one in which their personal space is not invaded on any level, and in which they had some control over their level of interaction with others. Of course in a public space filled with strangers this ideal world rarely happens, so the continued development and maintenance of social order is necessary. When people come together in public places with senses of their personal boundaries, problems surface when they have different personal boundaries different ideas of what they should be. In addition to having a sense of what kind of environment would be best, people in public spaces need to be able to create social order in that environment. If everyone had the same needs and goals and things flowed smoothly, that would not be social order. It becomes order when there are potential conflicts amongst users with different needs and negotiations are required in order to proceed

(Goffman 1971:6).

Fear of Disorder

When people desire order but instead find disorder, it can cause fear. Potential conflict is signaled when there is a perception of disorder, which can include a disorderly appearance of the place, or disorderly conduct of people. Disorder is frightening because it symbolizes a possible lack of control – either for an individual, or by an authority. Disorder indicates the potential for things getting out of control, and it is a reminder of some of the things that could go wrong. Even minor problems can be interpreted as evidence of disorder, which can make a public space threatening. In other words, people may ask themselves: if the environment is one that could allow small problems, what is to stop other types of problems? (Skogan 1990). There is potentially no limit to all the things that could go wrong. In a public space with limited individual control, the conceptual possibility for chaos could be frightening.

I found that it became easier for me to use the fear of disorder in my analysis when I was able to separate *fear of disorder* from *fear of crime*, a concept commonly used in public discourse. Research on fear in public places can sometimes conflate fear of crime and/or fear of victimization with other kinds of fears such as fear of strangers or fearing the loss of a quality of life. Surveys ask people conceptually broad questions like: "Are you afraid to be out alone on this street/this neighborhood at night?" and then compare the results to crime statistics to see if there is a correlation (Hale 1996, Skogan 1990). Some of the results of these comparisons are well-known. Examples include statistics that show elderly people and women confess the highest levels of fear, when data prove that they are least often victimized. At the same time, young men statistically victimized most frequently do not claim to have much fear. Authors of literature on

fear Sometimes criticize the subjects rather than the results, arguing that perhaps women and the elderly are irrational, or that young men aren't educated enough to have the appropriate amount of fear considering their respective levels of victimization (Hale 1996). The problem is that people may be afraid to be alone outside at night for a number of reasons, and it is not necessarily directly related to their fears of being the victim in a crime.

A different explanation for the apparently mismatched fears mentioned above could be that researchers weren't taking into account different kinds of fear. It turns out that elderly people are just as afraid of confrontation with a rude teenager as they are of being robbed (Wilson & Kelling 2004). Furthermore, it turns out that many people are afraid of disorder, or of the things that disorder symbolizes. Disorder can cause a fear of the loss of community guidelines of appropriate self-control, something that might curb the behavior of rude teenagers (Skogan 1990). This means that disorder can indicate to an individual that she may not be able to count on receiving basic human respect from a stranger, or being able to count on that stranger to be subject to social control. Fear in a community also increases if members perceive a trend of increased lawlessness, and disorder may signify a lack of authoritative control (Jackson 2004, Skogan 1990, Wilson & Kelling 1982). Disorder is also a sign that community members do not find satisfaction in their community and that they don't care what happens to and within it. When members do not care about their community, it makes the community more vulnerable (Jacobs 1961, Skogan 1990, Wilson & Kelling 1982). When people confess to having fear, they may not be talking about fear of crime or of being harmed; they may be expressing a rational fear of disorder itself (Skogan 1990:49). Therefore, it may not be an accurate assessment to compare levels of fear to levels of victimization.

My point is that there are different kinds of valid fears. For this paper I want to be clear

that when I speak of fear, my meaning is not limited to fear of crime or of being physically victimized. The most common fear I intend to highlight is the fear of being out of control, which includes both fear of disorder and fear of strangers. But let me add a caveat. Even when fears of crime and victimization do not appear to be predominant fears in the psyche of many people, other kinds of fears are linked to a fear of being victimized. For example, there is reason to believe that some people may consider victimization to be an end point in a sequence of increasing levels of disorder. Someone may feel that disorderly behavior like incivility may lead to vandalism, and disorderly appearances like vandalism may lead to theft, and so on (Wilson & Kelling 1982). There is also evidence that visible decay of an area can spark fears of crime (Skogan 1990). Additionally, incivility has been shown to be a predictor of a rise in crime, or linked to crime (Jackson 2004, Skogan 1990:46), so mentally linking rudeness and crime is rational. In this way, disorder is threatening because it links (perhaps subconsciously) to future victimization.

Order through mutual surveillance

Disorderly behavior can be considered anti-social behavior because it disregards, or disrespects social behavioral expectation. Wesley Skogan points out that "visible evidence of anti-social behavior should seem to be a sure sign that an area is *out* of control" (1990:76, original emphasis). Lack of control causes fear, and fear needs to be managed, so the way to do it is to make sure people are under control. People generally need to be organized, from a small unit like a family, who needs to create an efficient division of labour, up to the organization of a state that needs to efficiently support and defend its population (Marx 1978: 151,157). When people are strangers to each other the inability to hold them accountable is the same as not

having control over them and increases distrust of them, which makes it even more important to control them. Social order increases trust among strangers because when people continue to conform with expectations over time, others grow to count on them to continue to conform.

Jane Jacobs is quite critical of public development and spent considerable time evaluating what makes healthy communities. Her opinion is that what makes a healthy and happy community is one in which strangers are brought together in bound public spaces under the watchful gaze of many other strangers (1961). An example Jacobs gives is a wide sidewalk bound by the street and many small shops looking onto it. In a public space enclosing those who can communicate with each other, people send messages of sanction or disapproval about each other's behavior. The intentional sending of messages to manage another's behavior can include things like a smile to encourage, or a frown to discourage them, staring, and avoidance of eye contact (Altman 1975, Goffman 1963).

Other people have come to the same conclusion, that being subject to the watchful gaze of many of one's peers is an effective management strategy of social control. Barth explains that in an area subject to "high visibility and invasive mutual information" it becomes "invaluable to everyone" to develop and use mechanisms that will assist in coping with these pressure and will help provide some privacy (1990:351). Michel Foucault is another one in agreement. Foucault analyses the value of social pressure, explaining how people themselves can reinforce the systems of expected behavior even while they are inside the system. He reveals that a system of surveillance strengthens social forces when anyone can be the observer, and the observers can always be watched (1977:205-208).

> "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to

a whole technique of forces and bodies" (Foucault 1977:217).

People can signal that they are willing to be part of the system of social order, and are therefore not a threat to others. Many people can execute beautifully a move Goffman called "civil inattention" (1963:84, 1971). This behavior begins with a glance of acknowledgment that the other person is present, followed by avoidance of eye contact. "Visual attention after the acknowledgement can be construed as a breach of etiquette or, more seriously, as a distressing invasion of privacy" (Crabb 1996:805-6). Behavior very similar to that description of civil inattention can also be used to look at someone without threatening them. For example, in order to examine someone who just moved close to her personal space boundaries, a person can glance in the newcomer's direction as though something else has caught her attention, and make eye contact with the approaching person apologetically as though saying "oh, hello, I didn't realize you were there, sorry," and then quickly return her eyes to their original position. In this way she has gained useful information but has not broken the expectation that strangers are not supposed to notice each other. Goffman comments, "participation in public life routinely brings strangers so close together that civil inattention is relied on to avoid conversational entanglements, and since this means that well structured rules of conduct are being observed, there will everywhere be occasions where actual connectedness could exist and yet be concealed" (1971:219). Behaving in this widely recognized pattern (though most would not know to call it "civil inattention") signals that a person is willing to conform to normative behavior.

Strategies for managing fear in public places other than creating social order have been revealed in the literature. These include constrained behavior, community and political activism, defensive action, and avoidance behaviors like staying home (Jackson 2004, Merry 1982, Wilson & Kelling 1981). However, given the right circumstances to create organized social order, I agree with Jane Jacobs that the safest way to deal with strangers in a public space is to bring

them together in a bound location so that a system of social rules and norms can develop as well as a system of rule enforcement. Commuter trains are just such an environment in which to observe this process.

The Fitchburg/South Acton train

The train I studied is part of a system of public transportation organized around the Boston metropolitan area. It is part of the network of trains known as the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail (MBCR), which provides commuter rail services on 12 routes, under a management contract with the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) the nation's 5th largest mass transit system ("Regional System" 2007). I focused my work on what MBTA calls the Fitchburg/South Acton line, which serves North Station (in Boston) westward to the community of Fitchburg, and sixteen stops in between (Fig. 1). I will refer to it only as the Fitchburg line both because that is a shorter title, and because that is how riders refer to it.

All commuter train lines in the Boston area radiate out from the city center. The schedules of the trains are designed to be most useful to people commuting to and from Boston to work, so that there are more trains leaving at typical commute times in the morning and evening, and fewer trains during midday and from late evening through overnight. There are also fewer trains running on Saturday and Sunday. People do appear to be using it to commute because average daily weekend ridership is approximately 25% of weekday ridership ("MBTA Ridership" 2007). My personal observation, as well as information provided by my informants, also supports this. And when the average weekday ridership for the Fitchburg line is over 4,300 people, that means we're talking about a lot of commuters ("MBTA Ridership" 2007).

One important distinction I make with modes of public transportation that others don't

Fig. 1 – Source:
< http://www.mbta.com/uploadedFiles/Schedules_and_Maps/System_Map/MBTA-system_map-back.pdf>

Fig. 2 – Platform and scrolling marquee at the Brandeis/Roberts stop on the inbound side.

make is the differences between subways, light rails, and commuter trains. They can all be called

trains, and many people refer to them interchangeably. For example, in Boston, people talk about the "T" and mean either subway or train or both. However, for my purposes, they are distinct. A subway (also called rapid transit) is usually an underground or elevated electric train in a large city and generally confined to the most populated areas. The design of the cars is to seat passengers on opposite walls facing each other with everyone else standing in the middle. Subways do not have authority figures interacting with passengers during the trip, as tickets are automated and engineers are in a separate compartment. They run at regular intervals rather than follow scheduled times. Light rail is also a rapid-transit train, which are generally above-ground and resemble standard railroads more. Again, there are rarely authority figures mixing with passengers, have a similar design and they tend to run at regular intervals. The reason that I exclude these vehicles from my paper is because I found that the presence of conductors, physical design of the train cars, and infrequent trains play a significant role in the formation of social order on commuter trains.

