A Community Underground: Ethnography in the Tunnels of the Tube

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Entering the Tube

Entering the Tube is, in many ways, a deeply disconcerting experience. In company with hundreds of other people, you descend deep under the streets of London. Gradually, the sounds, sights and smells of everyday city life are replaced by those of the subterranean world that keeps the city connected. When considering what to focus on for this project the only thing I was initially certain of was that I wanted to explore something that I personally had not previously considered anthropological. The Tube – simply a central part of the fabric of my favourite city – seemed perfect. At first glance, the Tube might seem to the uninitiated like a rather odd choice for an anthropological project – it seems alienating, devoid of meaningful interaction and altogether unsuited for anthropology – usually a discipline focused on the social side of the human experience. However, the further my fieldwork progressed, the more I discovered that the Tube was a fascinating subject for anthropological research. Not only is it home to probably one of the most diverse groups of people in the country, but it has a vital role in mediating the way in which Londoners and tourists alike interact with the city they inhabit. Through a mixture of interviews and participant observation, I have endeavoured to explore these interactions both as an observer and as someone who has utilised the Tube in my daily life. When analysing the data I had collected, the main question I found myself wanting to answer was just how the Tube conditions and mediates the relationships that people have, both with other users of the Tube and with the city that surrounds them.

Fieldwork underground

I began my fieldwork by spending a period of time on the circle line,[1] engaging in participant observation at different times of the day. While on the Tube, I took extensive notes on the interactions I observed around me on my phone. I chose to use my phone to take notes because I was wary of those around me realising that I was watching them. I had decided to avoid taking pictures during my fieldwork, both because this would have been ethically problematic and because I was conscious, from anthropological literature I had read prior to this, that the camera can create a barrier while in the field (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2005). I did, however, make quick sketches at certain points, illustrating the environment in which my fieldwork was carried out, as I felt these was more helpful than photos in enabling me to interact with the environment. Due to the nature of the Tube itself, it was difficult for me to speak to other users while I was actually conducting my fieldwork. However, I had anticipated this, and I complemented the observations made at the time with data from interviews conducted both in person and over Facebook. I also spoke to people that I knew to be frequent users of the Tube as well as those who approached me with experiences to share when I told them about my project.[2] This allowed me to support and challenge the observations I made while conducting my fieldwork with the personal experiences of others. In my analysis, I have also attempted to connect my observations with wider anthropological literature, both that about the urban experience and about environments similar to the Tube more specifically.

The Tube as a place of transition

The first thing I considered when embarking on this project, was that there are many aspects of the Tube that do not entirely make sense. The most prominent of these things, and the one that many people I spoke to mentioned, is the map. Unlike other metro systems, where the map is topographical, the London Tube map is not geographically accurate, instead having been drawn to resemble "circuit diagrams", with the sprawling Tube network stripped down to a "neat diagram of coloured criss-crossing lines" (Henry Beck's Tube map 2017). This may make the map easier to follow, but many of the people I talked to about this felt that it also helps to create a disconnect between the experience of travelling on the Tube below ground and the actual reality of the city above. This seemed to be a common theme in my research, a co-worker who had previously lived in London, Sasha, stating that using the Tube can make you see the city in a "patchwork way" and that you "don't see how different areas interact with each other". Another interviewee who had grown up in London, Hannah, even suggested that "you miss out on the London above" and do not get to "explore the small quirks of London". The idea that using this mode of transport could disconnect people with the city through which they travelled is fascinating, as it re-conceptualises the Tube as an agent in the lives of Londoners. It also links into the idea that the Tube, and other transport networks like it, constitute liminal spaces, which Nora Plebke describes as a "space in between, a space of transition" and a liminal space between "home and work life, between public and private" (Plebke 2014: 260). Katherine, an interviewee who has frequently used the Tube as a tourist, encapsulated the effect of this liminality on the experience of using the Tube by terming it "magical" in comparison to public transport in her hometown. She expanded on this by explaining that it feels as if "you get on the Tube, and poof, you've disapparated[3] to another place". This disconnect between the Tube journey as portrayed on the map, and its actual physical journey seemed to make this journey in some way feel less 'real' to those I interviewed, as well as engendering a sense of disconnect between the real everyday London above, and the commuters and tourists using the Tube.

