

**This paper was written for my Research Methods class (Sociology 5) at UC Berkeley. In this observation, my partner and I rode the local bus line and used research techniques such as coding and observation. After conducting our non-evasive study, we shared our findings and interpreted the social codes we found independently.**

### **Social Hierarchy in Public Space**

For our study, our field site was the 51B bus route from the UC campus to the Marina area Amtrak and back. The bus/field site was fairly standard in that the vehicle wasn't brand new, showed signs of wear such as dirty seats and chipped exterior and interior paint, wasn't environmentally friendly (didn't run on an alternative fuel source like the newer vehicles) and was fairly small as it only had around 30-35 seats. Inside, the seats had a faint old smell that added to it's character of being an older bus and the paint on the seats had dark smudges. We chose the 51B bus as our field site because it is one of the most popular routes in the Berkeley area and is representative of the demographic as it goes from the northside to the south side of Berkeley. We felt that the bus would be an ideal location to study social distinctions as many people in Berkeley and throughout the United States rely on public transportation to get to work, do errands and go to school. Because anyone has access to the transit system, it has the potential to bring people of different backgrounds, races and genders into one setting. During our observation, we watched people from 3:30pm to 4:20pm on a Tuesday afternoon. Because we chose to observe people during this time, it may have affected our results as many people are still at work during these hours. Furthermore, it could have also shown an excess number of students riding the bus as this is the primary group of people who are using the system during this time since they are not restricted to a strict work schedule.

Social hierarchy is defined as “differential access to something [such as] public space, people's concern or attention, resources or to a social position.” In my field, I identified social

hierarchy in terms of age, race, gender, and wealth/social class. From my observations, I noticed that age was a primary marker as there was a blatant divide between younger and older bus riders. For example, older/middle aged individuals tended to stay near the front or middle of the bus and would never go to the back even when seats were available in the last row. Furthermore, there seemed to be a segregation between these two age groups as older people (40 and older) would not sit with the college age students in the back of the bus. If they were forced (no other available seat) to sit with a younger person in the middle of the bus, they remained silent during the ride and did not converse with their seat partner. Older bus riders also tended to sit with those who were closer in age to them rather than with younger students. This demonstrates their access to public space and how the older generation tends to take up the “prime” area at the front/middle of the bus as it gives better access to the exits and is less strenuous as it is closer to the entrance of the bus. Thus, the elderly are higher in social status as they take up the most sought after space on the bus. Another mark of social hierarchy was race. While riding the bus, I noticed that a majority of riders were people of color as they were primarily of African American. Many were also of Asian and Hispanic descent. Because many of the riders were minorities, this could indicate that they have less access to private transportation in comparison to caucasians as cars are more expensive to buy and maintain than a bus pass. Interestingly, the caucasian bus riders were mostly older individuals that were in their late 60s which is another indicator of social hierarchy as these white bus riders seemed to lack the resources/wealth to use private transportation. Therefore, it seems that younger caucasians have more access to private transportation than those of color while some elderly caucasian individuals may also lack the resources to obtain cars which could show that younger whites have more wealth in comparison

to people of color. Similarly, I also observed that women in burkas tended to stand in the front of the bus even though they were in their early 20s. This could indicate a gender mark as the front of the bus is seen as a “prime” area and usually reserved for the elderly. This act demonstrates social position and how these women and their religion revere the female and see her as someone who deserves this “special” area as the front of the bus is seen as a place of importance due to it’s more prominent/noticeable and more convenient in terms of access. In terms of gender, men also took up more space compared to the female as they spread out their legs both when standing and sitting. Thus, their social position is seen as more important as they command more space than other riders.

Another mark that I noticed was social class in terms of how the bus riders were dressed. Because those that belong in different classes (upper, upper middle, lower middle, poor etc.) tend to display wealth through their appearance, I noticed the differences between the bus riders in regard to how they were dressed. When riding on the 51B route, no one was dressed in particularly nice clothing and displayed little to no signs of wealth. In fact, most of the college students were dressed in Cal sweatshirts, jeans, sneakers and usually carried backpacks or well worn shoulder bags. Similarly, the older bus riders wore baggy sweat suits that displayed stains, retro shirts (that displayed old patterns such as tiny floral prints) and worn out khakis/jeans. Interestingly, no one was dressed in stylish/modern clothing, name brand suits or business wear. They also did not display wealth in terms of their possessions. While older men and women tend to carry briefcases or purses, the older bus riders either had no visible possessions or carried canvas market bags. In fact, the one college aged girl that wore name brands such as a Gucci backpack was the only one that stood out to me as she was a stark contrast to other riders on the

bus. Though she shared the same disinterested expression as many of the other riders, her style of dress was much more noticeable as she seemed to follow the “mainstream” fashion trends with her skinny jeans, riding boots, glittery sweater and her Gucci baseball cap and backpack. Interestingly, she was also one of the few people who was listening/using her iphone. This relates to another social hierarchy mark relating to knowledge/intellectualism that I observed while riding on this route. Unlike the Los Angeles buses where everyone is using an electronic device (cell phones, ipods, ipads, laptops), Berkeley bus riders almost never used their portable electronics. In fact most of them either looked out the window or read a newspaper/book. I found that people in the area seemed to have a greater access to knowledge as they did not use electronics to diffuse boredom on their bus rides. Thus, it could be said that those who read were more educated and had greater access to knowledge resources (newspapers, books) than those who used their phones or didn’t do anything.

When going into the field, I didn’t have have set “markers for social hierarchy” and wanted to interpret my own observations of the people and interactions that I saw. However, when observing the scene, I did look for cues in how the bus riders conducted themselves, how they were dressed and their physical features. Because people poise themselves in certain ways in order to demonstrate confidence and social status, I thought that these were good markers of social hierarchy as certain stances and styles are indicative of social class. For instance, men who are well groomed, wear clean button up shirts and have their shoulders back exude the image of an upper middle class male as they have a confident pose and are well dressed which shows they have the resources to buy nice clothing and maintain hygiene. In addition, I started to notice

physical appearance (race) purely by coincidence as I saw more and more people of color enter the bus rather than white individuals on this particular route.

Overall, Annalisa and I had similar observations when writing our field notes as we noticed many of the same interactions such as the lack of communication between bus riders and the separation between the elderly and the young. However, I noticed that I focused more on the differences in race, social class and age when comparing field notes. Because driving is Annalisa's primary source of transportation, I feel that I may have had an insider bias as I usually take the bus to get around the Berkeley area. Thus, I had more of an idea of what kind of people rode the bus, what interactions were like and what distinctions to look for whereas Annalisa had a different perspective. I found that while we saw the same things, Annalisa focused more on the interactions between the bus riders. For example, she saw how some young people would give up their seat for older individuals while others would not. She also took note of the handicapped individuals on the bus. While I also noticed these riders, I didn't write much about them since I assume it's bus courtesy to help the disabled by releasing your seat. I think the primary reason we had these differences was our insider/outsider biases as we had different levels of exposure to the field.

Personally, I feel that these differences in our field notes strengthen our ethnography as we have different viewpoints on the same field observations. Because the "scientific" nature of ethnography strives to promote a free flowing and natural approach to the researcher's observations, the differences actually help us get a broader view of social hierarchy and helps our research in that we get both the insider and outsider views and perceptions.