In one sense, conductors seem like a physical characteristic of the train, "properties of the environment," Milgram would say (1977:3). Conductors are always present and their presence is because of the train itself. However, conductors fill a social role in their relationship to passengers. There are usually two conductors on a train. This means that they are always nearby, but not on every car. Passengers try to maintain awareness of where the nearest conductor is, and of how many conductors are on the train at a given time because it can signal which door will be opened for a person's stop and where to find help if necessary. Conductors are always in uniform and are clearly viewed as authority figures. Their most frequent activities on the trains are opening and closing doors at stops and "taking tickets" (an expression which means taking money and providing tickets, but also means glancing at passes flashed by passengers).

Conductors are also pressed frequently for information about the train, and information about subway lines, such as which commuter train stop is the proper stop to reach their desired subway line. Despite all this interaction, conductors are strangers too. Well, at least they start out that way. Conductors become familiar and friendly strangers as quickly as (sometimes more quickly than) everyone else.

Commuter trains (also called commuter rail trains or commuter rails) run on standard railroad tracks and use standard railroad systems – in many cases, commuter rails and freight trains share tracks. These trains are above-ground but not elevated, and usually consist of a locomotive moving a string of four to six coach cars. The trains are designed to heavy rail standards and differ from light rail or rapid transit systems by "being larger; having (in most cases) a lower frequency of service; having scheduled services (i.e. trains run at specific hours rather than at specific intervals); serving lower-density areas, typically by connecting suburbs to the city centre; sharing track or right-of-way with intercity or freight trains" ("Regional Rail" 2007). On Boston's commuter rails, conductors are always present, checking or selling tickets and providing customer service.

Most stops have a raised platform that reaches the level of the floor of the train when it arrives. Platforms have a roof and a bench, and when they are available, are the most common place where people will stand to wait for a train. All train stops have electronic signs that give passenger information. The sign is a scrolling marquee of red led lights that constantly gives the time and updated scheduling information (Fig. 2). When all is well, the sign advertises MBTA's safety slogan *See Something? Say Something.* and lists a phone number – a call for community involvement in the safety of train use (TRUST 2005) (Fig. 3). When there is a problem, information about things like train delays can be found on the marquee. My experience is that

other methods of getting up to date information (such as calling MBTA or checking the Internet) are more reliable and update more quickly than the marquee. But this is not everyone's experience. One rider told me that the train is "always on time; only twice it's not been on time. And then I was alerted by the electronic marquee so it was fine." The presence of the informational marquee and the *See Something? Say Something.* campaign are evidence that the MBCR and MBTA are aware of passenger needs for safety and reassurance, and are attempting to help provide it.

Methodology

My primary means of researching for this paper was participant observation. As a participant in the commuter train culture, my experience of riding the Fitchburg line was from September 2004 to April 2007. During this time I rode the train five days a week during every week that school was in session, and occasionally on weekends. I took the same train every morning (the train that leaves Fitchburg at 7:20am), and one of three trains on my return trip. When any of my informants uses the expression "same train," or talks about a certain train, they mean it in the same way that I have used it: the train leaving at the same time, not the same particular vehicle. My primary sources of data were personal interviews, supplemented by research of publications on applicable topics. I officially interviewed 24 people, recorded circumstances concerning six additional people whom I did not officially interview but who willingly gave me information, and included myself as an informant, for a total of 31 contributing perspectives. Nearly all interviews were conducted on the train, but I conducted four face to face interviews off the train, and one telephone interview. People were interviewed off the train when their commutes were too short to be conducive to a full interview, or when they

did not expect to see me on the train for some time. Follow-up interviews were, again, mostly conducted on the train, but also included two telephone calls as well as several emails.

My method of data collection was limited in that I recorded all interviews by taking hand-written notes, followed by an attempt to type up transcripts as soon as possible after interviews in order to fill in as much as possible through recollection. This certainly must have resulted in the loss of some data and other problems such as imperfect quotes of informants. Aside from data collection methods, other limitations with the information I present in this paper are its narrow time-frame, and single location. My own experience on the train dates back to September 2004. However, research of relevant publications occurred from September 2006 through April 2007, and data were collected from January 2007 through April 2007. I include only information about the Fitchburg train line in this paper. I have no experience on any other commuter rail train.

The final limitation of the data presented in this paper is that I used a non-random sample of informants. It is important to know that most of my informants were *familiar strangers* to me. That is, we easily recognized each other but had very little additional information about each other. Some of my informants are *friendly strangers*, in which we perhaps greeted each other every morning, shared some personal information about each other, and have a small measure of emotional investment in our relationships. Additionally, I have a few *anchored relationships*, which resemble traditional friendships, but only exist on the train or because of the train. The remainder of informants was made up of total *strangers* – people I did not know at all, and some I have not seen again.

Informants were selected with the intent to draw from a range of variables summarized in the following categories: race, age, gender, and experience with riding the train. A limitation of

these categories is that, except for experience level, people were categorized almost entirely based on my opinion through observation. However, while I did not ask for it, many informants did volunteer their age. Participants were identified as "white" (24)[1] or "non-white" (7). They were categorized into three different age levels. "Younger" (8) was for people who seemed to be in their mid-twenties or younger, "middle" (16) was for those who appeared to be in their late twenties to mid-fifties, and "older" (7) was for people who appeared to be in their late fifties and older. Participants were categorized as either "male" (15) or "female" (16). Finally, I assessed their experience level directly, by asking how long each person had been using the commuter train. "Experienced" commuters (21) were those who had been using the train regularly for a year or more, and "not experienced" commuters (10) were those who had been using the train less than a year.

I include many quotes in this paper and I have kept them as accurate as possible. However, sometimes the quotes originally included details that could help a reader identify who the speaker is. When this happens, I have omitted parts of, or changed the quote. For example, a commuter described getting off the train and named the stop. In that person's quote I changed the name of the stop to the words "my stop." All names used throughout this paper are fictitious names. Any information that seems designed to identify a particular person is accidental; my only intent is to use people's own words to paint the picture of the Fitchburg line commuter train culture.

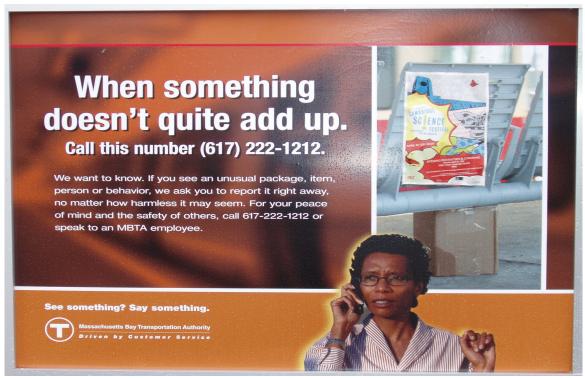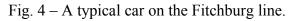[1] Numbers of participants falling into each category are listed within parentheses.

Fig. 3 - *See Something? Say Something.* advertisement at a train stop, asking people to report "an unusual package, item, person, or behavior"

Fig. 4 – A typical car on the Fitchburg line.

Trains as an example of public space

Commuter trains in general are an interesting type of public space, and especially conducive to research of social organization of strangers. They are an excellent place to examine organization of public spaces because they have all the characteristics of a public space, but include some important differences which make the environment even more interesting. It seems as though the qualities of train boundaries and train populations increases the level of fear and amplifies the normal dynamics of public spaces and result in higher expectations for order on trains, as I hope to demonstrate with examples. Like any other public space, because commuter trains serve group needs and not individual needs, there is a lack of individual control. While public spaces may suit the needs of most people there, there is always the chance that any one individual at any given time may have to sacrifice individual preferences. For example, my current schedule requires that I be present on campus by 10:00am. Despite this, I arrive daily at 8:25am. I do take the latest train possible to get to campus on time, but that train arrives an hour and a half earlier than I need it to. I would prefer a train that left an hour later, but there is no such train. So I must give up my individual needs in order to use a system that suits the greater needs of the group. Qualities that describe the train environment can be grouped under categories for *physical*, *social*, and *public* aspects, and like I discovered when choosing the best morning train: public aspects are what make much of the train characteristics *uncontrollable*.

Physical qualities of the train environment

Commuter trains are relatively unknown and unfamiliar compared to the homes and workplaces of train commuters. This is another reason to need to feel safe and comfortable on trains. The cars are a relatively small space physically bound by four walls with a door at each end with a capacity for approximately 100 people each. The interiors of all cars have a series of

bench seats. Most cars have smaller bench seats on one side (called *2-seaters* by passengers) and larger bench seats on the other side (called *3-seaters*) of a narrow aisle (Fig. 4). Some cars have seats which are the same size on both sides of the aisle. The seats in each half of the car face the doors, so that directly in the middle of the car is a row of seats which are back-to-back, facing opposite directions. Trains have large acrylic glass windows that run the length of both walls, and a couple of these windows are emergency exits (Fig. 4). Fluorescent light, heat, and air conditioning (AC) all come from the ceiling. The Fitchburg line, unlike other lines of the MBCR, does not include any double-decker coach cars, so one can imagine that when a person enters a car they can see and be seen by every single other person on that car.

In addition to the space on trains being physically bound, it is also bound by the movement of the train. This is significant because one of the main coping strategies available to people in other public spaces – leaving – is unavailable to people on the train. People avoid boarding and exiting a train while it is moving because it is unsafe to do so. All passengers quickly become aware that getting on or off a moving train is strictly against MBTA policy. Conductors frequently ride on the steps of the train as it pulls away from a stop to keep a look out for passengers attempting to get on a train while it is moving. They will yell at people outside to stand back if they suspect someone may attempt to break this rule. Passengers inside the seating area will avoid getting too close to an open door while the train is moving, and some conductors also guard the doorways to keep passengers away from open doors until the train comes to a stop. Furthermore, the movement of the Fitchburg train is very unsteady, almost always requiring people who are standing to hold onto something to maintain balance. This movement tends to keep people in their seats.