Collective isolation

The disconnect that the Tube creates, is something Schilvelbusch conveys in a rather more pessimistic way, describing those who travel by locomotive as "human parcels…arriving as they left, untouched by the space traversed" (1977: 38-39). This implies that the mode of transport is in some way dehumanising, as people using it have the same level of interaction with the space they are travelling through as a piece of cargo would. This factor is something frequently noted about the Tube, both in academic research, every day conversation and popular culture. It has, in fact, become the stereotype of the Tube, that it is a place of minimal interaction, where people avoid social interactions to the point where it has almost become a norm. The comedian Hugh Dennis, talking about the Tube on a popular current affairs related panel show Mock the Week stated that "as a Londoner, you simply don't talk to people on the Tube… unless you've got a dog" (BBC 2012).

Hugh Dennis demonstrating his 'on the Tube face' on BBC Two's 'Mock the Week' (BBC 2012)

Comparison between a topographical map of the Tube and the Tube map. (TfL 2017)

This example shows just how far this idea has pervaded British popular culture – to the point where it was assumed to be a joke that everyone would immediately understand and be able to relate to. According to Augé, this sense of disconnect is something common to underground transport networks, causing him to give the "prosaic definition" of the Paris metro as "collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation" (2002: 30). He goes further in expanding this, detailing the "boundaried" (*ibid.*: 31) character of the community "imposed by the dimension" of the metro cars – seeming to suggest that the physical nature of such modes of transport forces people to be physically intimate, while at the same time ensuring that this intimacy is in no way replicated in a social sense. This, while it was intended to define the experience of the Paris metro, could just have easily been describing the Tube. This suggests that this is lack of socialising is not, as has been suggested, due to some aspect of British culture, but something influenced by the nature of subterranean transport. Ben, who used the Tube primarily for commuting, suggested that he would only talk to people if they "spoke first, like a tourist" and that he thought that was one of the assets of the Tube, that people can travel in "peace". In this case it seemed as if 'peace' meant something deeper than simply not talking – the Tube acting as a refuge from the wider world. This certainly seemed to be the case during my fieldwork, where I noted that people would try not to sit directly next to others and that conversations were rare. One particularly memorable moment occurred when a group of tourists got on the Tube at Baker Street, singing loudly amongst themselves, celebrating a recent victory for their rugby team. I expected people to react negatively to this, having previously encountered commuters glaring at encroaching tourists, but the presence of the exuberant tourists instead seemed to relax the unspoken rules, as several people engaged them in conversation about their hometown. These obviously were not the only people I witnessed speaking on the tube, but this was the only time their exuberance managed to break through the social boundaries. Despite this exception, the close confines of the Tube or metro car appear to induce travellers to strengthen the boundaries between themselves and others, as if reacting instinctively to the unwelcome necessity of sharing their personal space

The Tube as an agent

Despite its possible shortcomings as a geographically accurate map of London, there is no doubt that the map and other images such as the 'roundel' that features on every Tube sign and train have become some of the most recognised symbols of London, both home and abroad. This seems to support the previously

mentioned idea that the Tube is an agent in its own right, as it has its own presence and 'brand' beyond its London based tunnels and platforms. I believe that this is part of the reason that Alex, an interviewee, when asked "Do you think using the Tube means you know London less completely?" suggested that he actually thought that knowing the Tube "kinda counts as knowing London", as in his eyes it was "one of the most iconic bits of London". This suggests that Alex, who had recently moved to London, saw the Tube, as being synonymous with central London, just like landmarks such as Big Ben and the London Eye. This idea, that knowing the Tube counts as knowing London, is interesting. It contradicts the experience of many people I spoke to who suggested that they felt using it meant they did not experience or know the places they travelled through as thoroughly as they would do otherwise. Alex, by contrast, seemed to suggest that he felt he knew London because he used the Tube. Towards the end of this interview, he also mentioned that one of the reasons he used the Tube as his primary mode of transport was that as someone new to London the Tube was the only possible way for him to travel without becoming lost. In some ways for him, it seemed that the Tube and the Tube map were what taught him to navigate London. He thought that the only thing he really missed out on about the world above was the fact that often it is much easier to walk between stations than it looks on the map – something he only discovered after he had been in London for over a month. His experience, which seemed to be comparatively rare, by no means negates the experiences of others, but perhaps suggests there is an element of socialisation in the way people act on the Tube and think about it – and also that perhaps it takes time to react to the Tube as a 'Londoner' would.