Another way the movement of the train maintains boundaries is that movement makes it

difficult to pass from one car to the next. One finds that while conductors move freely and comfortably between cars, passengers tend not to. There is a small sort of room between train cars formed between the doors to get onto the train and the doors to enter the seating area. This is where the two cars are connected. This small room is not designed for passengers to occupy, and many conductors will not allow passengers to linger in this area. In the space between cars there are four doors leading off the train and invariably one of them will be open, sometimes all four may be open. Passing within 3 or 4 feet of an open door when the train is moving can be frightening. And finally, the floor in that space consists of overlapping metal plates designed to allow the train to bend around corners, and move up and down on the tracks. Therefore, the floor is moving unsteadily most of the time causing people to choose to wait till the train stops to move between cars, or to stay in their car. The moving train thus creates boundaries which are nearly uncrossable. While the train is moving – which is most of the time – people stay in their car, avoid the doors, avoid standing up, and for the most part keep to their seats. The population on board remains steady.

Paradoxically, the final physical factor which makes the public space aboard a train seem uncontrollable is that it is constantly changing. Each car has clearly defined boundaries, and there are good reasons not to cross those boundaries as I have discussed, but nevertheless the boundaries are crossed constantly when the train stops. While the population may be steady when the train is moving, there's a mad rush of movement when the train stops. People and conductors get off and then on, and people on board move from car to car. In fact, the whole purpose of a train revolves around the boundary crossings of people getting on and getting off, and the train moving from one area to another. Thus two key components of the train environment seem to contradict each other: the population on board is both stable and constantly

changing, albeit at predictable intervals. It is important to keep this changing population in mind because it means that the people on board need to remain aware of their surroundings in order to reassure themselves of their safety. It is not as though I can step on board in Fitchburg, survey the situation, and then tune out for the next hour and a half till I arrive at North Station. In reality, there are sixteen more chances (i.e. sixteen other stops. Fig. 1) for someone to enter my train car and make my commute unpleasant.

Due to the movement of the train, people on board are also aware that the environment off the train is constantly changing. The large windows provide constantly changing scenery inside the car, even when nothing else changes. Sometimes the train is within city centers; sometimes it is miles from a town. People remain aware of what services (warm buildings in the winter, access for emergency vehicles, hospitals, etc.) may be close to a train stop, and also aware of how far away one might be from any of these things at a given time. Commuters will also be sensitive to whether or not the environment off the train at any given time seems like a safe place (Hutchinson 2005). When one commuter was nearing the end of her pregnancy, a nervous conductor commented to me that she was not worried about the woman going into labor on the train as long as it happened west of the West Concord stop. That is where all the hospital employees get on and off, I was told. The conductor's hope was that if the woman went into labor, someone with medical training would be on the train with her. The important point here is that when the pregnant woman was on the train, this conductor was acutely aware of where the hospital was in relation to the train.

One reliable feature of a commuter train might be that the population on board is either gradually increasing or decreasing as it moves along the route. This is generally the case: the number of people on board is higher the farther east the train is (closer to Boston), and lower the

farther west the train is (closer to Fitchburg). However, this gradual increasing or decreasing of population is not consistent enough to be a reassuring pattern. Many riders enter and exit at points in the middle, so the change in population is not steady or uniform, and can be unpredictable. The density pattern changes from day to day, and week to week. One conductor told me that this is more commonly the case on the Fitchburg line than on the lines out of South Station, where passengers are more likely to get on at one end and ride all the way to the other end. The outcome is that on the Fitchburg line, one can never predict at which point the train will become so full that one needs to anticipate sharing a seat and being closer than preferred to other passengers. Therefore, every single stop is potentially a place where an individual will have to define and defend his or her personal space.

People on the train want to sit alone in a seat as long as possible. When there are so many people that seats must be shared, then the doubling up begins on the 3-seaters, because people who must sit together hope not to have to touch each other for as long as possible. But eventually, as the train fills up, there are three people in the 3-seaters and two people in the 2-seaters. In the winter, when people wear bulkier clothing, it is nearly impossible to sit beside someone without touching them, which is clearly an invasion of personal space. During a train ride, passengers will keep track of how full the train is getting, and they will know when it becomes likely that they will be forced to share a seat. At that point in a trip, people sitting alone will follow a strategy to help minimize conflict. One strategy is to make space for a newcomer so that no negotiation needs to take place concerning what will be done with the personal items. A person will shift their belongings from the seat beside them to the floor or to the rack above, so that when someone chooses to sit with them, they don't have to negotiate. This strategy allows them to ignore anyone who ends up sitting beside them, appropriate behavior for strangers. On

the other hand, making space for another person actually encourages someone to sit there, which is the opposite of what a commuter wants. This leads to what I find to be the most common strategy: intentionally leaving parcels on the seat. It may discourage someone's approach, but in the case where someone does approach, it makes it impossible to ignore the person, because there will have to be a negotiation about what to do with the personal belongings.

Social qualities of the train environment

Interestingly, people on board commuter rail trains can be different than people in other public spaces. This is because their relationships to each other as strangers changes over time. This stability in membership and affiliation with a group on a train assists in the creation of a social order. Social order on trains can take advantage of the fact that the population is somewhat stable over time, and that a common understanding of appropriate behavior does not need to be re-conceived and re-taught each day. So while people in other public spaces may be predominantly strangers, people on trains are also familiar strangers, and often friendly strangers as well.

Friendly strangers are the commuters who share an easy smile and a greeting, but don't get too personal with each other. One woman recalls a friendly stranger who was memorable because he was one of the first people to make her feel welcome on the train. "This one guy smiled all the time. An Asian guy. He'd say 'hey girlfriend!'" In this example, she didn't know the person's name, but spoke of him with fondness. She also chose an identifying feature of his (Asian) in order to recognize him in the future. Because of his kindness, she responded with reciprocity as she would in any other friendship. When his status in her mind was that of a friendly stranger, she felt more of a social obligation toward him. At a later date she had the

opportunity to defend the person's character when it was called into question, and she felt pleased to be able to do so.

Examples of these friendly strangers abound. Sometimes they form easily as in the example above. A few times I have developed a friendly stranger relationship with someone in a scenario that goes something like this: I learn the stop a person boards at, and notice when that person doesn't get on. I wonder if they're just taking the day off, or if they didn't come because they're sick, or if bad weather caused them to miss the train. This is my first emotional connection to a person. If I want to create another friendly stranger on the train, the next time I see the person, I might ask why they were not on the train. My personal attention and concern for their well-being might offend the person because strangers are not supposed to notice each other. However the attention may compel the stranger to feel more trusting and/or appreciative of me. They realize that if I am already looking out for them, I may continue to do so and it could be helpful among so many other strangers. If that person wishes to encourage my friendliness, they might take the time to give a full explanation of why they were not on the train the day before, and this exchange will break the barrier between us, allowing us to cease being familiar strangers and to become friendly strangers. We have now exchanged personal information about ourselves which means we now have a relationship that is based on sharing our commutes on the train. From now on, we may feel compelled to smile and greet each other each time we see each other, in acknowledgement of the continued agreement to share a relationship as friendly strangers.

On the Fitchburg train it seems that friendly strangers are formed for different reasons. For one thing, recognition can increase trust between people. A passenger told me it would be good to date someone met on the train. The passenger explained, "That way you see the person every day. You see their behavior. You know if they go to work every day, and how they get

dressed every day. You can know what kind of person they are like." Often a friendly stranger relationship is developed when someone initiates contact specifically to find out if someone will be a threat or not. A commuter told me, "More than anything, I like people who can laugh. I test them out. We'll talk a little, and I'll say, 'Don't you just love to laugh?'" Another commuter said, "I like to interact with people. Sometimes they respond, sometimes they don't. I'll start the conversation in a way that gives them a chance to talk to me."

Another way that friendly strangers are developed is in the event of a catalyst which acts as a common experience which can create a bond between people. Milgram noted that familiar strangers are more likely to talk to each other in times of crisis (1977). I use the term "catalyst" because an event which kick-starts a friendly stranger relationship does not necessarily have to be as negative as a crisis. A catalyst can be a shared experience like waiting for a late train together on the platform, seeing a memorable event together such as a remarkable or troublesome passenger, or noticing something about another person that one feels connected to, such as someone with an unusual book as described to me by a student passenger.

"Once I saw an older, more academic-looking fellow. The passenger (whom I assumed was a professor) had a collection of stories in Middle English. I asked him what he was reading, and he said it was The Fox and the Wolf. I told him I hadn't read that, but I had read Chaucer in unabridged Middle English. He looked up at me and was surprised. It was my stop and I had to go, so we couldn't talk. He said, 'Well, good luck!' I felt like we had a bond. If we had more time to talk I think we would have talked."

A more dramatic catalyst can create a stronger bond between strangers. The most dramatic catalyst described to me was when fellow passengers were on a train together when the train hit a person. Passengers remember who was on the train with them and particularly the conductor at the time, Meg, for whom they felt unanimously sorry. They recalled one

troublesome passenger in particular who complained that because of the accident he would be late getting home, and harassed the conductor about it. Several people talked to me about this incident, and the following quote seems to mention all the important details.

> "Then there was that horrible incident. When the train hit that guy. Everyone on the train came together. They were curious, but respectful. And there was that jerk who wanted to go home and harassed Meg. He was a real jerk to Meg, saying how inconvenienced he was because the train was late and he wanted to go home. Everyone gave him the cold shoulder."

Events like this are important for people to recall because they want to emphasize their group affiliation and to believe that it's a good group to belong to. It makes sense that all commuters who spoke to me about this event praised the other commuters on the train at the time, and especially praised the "leader" of the group – the conductor. The troublesome passenger also served an important role as an example of how people in that group do *not* behave.

In my personal experience, one dramatic catalyst was waiting for a train that did not come. During the winter of 2005-2006, I was waiting with others for the train when the red MBTA marquee scrolled the message "Seek alternate transportation" which caused anxiety among us since we had never seen or heard of a message like that before. Trains are sometimes late, but rarely canceled. We knew it was a major event and since we had already been standing on the platform for an hour in the dark cold night, we took the advice of the sign. One woman among us invited us all into her workplace across the street so that we could stay warm while we made arrangements. Eventually the six of us (mostly strangers and familiar strangers to each other) who had the farthest to go ended up splitting a cab ride. During the hour-long ride we all shared first names and personal information and since that time have continued to share a tighter bond than with other commuters.

Public qualities of the train environment

A train car is different than private space in important ways. As one regular rider put it, "It's forced social interaction. You're here not because you want to be, but because it's how you get to work." People on board a single train car are always in the presence of others, they are always in view of others, and they must always view others. This person described discomfort when boarding the train. "When you're standing in the aisle, and everyone else is sitting, it gives you a sense of being visible. Walking to my seat gives me a sense of being more visible until I get to my seat." The seats face the door, so that the line of sight for those sitting there is directed at each person who enters the car. Additionally, those entering are standing, while the ones already present are sitting, creating a sort of "stage" for entering passengers to be on. Once a passenger is seated, they are obligated to view other passengers, which causes discomfort as well. Nicole Fleetwood observed young people who took advantage of this stage-like quality on public busses and subways in San Francisco. The young people performed deviance intentionally in an attempt to upset other passengers and to entertain themselves (Fleetwood 2004).

A common comment about the public nature of the train is that it is the reason many things are uncontrollable. Passengers will even go so far as to say that in public spaces certain things should be expected to be uncontrollable. These uncontrollable things fall into three main categories: *timing*, *physical environment*, and *other people*, though "other people" seems to be the most critical of the three uncontrollable categories. It is as though the people are the key problem, and things like a train being late, or the lights not working only adds to the aggravation that comes about when people cannot be controlled.

Riders cannot control the scheduled times of the trains (e.g. as I cannot make the train leave an hour later in the mornings which would suit me well), nor can they control whether or

not the train adheres to the scheduled times. Sometimes the train is late, and this can be a source of stress. One commuter told me,

"There are times when there are weather problems or switching problems and I'm late for work. Then I have to stay late to make it up. The next train [after his usual evening train] is ½ hour later and it's not the express, so it makes every stop and takes longer. So then my commute is 2 ½ hours."

As this commuter's experience shows, a train just a few minutes late in the morning can have a significant impact on the rest of his day.

Aspects of the physical environment that can't be controlled are numerous. My interviews revealed complaints about just about anything one can imagine finding inside a train car. Riders complained about dirty cars and an even dirtier bathroom. They complained about broken seats and duct tape holding seats together. They didn't want to see advertisement on the walls they considered distasteful. They had no patience for noise or smells, or for people getting too close. Riders find comfort in knowing what to expect inside the train, and they don't like it when the system changes. They even become disoriented when the large and small seats sometimes switch sides. One passenger described this: "You know, sometimes the 2-seaters are on that side and the 3-seaters are here. People get thrown off and comment when the train isn't set up the same way."

Commuters like the large acrylic glass windows, and thus complain when they become scratched from years of use preventing them from being able to see out. Commuters lamented lights that go out, as well as heating and air-conditioning that doesn't work. One passenger said he had no complaints, no complaints at all, he insisted. Then I asked him about heating and air conditioning. "Well, if the AC goes out, now *that* is a problem….Once in the summer, there was no AC, so that was a problem. It was very hot." When people on the commuter train are given a

forum in which to voice their complaints like in my interviews, memories of past anxieties easily come gushing forward. The reason these stories remain in their minds is because they are reminders of how they cannot control the train environment. A faulty AC system is symbolic for the potential chaos and danger that could exist on the commuter train if things are not kept under control. Remembering stories of past inconveniences is a way to remember that anything can happen on a train, and that for self protection one needs to maintain a constant awareness of what things are and are not reliable on the train.

There is another possible category of uncontrollable things, which I would call safety. However, safety appears to be tied to the other three categories. For example, timing of the trains can be a source of discomfort for commuters, and for more than merely reasons of inconvenience. This is because trains are often required to move slowly for safety reasons such as a signal light malfunctioning, slick leaves on the tracks making it difficult to use the breaks effectively when it's time to slow down, and summer heat causing steel to expand (Daniel 2006). When a train is late, it signals that a safety issue may be at stake for those who will be using the train. Another safety related category is the state of repair or disrepair apparent to passengers. When seats are broken or the lights and heat aren't working, it could signal the possibility of other things not working. When these things are broken, some passengers fear that the mechanics of the train might also be questionable. The presence of other people is a safety issue for those who are more consciously aware that behavior of others is unpredictable and has the potential to be dangerous. One of the only people to tell me that strangers are dangerous chooses the very front seat on the 2-seater side with this in mind. "And in a 2-seater, if there's a problem with the person next to me, I only have one person to fight. In the 3-seater, and someone picks loyalty with another side, then there's the potential I'll have to fight two people. At the front I have

space, I'm not trapped."

Social Organization of Strangers on the Fitchburg Train

The nature of commuter rail trains being designed for, and appealing primarily to, commuters means that they are indeed filled mainly with commuters. By commuters I mean those who regularly ride the train to be able to attend regular daily obligations such as work or school. These are people who will be on the same trains at the same times, day in and day out. The time they spend together is significant. A typical ride on the Fitchburg/South Action train line from Fitchburg (the westernmost stop) to North Station (the easternmost stop) is an hour and 32 minutes when it makes all its stops under ideal conditions. The shortest ride is on the "express" train, which skips stops and is an hour and 18 minutes from end to end. This means that thousands of people each day on the Fitchburg line spend 2½ to 3 hours[2] a day in a public space with people who are strangers. This adds up to 18% of a commuter's average waking hours (based on a 17-hour day), making it important that this part of a commuter's life is not a negative part.

Management of the Physical Environment

When I ride the train I am somewhat aware of my specific limitations, but I am clearly aware of what my choices are. I'll illustrate with how I select my seat. Given no restrictions, I would prefer most of all to take a seat on the train that is designed only for one and which blocks strangers from coming near me. This is not an option I have. No matter what, I am forced to sit where there is room for someone to sit beside me. However, I still do have a choice: 2-seaters or 3-seaters. From among those I take my seat, confident that I have been able to express some

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[2] Two hours 36 minutes to three hours 4 minutes.

autonomy. The fact that there are no 1-seaters doesn't enter my mind. In a public place, people are forced to sacrifice some individual preferences and to maneuver amongst the options available. I believe that commuters' focus on choices to manage their physical and social space on the train is a way to reassure themselves of their autonomy.

The first choice people make is their decision to take the train in the first place. Many people could easily identify their reasons for using the train, indicating to me that they had given the choice some thought, and that they continued to evaluate the choice or they would have forgotten their reasoning at some point. "It makes me feel noble, because it's economically friendly. It also makes me feel like I'm taking a part in history. People all over the world for so many years have been taking trains. I feel a connection to them." Then commuters must decide which train to take. Often, it's not much of a choice, and the train someone uses is frequently the only one that will get them to work on time, or is the next train that leaves after they are off work. "Where I live, you don't have a lot of choices," a commuter who uses one of the western stops told me. "There's one train I can take in the morning, and one train I can take at night."

The next choice that becomes important to people is which passenger car to sit in, and this, again, is a choice that passengers frame as an important one. As one commuter put it, "It's like we're on another planet if we're not in the same place on the train." The decision of which car one sits in may not involve an elaborate process, as this commuter expresses. His decision-making process leads him to sit in particular cars that are adjacent to the parking lot. "I usually like to sit in the last cars. That's where my car is parked….I like to get off the train right at my car."

Passengers will also choose a car based on what door opens at their stop, and they will manage their social environment by sitting in the car where their friends are sitting, or where

their preferred conductor is sitting. Some passengers choose the car they sit in with safety in mind. "I try to sit two cars up from the locomotive just in case something happens. Statistics show that the first car gets crushed, so I sit in the next one," one rider told me. This point was also mentioned by a passenger in New York, confident that in an accident the first and last cars have the greatest chance of going off the tracks (Paumgarten 2007).

Windows in a train car are another point mentioned when selecting an ideal seat, either for looking out of, or for emergency exit. Two commuters told me they attempt to sit near exit windows. More often, commuters use the window for looking out, and they will notice how clear the view through the windows is because the view can aid in information gathering for a commuter. People look through the windows to keep track of where the train is. "If the intercoms are not working, I pay attention to the signs. I'm looking out the window," said one new commuter to me. A conductor training a new conductor was explaining how to be prepared for the South Acton stop, "Pretty soon all you'll see are white houses. White everywhere. South Acton is right after that." The acrylic glass windows are easily scratched and become clouded with scratches over time. Some windows are so scratched that it is impossible to identify what is outside – only light comes through. A conductor once told me that it took some time for MBCR to discover that the cleaning solution used when washing the cars was abrasive on the windows. To someone who finds it important to look out, cloudy windows are unnerving. Even when the windows are clear, people are unsettled when they don't have access to the view. One commented on the changes of daylight hours during the winter. "All of a sudden, it's getting dark at 4:00 pm, and I look up and I can't see out the window. And I think, 'Where am I?'"

It is also common that some people appreciate the opportunity to enjoy the scenery. I sense that this luxury addresses a few needs. People on the train have the choice to watch scenery

in a way that they couldn't if they had to drive, so it is not only another choice they get to make, but it also may help validate their choice to take the train in the first place. This passenger points out what commuters miss when they use their laptops on the train.

> "They miss the sunrise. They miss looking out the windows and seeing nature, or just seeing the sky. I need to look out, to see the change of the clouds. It's the human touch. They need to look up." *Do you look for anything in particular?* "Nature. Nothing in particular. Anything that wasn't there yesterday, like maybe a tree has fallen or something. Every day is different! Every day there is something new to see. It's never the same."