Social norms and collective identity mediated by the Tube

This brings me to something that came up frequently, both in my fieldwork and in interviews – the difference between a tourist and a 'Londoner'. When the majority of those I interviewed wanted to talk about behaviour that was out of the ordinary, they would speak of it not being "how a Londoner would behave", or in the words of David being like the behaviour of "a tourist". This divide seemed evident during my fieldwork, where I found that I was able to identify tourists by the way they acted and in some cases by the way they dressed, primarily the carrying of large backpacks and bulky cameras. This is interesting because throughout the interviews and conversations I carried out there was a line drawn between Londoners, the 'insiders', and tourists, the 'outsiders', that suggests that Tube users consider themselves to be a community, with their own norms and behaviours. Along with the unwritten rule about talking on the Tube, which according to my research seems to be commonly adopted by those who identify as 'Londoners', there are official rules as well as tricks, that a 'Londoner' would know, but outsiders would not. These include well-advertised things like standing on the right-hand side of escalators and walking on the left, as well as less obvious tricks such as always taking the lifts at Covent Garden.

Signs explaining why taking the stairs is not advised and displaying the 'stand on the right' rule (Huishu 2017), (Felbor 2010).

By pointing out these norms, self-proclaimed 'Londoners' are simultaneously defining what it means to be a 'Londoner' – someone who understands the written and unwritten rules – while defining those who do not understand or follow these as an outsider, not a Londoner, an 'other'. The idea of otherness and the process of othering has been much studied, from Said on orientalism, who stated that the purpose of this was to "characterize the orient as alien" (Said 1977: 73) to Beauvoir on the status of women whom she argued are "only conscious of themselves – in way that men have shaped them" (Hughes and Witz 1997: 49). There seems then, to be precedent for the idea of a community defining itself in opposition to others while defining the status of 'other' in opposition to the community. In this case, Londoners define themselves a group who observe certain norms, such as not talking on the Tube and outsiders or 'others' as those who do not. This all supports the idea that those who use the Tube regularly form a kind of community, with its own rules and norms, which is mediated and conditioned by the environment around them. This community is formed despite the fact that, even taking the same journey every day, these 'Londoners' are unlikely to meet the same people frequently. This is unlikely because according to Transport for London, the Tube handles up to 4.8 million passengers per day and that at peak times more than 543 trains can be operating at once (London Underground 2017). Even if they are not at all aware of it, it seems from my fieldwork and interviews that Londoners who use the Tube, and Londoners more widely, form a community, defined in opposition to the tourists 'others' who stream into London every day. This may have the effect of making central London seem more impenetrable than it perhaps needs to be, but I believe it is the effect of the constant state of isolation in a crowded place that Londoners experience day in and day out.

Conclusion

While I tried to start my fieldwork without forming any preconceptions, I was expecting to find signs that the Tube was not the place it is usually described as – that this seemingly antisocial liminal place was home to social interactions that usually go unseen. I did find this, observing tourists cause part of a carriage to join in with a song and a young man to have an animated conversation with a stranger about his Doctor Who t-shirt. However, I also found much more than I expected in the form of a community. This community may be unspoken, and in some ways invisible, but it has its own identity, rules and norms. I also discovered that the built environment – that of the Tube carriage and of the stations and platforms – did indeed have a profound impact on this community and the way it operated, the most obvious example of this is the way that the close confines of the carriage reduced social interaction due to forcing physical intimacy. For many of the people I interviewed, the Tube was also seen as a liminal place – a place of transition disconnected from the city it operates underneath, which in the limited experience of one person I interviewed, was so efficient that travelling on it felt like 'magic'. Both my fieldwork and the interviews I conducted confirmed the idea that there is a kind of community formed between those who use the Tube, especially those who use it regularly, mediated by the environment in which their journeys take place.

NOTES

1. The circle line was chosen for ease of conducting my observations, as it being circular made it much easier for me to spend extended periods of time on the Tube without interruption.

2. It should be noted that all names have been changed.

3. The use of the word 'disapparated' only accentuates her point, as it comes from the Harry Potter novels where it is a form of magical teleportation.

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