This commuter felt that being able to see nature out the window helped him connect with his humanity, and he wished others were similarly motivated. When the MBCR began replacing the scratched windows with new ones, this passenger felt those clear windows were a commodity. "A lot of people don't look out the windows, but they take the clean windows, and it annoys me. They take it, and then I can't get a good seat."

Criteria for seat choice frequently includes whether the seat faces the direction the train is moving or not. This may be to improve people's visibility of where they are going, and consequently, what they may expect. "If I don't sit facing forward, I can't see what's coming," one woman said. People most often claimed they didn't know why they preferred that direction, or claimed it was because of car sickness but then downplayed whether or not they actually get sick. "I prefer to sit facing the direction the train is going. But I stopped doing it to sit with my friends. I thought I would get carsick if I sat backwards. But it turned out not to be true." Another person commented to me: "You sit going backwards, that's interesting to me. I don't like sitting backwards, it feels weird. I don't get carsick, but I always associate it with that negative." Facing a particular direction probably has more to do with being able to "see what's coming" than anything else.

Even if a person is able to choose to sit in the most ideal place, passengers can sometimes improve their environment further by taking matters into their own hands and changing their physical environment. For example, there are no trash cans on a commuter train. One commuter suggested that this could be to encourage people to take their trash home with them. It doesn't work though, and cars fill with trash stuffed into seat cushions and scattered across the floor. One time, I gathered up an armful of trash and when the train stopped, had enough time to get off and dump it all in the trashcan outside and then get back on the train and return to my seat. I once saw a passenger remove from the wall an advertising poster which she found offensive, and hide it behind a seat. This is management of one's physical environment, but it is also management of one's social environment. By rejecting litter and certain advertising, commuters send a message to others about what is appropriate.

Management of the social environment

As a public space, there is very little restriction on who can ride a train, so the population on board trains is a menagerie of different kinds of strangers that need to cooperate. Management strategies like changing cars or changing seats might appear to be only a physical consideration, but it is often to manage one's social environment. People will move from their preferred car to another because conditions in the first car are unacceptable, based on things such as whether the heat or air conditioning is working, or to avoid a loud person. One passenger moved when the car she was used to sitting in became too full for her to manage her physical space in her seat to her preference. "When gas prices got higher, the car got full and I had to change cars so I didn't have to sit on the outside of the 3-seaters."

By far, the decision most commonly and most eagerly described by my informants was

the elaborate processes by which to choose which to choose a seat. While choosing a seat is management of the physical environment on one level, more importantly it is a way to manage one's social environment. Choosing a seat is like marking one's territory, and seats are usually chosen with strangers in mind. The train is a public space and by Hall's account that might mean a space of 12 feet between people would be comfortable. But adhering to these space requirements at all times would be impossible. Even a social distance of 5 feet will be unlikely, especially when the train is closer to Boston and fuller. For an average person from the U.S. then, simply being on the train can mean that a comfortable personal space will be invaded.

People living farther west on the Fitchburg line have more choices for seating because there are fewer people on board. Commuters boarding the westernmost stops often choose their seats with a lot of thought. There is a likelihood that they will be able to sit in the same place time and again, and eventually they become attached to what they begin calling "their seat." Passengers are aware that they become territorial about "their seat," and have a sense that because it is a public space, they must give up their seat if someone takes it first. However, this robs a commuter of some of the autonomy they were expecting. It is also a breach of the understood system, so that even the person who took the seat may quickly become aware of what has happened.

Did you ever get on and find someone in your seat? "Yes." *What did that feel like?* "In a place where no one can hear, I was screaming, 'You're in my seat! Get out!' But I sat as close as I could and told myself to grow up. Other people can tell. You get on and it must be a look on the face because you're in shock – someone's in my seat. And then, in a moment you shake it off and realize 'Now that's not very mature.' I've had people say, 'Oh, am I in your spot?' and of course I say, 'No, no, you're just fine.' And I go find another seat."

I have already mentioned that I thoughtfully choose between a 2-seater and a 3-seater,

and so do many other people. These are misnomers however, for while their names seem to indicate how many people should sit there, this is not the case. One commuter told me,

"I notice on the train the 2-seaters are really only for one. I mean, two people can fit there, but there isn't enough space. There is no reason that people should have to sit together in the 2-seaters….There is an unspoken rule – you should not be sitting together in a 2-seater. Let's say we're sitting here like we are in this 3-seater and say someone gets on and wants to sit with us. That's an infringement. It's understood that we are two people."

It's significant that this commuter told me this information after riding the train for only one month. It is my suspicion that the understood rule saying 2-seaters are for one person and 3-seaters are for two people becomes unconscious after awhile, and train regulars may not be able to recall this important part of the train culture because it will be so well known it ceases to catch people's attention.

Many people mentioned how the size of the seat made a difference. Recall the one who had to move when gas prices went up. She said, "I had to change cars so I didn't have to sit on the outside of the 3-seaters." Another stated, "If it's moderately crowded, I won't sit in 2-seaters, I'll sit in 3-seaters." This person knew he would have to share a seat, so he chose a larger one. Choosing the size of the seat is all about one's strategy for maintaining as much personal space as possible. Some people believe that it's best to sit in the bigger seats. That way, when someone comes to sit there with them, there can be plenty of room between them and they won't have to touch. Some people prefer the smaller seats because the space is so small that others will avoid attempting to sit there. But the choice is always about personal space, as one person was able to articulate. "I like personal space. I sit the in the 2-seaters." In addition to choosing a car according to where one gets on or off, where a door opens, or whether or not there is a distasteful smell or sound or temperature, people choose cars according to who else can be found on that

car. This is a strategy to manage one's copresent community. As mentioned already, people will also choose to sit in a car because of the conductor. This can give a person a sense that someone in a position of authority is nearby to keep an eye out for trouble. "You get to know certain conductors. You feel…not a bond…but a sort of rapport. I would prefer to be on a train with a conductor I know. They will help look out for me," one commuter said. "Also, I sit in the same car and I know where to get off. That helps the conductor get to know me."

Managing level of engagement with others

Once a commuter has settled into a seat, he or she has to choose their level of interaction with those nearby. As anyone is aware, individuals do have some control over how much to interact with strangers. When standing in line at the grocery store, one can ignore the people ahead and behind, or exchange small talk, or even send them a smile that says, "Yes, your child is behaving loudly, but I don't mind." It's the same on the train.

When someone chooses to engage another, it could be for several reasons: to fulfill a social obligation felt among many in the U.S. that people who see each other should greet each other, to show both people that they are not a threat to one another, and also to make acquaintances. Acquaintances on the train can help one pass the time with an enjoyable chat, or they may help someone to feel as though they are part of a group. When people on the train become acquaintances, this means that they have become friendly strangers. They are no longer strangers, and no longer perceived as potentially dangerous as they once were.

The following is an excerpt from an interview where one commuter described to me the way she initiated contact with me and with others sitting nearby.

How was your network of friends on the train established?

It took three months before I finally plucked up my courage to introduce myself to you. From

my eavesdropping, you both seemed like nice people. I didn't have many friends and I felt like I had nothing to lose.

How did it become ok to talk to people you really didn't know?

You and Yvonne were friends, and Ronnie and Ruby. I observed for awhile. That was really the key. I didn't just walk up to a stranger and say 'hello.'

What did you see when you observed?

You asked about each other's families; it was clear that you had established a bond. There was laughing, teasing. Once someone wasn't there, I think it was Ronnie, and you were all concerned. I knew it was already a little community.

How did you approach the community?

Well, as I said it took a long time. I made eye contact with Ruby, and sometimes she would invite me to join in. And maybe I dropped into a conversation. I felt like introducing myself was the next step. I had to introduce myself to one of you, and I chose you!

How did you choose who to introduce yourself to?

I felt like I could relate to you; you were more my age and I felt like that meant inherently that we had things in common. You laugh a lot. You seemed more fun. Your age was only important because I was looking for something in common, but I wanted to get to know everyone.

On the other hand, there are people whose preferred method of social management is to avoid strangers as much as possible. It would take a significant investment of time and attention to get to know someone on the train well enough to be reassured that they do not need to be feared as much as other strangers. Therefore, commuters who choose not to interact with other commuters are making a rational decision, just as people who do choose to engage others are being rational.

Goffman introduced the concept of *involvement shields* as tools to help us keep from engaging with others. Over time, newspapers have become automatically recognized as

involvement shields on commuter trains, and people will try to avoid approaching anyone who appears to be intently reading a paper knowing that there is a good chance the person is not merely reading the paper, but sending a "do not disturb" message to others. This same reasoning works for people doing crossword puzzles and sudoku games, as this passenger explains when describing an acquaintance she sometimes avoids. "I know someone who gets on at Ayer and he is loud. I am so embarrassed, I sink into my seat. He says, 'Aren't you going to sit with me?' and I say, 'Honey you know I like to do my sudoku,' but really I just can't bear to sit with him."

Increasing mobile technology has provided train commuters with more tools to use as involvement shields, like iPods and cell phones, but they serve they same function that people have been using for years. One woman recalled attempting to avoid a stranger when she was younger. "An older man came and sat by me, and there were many open seats. He was drunk, and he kept trying to engage me. I kept my earpiece in even though my transistor radio wasn't getting reception, so he would think I was listening to my radio." As she knew, listening to music was a socially acceptable behavior, and it still is. Another young woman showed me the iPod headphones in her ears, then pulled the end of the wire from her pocket. It wasn't connected to anything! Her intent was only to keep other people from talking to her. This is a good strategy and often works.

Aside from involvement shields, there are other strategies that send a "do not disturb" message. If someone is reading the paper and gets approached anyway, the person reading the paper can give minimal responses. Simple, uninterested, short responses are another signal that a person does not want to talk. I asked one commuter how to tell if someone's not interested in her attempts to engage them. "They won't have eye-contact with you, or they'll be short. You know, if you ask a question, and they're curt. The eye contact is very important. If they're talking to

you and they're looking around, then obviously they're not interested."

As she points out, eye-contact is another means of sending a message. It is the most commonly recognized social signal on the train. In general, someone who avoids eye-contact is trying to avoid interaction or to avoid implied intimacy such as paying too much attention to a stranger (Altman 1975). When two people make eye contact by accident, there is a social expectation to display civil inattention by immediately breaking eye-contact. This is an option available to people who are forced to sit closer to strangers than preferred: avoiding eye-contact is a way to make sure the seatmates don't invade each other's personal space any more than is necessary.

When trains are very full and every seat needs to be occupied, strangers will then come inside what hall describes as intimate distance of 6-18 inches. Commuters are prepared to allow someone within a couple of feet from them, but will adopt a variety of strategies to keep strangers outside their intimate distance. Commuters on the train will often use the seat itself to help define their personal space. One woman called the space between seats on a train her *pod*, indicating that she conceived of it as a bound space. Another woman ducked her head below the top of the seats when relaying some personal information, showing me that the top of the seats represented the upper boundary of her own pod. This kind of behavior is an indication that passengers on the train envision small areas of personal, and thus private, space within the greater confines of the public space. Likewise, they consider that they have a wider range of options of behavior within these private spaces such as the appropriate space to share personal information.

Because these created private spaces allow each person a greater sense of autonomy and privilege, invasions into someone's pod are very unwelcome. Invasions range from someone's

music or voice being loud enough to be heard within the pod, to a child sitting behind and kicking one's seat. I was told by one regular rider that he considered it an invasion of privacy if someone put their hand on the back of his seat. I am personally offended when someone walks past and their bag thumps my seat, even moreso if that bag hits my arm.

On the Fitchburg train, every row of seats displays a small placard which says "Please keep feet and parcels off seats." However, parcels are frequently used to define the boundary of one's personal space. Many of my informants described how they would place their bags, briefcases, and backpacks on the seat next to them to prevent a seatmate from getting too close. In a 2-seater, parcels next to someone will sufficiently "fill up" the seat, indicating that there is no room for an additional person. These commuters know that others will avoid sitting with them just because they will not wish to ask them to move their belongings.

Another strategy people will use is to sit on the aisle side – or the edge – of a seat when they are the only person in that seat, to "block" entrance to the rest of the seat. Again, negotiation will be required before another can sit there – either to ask the person sitting to scoot over, or to ask them to move enough to allow the new person to squeeze past them toward the window side of the seat. Many people will wish to avoid this conversation of conflict, like this commuter who says: "I have found that people sitting on the edges of seats are unapproachable."

After a person has been riding the train for several weeks, they begin to understand the order in which others expect the train to fill up. This commuter makes it very clear that people should not bunch up before they have to:

"I like personal space. I sit the in the 2-seaters. I take up most of the seat, can't you see? I plunk my bag next to me, avoid eye contact. If they do sit next to me, I just look out a window – what am I gonna do? Marjorie was talking about that. There was a person that sat next to her in a 2-seater when there were other seats available. Why was that necessary? There should be some

unspoken rules. This one time I saw a guy get on a train, and he was gonna sit down, but changed his mind. There was this guy already sitting with his laptop in a 3-seater. And the seat in front and the seat in back of him were empty. The guy getting on almost sat in front of him, then changed his mind and sat next to the guy with the laptop. That was weird….I don't expect them to roam from car to car looking for a completely empty seat, but sit in an empty seat. Or else if every single seat already has someone in it, then ok, sit with me. Unless I know you. I mean, if it's Marjorie, or Carol, or you, then it's ok. But as far as strangers go – well, preferably find space on a 3-seater first, but if there isn't any, then ok sit with me. There's no need to snuggle up."

Once someone is sharing a seat with another, expected social behavior then includes "limb discipline." Limb discipline is the expectation that people should keep their arms and legs close to their bodies. This phrase was used by Goffman to describe how it caught his attention when females would sit with their legs spread in a way more common for men to sit (1963:27). His point is that we have expectations about how we should compose our bodies in public. Goffman's example is, in fact, one aspect of limb discipline expected on the train. People should sit with their legs together in order to take up less space. A commuter described an incident when she and another commuter were having difficulty negotiating shared space:

"I sat by him and by Hastings he was snapping his newspaper to let me know how unhappy he was that I was sitting with him. So I pulled my stuff to me, tucked in my clothes (*beside her legs*), folded my arms and put my knees together so I was just taking up my space only. Then by Silver Hill, he pulls one of these! (*she spreads her knees wide to demonstrate*) And this with the paper! (*she holds an imaginary newspaper out in front and opened fully*)."

Other intrusions into personal space can occur through sound, smell, and sight, in addition to physical proximity of another commuter's body. Asked whether smells are an invasion of privacy, one commuter told me, "Oh, yes. Not just personal hygiene, but also

perfumes and colognes." Another commuter identified a woman who smells of baby powder who normally walks past to sit in a different car. "If she sat with me, it would be a problem."

Sounds on the train are particularly offensive to many people. Some people plug their ears while waiting for the train to pull to a stop, some make sure the doors are closed to quiet the outside noises, but most people complain about the noise that others are making. Most of these informants said that what made someone "loud" was when their normal activities or routines (such as reading a book or talking quietly with their friends) were disturbed because of the other person's loud behavior. People's sense of what "loud" is has to do with whether or not that sound invades their personal space. Hearing people talk is not a problem, but when it "interrupts" what they're doing (talking, reading) it is.

A major irritation mentioned is music that can be heard despite the fact that someone is using headphones. "The point of headphones is so you don't disturb other people," a couple of people on the train told me. "And most likely, people aren't going to share your taste in music. So if you've got headphones on and we can hear your music anyway, what's the point?" Perhaps the presence of headphones signals that the wearer knows what behavior is expected in public places, but is missing the point of that behavior, which is to avoid bothering others. Since the wearer can't be excused for ignorance of the rules, music so loud it can be heard coming from someone's headphones is particularly offensive because it signals a disregard for the rules. One passenger comments on the idea that others may be flaunting the rules:

"I think that often people do play their music loud so that other people can hear what they are listening to, say, a particular genre of music, almost as a personality statement, just like wearing a mohawk or something. Otherwise, I think they often just have their music way too loud unintentionally, perhaps not realising that it irritates others. I don't think either case is predominant, but either way, it is distracting and, I think, discourteous."

People also regularly complain about babies on the train. "I can't stand babies screaming," said on regular commuter. "I feel like it's normative to be respectful of others and curb their [the babies'] behavior. I think people should begin shaping their babies socially. I guess I'll just lay it out there: I think people should say 'Shh!'" Another commuter said that small children shouting is "unacceptable."

The most common noise complaint is of people talking on cell phones on the train, like this: "The other day there was this lady screaming on her cell phone and I moved. They think since it's a cell phone they have to talk louder. They don't realize we don't want to hear it." A different passenger addressed some common complaints when I asked her about cell phones:

"Oh my god! I hate it! I hate it! It's completely rude. It's a communal space! Part of our unspoken agreement is sharing space. Like those two-way walkie-talkie things. (*she makes the sound*) Boop boop! Boop boop! Even when I'm NOT on the train I hate those things." *What's the social rule about cell phones?* "Cell phones don't necessarily violate it, but it's abused. It's the volume. If you're having a conversation and I can't hear you…fine. Once I had to sit three to a seat, and this woman got on her phone!" *One of the two you were sitting next to?* "Yes! 'Lady! I am five inches from your face!' I just couldn't do that. I wouldn't feel safe that what I was talking about wasn't being overheard."

In the above example, the passenger mentions both that she doesn't want to have to hear another's conversation, and that she wouldn't want someone else to hear her own conversation. She also makes it clear that proximity to the source of a sound (volume) is a problem. It says that one important characteristic about personal space is that there should not be communication of personal information across the boundaries of that space.

Scrutiny of deviant behavior

People on trains keep their eyes on everyone just as everyone keeps their eyes on those people. If each stranger on the train were thought of as one more person with the potential to take advantage of another's vulnerability, it would mean each person would need to be watched carefully. In a full train car, that means I would have to carefully watch around 100 people. It's unrealistic to even attempt it. Furthermore, 100 potentially dangerous people in a train car with me could be a very frightening thought. It becomes much simpler and less frightening for me if I categorize these people into "strangers who are behaving according to social order" and "deviant strangers." A group of strangers is one thing to keep track of, and a deviant is one more thing; two things to keep track of is much more manageable than 100 things.

If an individual catches the attention of others because their behavior is deemed deviant, other commuters will identify that person as a potential threat and increase their surveillance of him or her. If nothing is known about that particular individual, then an attempt will be made to assess their "type." Copresent people will rapidly collect observable behavior from a deviant individual and attempt to guess that person's character based on what data is discovered. It is at this point that stereotypes are most often used. In the absence of sufficient data, people will assign meaning to a variety of characteristics including a person's age, gender, style of dress, race, apparent social class, and the nature of their deviant behavior. One passenger addressed this, "I try to look at the people, but I can't always stereotype or profile people." This passenger said she was keeping a lookout for bad attitudes. Other commuters told me they would try to identify whether someone was the "gangster type," "goth type," "rapper type," or whether someone was "sketchy." I asked for a description of sketchy: "A sketchy person is a guy, with a hoodie up so I can't see his face. Slouched, defensive posture. He's deliberately trying to be cool, but is obviously uncomfortable. Unkempt, sloppy." The qualities described indicate that a

"sketchy" person is one who resists full participation in a social group by hiding his face and not fitting in (being uncomfortable).

If the deviant person doesn't fit into a stereotype, an observer will choose an identifying feature that may help in recognizing the person in the future. This seems to be a much more common strategy than stereotyping people, indicating that intolerance of other (such as racism or ageism) is not a particularly helpful strategy in creating and maintaining social order. Out of 30 informants talking about others, only three mentioned cultural differences, for example. One person used it to identify a friendly stranger, and one mentioned how pleased she was to find diversity on the train. Only one mentioned displeasure, and that was to say that when people are talking in another language it seems louder than it really is because the sound is unfamiliar. It seems as though social order in a public space improves peaceful coexistence among diverse people, who are more likely to be evaluated for their social participation and not for some randomly assigned label.

In the following example a commuter describes deviants by their noticeable physical characteristics.

> "Some people I recognize and it's annoying because I expect them to annoy me." *These are people who have annoyed you before?* "Yes. They're the only ones you can count on. They have this quirk and then you see them, and it's 'There they are, being quirky.'" *Examples?* "There's this guy with a guitar and black hair and he's always rustling through papers and telling people about his projects. I can see that they aren't interested and I'm not interested and I just want him to stop talking about it. And there's this lady who wears her fanny pack backwards and I don't understand that. She always complains and is loud and I want to say 'Shh!'"

One commuter told me "The train is a great equalizer." She meant that different kinds of people don't elicit much different treatment on the commuter train. People are mostly ignored. But if

they're deviant and attract attention, they are identified less to stereotype them and more to help remember whether they have been deviant in the past (and are not to be trusted), or if they consistently conform (and thus are to be trusted). Here another commuter keeps track of others based on their deviance from the norm:

> "I see that guy who gets on in Lincoln, the lady with the guide dog. The crazy cat woman. I
> don't even know if she likes cats, she just makes me think of that. She has a strong scent of baby
> powder and dresses in these colours, sometimes a pink outfit, sometimes all purple."

The commuter didn't explain man's deviance because he is well-known to many who share a train car with him. The fact that the commuter didn't explain which man more precisely is also a sign that it is believed that this man's deviance is so obvious it doesn't need to be described. The other two are deviant because one brings a dog on board and one has a strong smell. Pointing out their deviance is a way of pointing out how people should behave by making an example of inappropriate behavior. As these examples illustrate, deviance doesn't have to be obviously threatening, only outside the norm. For example, another commuter notes a man who waits for the train at his stop. The man wears a broad-brimmed hat and holds ski poles. "He looks like he's going out to hike. But he's there every day," said the confused commuter.

In general, riders notice the amount of people on the train and whether or not there are more or less people boarding than usual, in order to determine whether or not an intrusion on one's personal space is acceptable, or if the invading person should be considered deviant. For example, several people that I talked to had noticed increased ridership over the summer of 2006 when some tunnels into the city were closed for repairs causing an increased demand on commuter trains (Daniel 2006). A few people talked about this with me, as this person did: "This train is sometimes crowded. For example, when the tunnel was closed, there were more people on the train. It's not been so bad in the last couple of months, now that the tunnel is open again."

An event such as tunnel closings in the summer of 2006 is important to commuters because it excuses unusual behavior and protects people from being labeled deviant or the situation being considered disorderly as long as there is a good reason for it. Having to sit close to one another on the train is unacceptable until it becomes apparent that there is no other choice. An increased train population due to the tunnel closing is an acceptable reason for crowding and sharing space more closely than one would like.

Managing the behavior of strangers

I find that anyone inside one train car is subject to the same set of rules. The flexibility of this unspoken, understood system of social order is apparent when one observes that a set of rules can change from one train car to the next. Once a population on board has been scrutinized, and it is determined that someone is deviant, their behavior then needs to be addressed. The most common method of addressing a deviant is to stare at him or her.

There are many examples of staring as a form of communication on the train. When I asked one commuter what she does when someone is bothering her, she answered, "I never confront them. I give them dirty looks, really mean looks." Another passenger explained how teens who "dress the part of a gangster" are managed by others:

"So they give the kids a look maybe. Or they're just nervous and think to themselves 'What if they are a danger to me? What if they attack me?' and they move a little or glance at them. And the kids can sense that. They think 'What are you looking at me like that for? What have I done to you?'"

This example points out a problem with staring as a means of social control which is that staring isn't always interpreted the way it is intended to be. Unfortunately, while eye-contact is always noticed, it's not always interpreted to mean the same thing to different people. Staring

isn't the best form of management of people when it is interpreted as a challenge and makes the staring person more vulnerable. The commuter above also said that you can "put yourself into a situation" by looking at someone, and "You don't look at people because they'll wonder why you're looking at them." Another commuter concurs, "I don't look at people – it would create trouble. I don't want them to feel threatened." Of my sample of informants, it may be significant that those who stated that staring can make a person more vulnerable (because it's viewed as a challenge) are men. The informants who confidently rely on staring as a form of social control are women.

Another way to manage others is talking loudly about them or their behavior, intending that the deviant person will overhear. A commuter told me a story of how he attempted to manage another by speaking loudly about him.

> "I kept saying things to the people I was with, like, 'Not everyone wants to hear people playing their video games.' And he heard me, and he was intentionally trying to irritate me because he ignored me and kept playing it. I said 'Games don't have to be played at full volume,' and he ignored me. So finally I stood up to locate the source of this irritation, and said to the people next to me, 'There's the selfish jerk who doesn't think of others.'"

There was an occasion in which I found myself participating in this same behavior of talking loudly in order to be overheard. While standing on the platform as the train was arriving, a latecomer dashed across the tracks in front of the dangerously close oncoming train as the engineer who saw it urgently sounded the whistle. The people watching were shocked at the behavior. As this person walked up the steps to the platform, we spoke loudly amongst ourselves about how dangerous it is to cross in front of a train because trains are too big to stop in time, and also how an accident would have caused us all to be late getting home that night. I hoped that the person we were talking about would feel social pressure not to do it again.

When people don't feel safe enough to manage the behavior of others on their own, they will solicit the help of a conductor. "If someone made me uncomfortable, I would move, or I would tell the conductor," one person said. A few informants mentioned that they asked for the conductor's help when another person had been drinking. This could be because a person under the influence of alcohol might be less subject to social control, which would put the person complaining in danger. An example: "One person was very inebriated and it was quite obnoxious. I got up and told the conductor it was unacceptable. That person was told to quiet down or get off at the next stop." And another: "There was another time when someone was drinking on the train. When I got off the train I said to the conductor 'There's alcohol. You can see it. You can smell it. Red sweater.' You know, *See Something Say Something*." This passenger didn't feel safe complaining while she was still on the train with the person, and waited till she was leaving to complain to the conductor. She justified her complaint by referring to the MBTA's safety campaign, indicating that she felt she may have been violating social order herself by complaining.

Conductors are not exempt. Despite their position as authority figures and as service providers, conductors are subject to as much scrutiny as any passenger. Commuters note the identities of conductors by watching them or by listening to announcements on the intercoms and recognizing their voices. Passengers pay close attention to things like the perceived mood of a conductor, the ability of a conductor to remember passengers, and how informative conductors are during unusual times. One passenger said to me, "The conductors are lovely, but not all of them. Some are mean." Conductors are also remembered for their good behavior, as another person recounts when the train hit a person. "And then there was the accident. Well, for the commuters that was a big deal. The conductors were really good, with all that going on. They

kept coming back to tell the passengers what was going on. They made announcements; let us know things as they knew them." Another gave me an example of where being noticed by a conductor went from appreciated behavior to suspicious behavior:

> "I think when they know the people it helps them do their jobs better. When they remember me, I like being noticed like that. They see me, and they know where I'm going. But when I'm not there and people ask why, I don't really like that. For example this conductor remembered that I once got on in Leominster and wondered why I was getting on here. Already he's asking himself why. I don't know about that."

This commuter liked being recognized, but did not like being questioned – that was getting a little too personal.

Change impression/minimize cognitive dissonance

Sometimes it is easier or more effective to change one's perspective rather than to change someone else or change the environment. This can be considered a way to minimize *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological term used to explain the incompatibility between believing something, but behaving contrary to that belief. An example is a person who believes that smoking is bad for her, but she continues to smoke. She may convince herself that she could quit anytime, so the difference between her behavior and not smoking is not really that big. That is minimizing cognitive dissonance. In many circumstances it is difficult to change behavior, so *minimizing cognitive dissonance* is when people change their thoughts rather than their behavior. This is another strategy used by people on the commuter rail train. Rather than believe the train is bad while they continue to use it, people rationalize their situation with statements like, "Considering how bad it is on the subway, we have it pretty good on the train." In order to avoid believing that the train is a dangerous place, several commuters told me "I have

no fear at all on the train," while they also told me how important it is that they sit in the same exact seat on the same exact car every day – which indicates to me that they fear being out of control.

Most people on the train will come into what Hall describes as personal distance, the distance at which interactions are comfortable among good friends. Another possible example of an attempt to minimize cognitive dissonance could be when someone makes friends with the person who has come inside the boundaries of personal space. If the attempt at making friends is successful, then it is not as bad having a friend sitting nearby than having a stranger there. And finally, in order to feel a sense of solidarity and belonging, people on the train may think of each other as friends, even when they don't know each other so well. One woman smiled and gestured across the aisle, "I'm happy each day when I can sit with my friend Hank, here." She got his name wrong, and he didn't correct her.

Networks

In the example above, with "Hank," it's apparent that this relationship between two people on the train is important despite its outward signs of not being a typical friendship. The woman doesn't even know the man's name. She hasn't spent enough time with him to have realized her mistake – such as overhearing when someone else addresses him by name. And yet, she counts him, or at least says she counts him, among positive influences on her life. Hank, on the other hand does not correct her. Perhaps he doesn't care what she calls him, or perhaps he feels that by not critiquing her he is supporting her, which may help their friendship survive. It can be puzzling to imagine the value of this relationship until one looks at it with a network analysis perspective.

Anchored relationships

Support for maintaining good relations, or at least civility, exists for most people at most times in public spaces because the more people know each other, the more they can anticipate what sort of behavior to expect out of each other. The more people know each other, the further they move away from being unpredictable, uncontrollable strangers. Commuters don't want to get to know each other, though, when they are afraid for their safety and afraid that they might not get off at the right stop, or have other fears. Once a person has become fully participant in the train's social order, it is at that point that they can relax enough to think about making friends. As Goffman says that once people give signs that they can be trusted not to exploit threatening possibilities, then "the individual may feel secure enough to forget about defending himself" (1963:197). As the number of familiar strangers and friendly strangers increases, a commuter can feel more at ease on the train. Then something else happens: the people on the train sometimes become friends. When the relationship between commuters becomes more personal and intimate than friendly strangers, these are *anchored relationships*.

Anchored relationships resemble traditional friendships in that there is emotional involvement, reciprocity, and a typical network exchange of resources such as doing favours for one another. However, they exist only in the context in which they were created. Goffman says an anchored relationship includes a built-in "understanding of the circumstances in which dealings are anticipated and even obligatory" (1971:190). The relationship occurs between people who acknowledge each other, and can be a spontaneous reaction to recognizing the other person "in a context that implies for each a relevant social identity for the other" (Goffman 1971:191). This is where the many affectionate terms for one's anchored relationships come in. I

have heard them called "train friends," "train buddies," "the train gang," and "train people." These anchored relationships will occasionally move off the train, but are maintained primarily because of the train. For example, a group I sat with on one train so enjoyed sitting together that they named the group after the number of the train, and even developed a group handshake. These people occasionally showed up with drinks and food for each other on the Friday night ride home, and organized holiday parties together at a bar in Boston. What held the group together was the shared train experience.

The ties that bind

One can ask of the anchored relationships formed on the train: are they cause or effect? In other words, does the train environment itself make relationships form as they do, or do people form relationships intentionally to create the train environment? It is true that anchored relationships serve emotional needs that traditional friendships fulfill. On the train, however, they have additional, important uses through their function in networks. The formation of anchored relationships is a way to build networks and thus expand the capabilities of social order.

Human networks are associations of individuals (or institutions) and relationships formed through some kind of exchange. Social network analysis refers to the individuals as nodes of exchange, and the relationships between them and other networks as ties. "The kinds of resources that flow through ties and networks include more than material goods. They can include such resources as information about one's environment and resources that are themselves part of the ties-such as affective gratification obtained through being liked" (Wellman 1983:172). These exchanges are particularly helpful in creating and maintaining social order on the train.

Sharing material resources and information in networks also obligates people to each other (Stack 1974). This obligation also serves to bind people together and improves their sense of affiliation. Belonging to a group can improve the chances that a person will be looked after and kept safe, and this in turn compels a person to look after others in the group. When examining networks that include a lot of boundary crossing or boundary changing, it is more useful to use the ties in a network as the unit of evaluation rather than the proximity of the nodes, or the structure that contains the network (Wellman 1983). "Weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle; but strong ties have a greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more available" (Granovetter 1983:209). Therefore people need both familiar and friendly strangers (weak ties) and anchored relationships (strong ties). A commuter said, "There is strength in numbers. I see the same people, they see me. If I needed help, I have people I could ask. If I didn't have the fare, for example, I would just ask you and you would bail me out. Whereas when I was new, I couldn't ask a stranger for money." Networks include conductors, of course, as in the case where one conductor frequently runs out of quarters for change to give passengers. He has asked two women to make change for him so often that they have begun collecting quarters in their bags just in case he needs them.

Some commuters hope to expand their social network of people from whom they can expect social resources and obligations, and to whom they feel an obligation toward, which makes them feel needed. An example of friendly support and commiseration is given in this example,

> "I love the people on the train. Just think about how much you get to know about other people [she tells this to those sitting near her, expecting that they agree with her]. You get to know their stories, their families. I think as a woman, well, we just plan our day, and we don't get times for

ourselves. But on the train, if I'm having a problem, or I've had a bad day, I just sit with Valerie here, and pretty soon she starts talking and before I know it, I feel better."

If we examine the use of networks on a train in terms of the ties and not the location, then some apparent anti-social behavior could be explained. For example, someone on the train who refuses to respond to another's attempts to engage him in conversation is perceived to be deviant. However, the refusal to engage could be the most appropriate behavior by which this particular individual manages his network of social ties. Perhaps his obligations to his network preclude his ability to widen his network at that time. He may not be able to fulfill his part of a new friendly stranger or anchored relationship and therefore refuses to commit himself to one.

Maintaining weak ties with familiar strangers and friendly strangers in a network is still important because they demand very little input and the level of interaction can be sporadic and undependable, yet still increase network size and access to linked networks. Contact with fringe members of the network can provide members with access to resources in other networks. For example, when someone seeks information about employment opportunities, they are less likely to gain leads from within their core network because those people will have the same access to information, and more likely to gain leads from people who have access to other networks (Granovetter 1983).

Networks are a result of social order on the train, but networks in turn further support social order. They are created intentionally and are not a result of being on the train, they provide commuters with access to resources (information, fare money, protection, affiliation), and networks provide opportunities to control others – in part because people in anchored relationships will share contact information and therefore can be held accountable. An example of networks in action was when one regular commuter suddenly stopped appearing each evening on the platform. After a couple of weeks, riders became worried, and since I had once given him

a ride home, several people asked me to go to his home and check on him. I did, and he was fine.

Conclusions

I have identified a number of things that people are aware of that could negatively impact them in public spaces. Public spaces, first of all, are a relatively unknown space compared to someone's home and workplace. Without the data that one would need to feel as though the space is known (and therefore predictable and safe), people collect as much observable data as possible and assign meanings to it. They take note of physical boundaries of the place, social boundaries, and assess the characteristics that make the place public. To make sense of all this information, organizational strategies are necessary. Organizational strategies used by people on the Fitchburg train are either about choice or social order. The creation of choice within a restrictive environment can mean people are either managing their physical environment, or managing their social environment, and it gives commuters a sense of individual control. The creation of social order such as rules, norms, and enforcement of them is how people deal with their fears of being out of control. All these things help me make a few general assertions:

(1) Fear on the train is about losing control, not about crime.

Fears among my informants seemed to relate to being out of control. This means that they had a wide ranger of fears that included fear of strangers and fear of disorder, and are not limited to fears of crime or victimization. When I was in the planning stages of this research, fear of crime or victimization is what I expected to find copious evidence of. My assumption was wrong. When it comes to the concept of *fear*, as it's commonly understood, there isn't much of it among commuters. Compared to all the other things that enter peoples' minds while they're on

the train, for most people there is very little sense that anyone on the train will be victimized, nor is there a feeling that most strangers on the train are about to burst out of control. There isn't even much consideration for the potential for an accident or vehicle breakdown. I eventually modified my research when I found that most people became distinctly agitated when there was disorder, or when they considered the implications of disorder. What people on the train do fear is being out of control.

There are varying levels of awareness of individual vulnerability on trains. Some people are conscious of their personal individual vulnerability, and behave in ways to reflect that. For example, they might sit by a door to make sure they can exit quickly at their stop, or sit by an exit window to improve their chances of exiting in the case of an emergency. People might also sit in train cars that are statistically less likely to go off the tracks in the case of a vehicle accident. When it comes to the potential for strangers on the train to cause trouble, people who are aware of their vulnerability will sit in a place that allows observation and room to maneuver in case of trouble with another passenger.

Some passengers are not consciously aware of their vulnerability and claim to have no fear on the train, yet behave in ways that suggest they are managing fears. For example, they sit in the same spot every day, look for the same people or same sights every day, do not speak out against anyone, and sit with friends and acquaintances. Anyone who moves away rather than complains about someone's behavior is an example of resisting speaking out against another. And many people sit with friends and acquaintances, developing networks to help provide security to be protected from a variety of possible future problems.

Perhaps the best person on the Fitchburg train to illustrate this is a man who often voices out loud the intimate concerns of others. This man seems to be less bound by behavioral

expectations than others, but also appears to act in ways that many can relate to. When he boarded the train one day when the lights were out, he exclaimed loudly, "Oh god! The lights are out!" When conductors make announcements for the next stop, he often calls "Thank you!" To illustrate my point about looking for the same things every day, this man is more obvious than others. He tries to sit in the same seat whenever he is able to. One of his first tasks each morning is to crane his neck in every direction, attempting to identify certain people that he expects to see there. If someone is missing, he knows and complains. "Where is that lady?" he will call out. "Lady? Lady?" When he sees someone he was hoping to see, he will voice this also: "I see that guy over there. I know you, mister."

(2) Social order makes members of a community feel safer

When there is a group of people who all fall into the category of "stranger" but they are all behaving within social expectations, they can be treated as one entity. That is not as overwhelming to manage as it would be if each individual stranger needed to be monitored. And furthermore, common rules of behavior make a unified group and encourage loyalty. Group affiliation helps people feel that others are looking out for them, and they in turn will look out for others. When one or two individuals of that larger group of strangers behave deviantly, then those few are easy to monitor as long as everyone else is behaving as expected.

(3) Choice plays an important psychological role

Commuters' emphasis on making choices while in an environment with limited choices recalls Goffman's observation that an availability of some choices can blind people to overall general limitations. In response to a perceived inability to control the whole environment that

people on commuter trains attempt to control what they can – be it choosing their seat, or creating social organization.

(4)Building networks supports social order

Making friends with passengers and conductors is a way for people to meet their emotional and social needs in a world where time is increasingly limited and opportunities for meaningful interaction with other people seem to be decreasing. While networking addresses this important need, it also widens networks for commuters. Networks increase the number of people expected to help in case of trouble, and decreases the number of people that need to be scrutinized. These anchored relationships formed on the train usually do not exist outside train environment, which means they may exist just to network on the train.

(5) Social order promotes peaceful existence of diverse groups

As Jacobs notes, people are more accepting of each other the more frequently they interact without trouble (1961). The more opportunities people have to come into contact with each other in public spaces, the more a community sense of peace can be cultivated, while ignorance of each other breeds suspicion and mistrust (Boulding 2000). When diverse populations of copresent strangers follow mutually beneficial social rules, it has the potential to break apart stereotypes and increase tolerance. Public spaces can therefore be beneficial to creating peaceful diverse communities. Understanding what social organizational needs are among users of commuter rail trains can help in planning designs that encourage cooperation, trust, and peaceful coexistence.

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