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Running Head: HOP ON THE BUS

Hop on the Bus: Driving Stratification Concepts Home

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ABSTRACT

To help students see the realities of inequality and poverty we present an assignment where students take public transportation and then write about the experience as part of a three-stage process. Students are first exposed to general statistics about inequality, rates of poverty in the United States, and the daily lives of the working class and those living in poverty. Then they have an experience riding the public bus where they consider what it would be like to be a single parent whose only transportation option is the bus, make observations, and notice changing neighborhood conditions. After writing a paper about the experience, as a class students compare their own experiences with statistics on bus ridership and descriptions of how inequality differs in various contexts. A copy of the assignment and tips on how to choose an effective bus route are included.

*“If you want to find out about people spend less time in the library with Plato  
and more time on the bus.” Al Neuarth*

The purpose of experiential education is to combine experience and learning in ways that transform both (Carver 1996; Giles and Eyler 1994; Kolb 1984). Students have experiences outside the classroom, and these experiences are integrated into the course curriculum, enriching both the experience and the class material. Successful experiential education assignments must first provide students with the background they need to fully take advantage of the experience as well as the time and knowledge to help them reflect on what they see (Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy 1999; Hollis 2002; Mooney and Edwards 2001).

Concepts related to social stratification and inequality are demonstrated particularly well through exercises and experiences both in and outside the classroom (for examples see: Bohmer and Briggs 1991; Folse 2002; Grant et al. 1981; Groves, Warren, and Witschger 1996; Hartung 1991; Luske 1998; Manning, Price, and Rich 1997; McCammon 1999; Misra 1997; Scarce 1997; Sernau 1995; Straus 1986; Wright 2000). For classes with content on social stratification and inequality, opportunities to see the unequal distribution of resources and diverse environments allow students to consider both some of the realities of living at different points in the social class system as well as some of the structural forces behind the social class differences they notice.

In this paper we, an assistant professor and two undergraduate students, describe an assignment that incorporates the experience of riding the public bus into course content. The purpose of the assignment is threefold: 1) to allow students to experience and consider some of the barriers that low-income people face in their everyday lives; 2) to learn more about how

inequality and stratification are at work in the community in which they attend school as well as how geographical location and relative poverty affect people differently; and 3) to provide observations that students can connect to structural factors.

This assignment is appropriate for many different types of courses, especially those courses that address inequality and stratification, poverty, urbanization, community studies, and qualitative sociology. The experience of riding the bus could be used as a one-time assignment or include multiple trips. We present the assignment as we have used it: in social stratification courses as a one-time assignment that complements and enhances community-based learning. We also talk about how the assignment can be used as a stand-alone activity, instead of community-based learning, because the experience achieves many of the goals of community-based learning, is logistically easier to organize, and allows students to see the broader context in which many people in poverty must live.

### **TEACHING THROUGH EXPOSURE, EXPERIENCE, AND EXAMINATION**

Community-based learning has been used often to illustrate concepts associated with stratification and inequality. It has been lauded as one of the most beneficial ways of developing students' cognitive skills, values and moral development, citizenship, and their appreciation of diversity, service, and social change advocacy (Marullo 1999). However, while participating in community-based learning is effective in minimizing the distance between students and the people they work with at their placement sites, the structure and requirements of typical community-based programs can result in outcomes that others have pointed to as critiques of community-based/service learning. Because most community-based learning takes place within human or social service agencies, students encounter people in a very limited context: one of

being helped, which could further perceptions that low-income people are needy and unable to help themselves (Everett 1998; Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy 1999; Strand 1999; Sullivan-Catlin 2002). Moreover, students usually drive their own cars or cars provided by the program and arrive at well-established agencies where they typically work with staff who are middle class. Community-based learning activities can also be difficult to coordinate and require a large investment of time by students (Wallace 2000). There is a need for activities or experiences that help to overcome these drawbacks of community-based learning and that allow students to be in the community and see for themselves the structural factors that contribute to stratification and inequality.

Based on past research and the advice of instructors using community-based learning and experiential education, we have developed a three-part process that brings together elements necessary for a successful experiential education assignment. Our assignment incorporates an individual experience, taking the bus, into a process by which students are first *exposed* to major issues in social stratification and inequality. Then, after making observations during their *experience* on the bus, students are given a chance to *examine* more closely how their experience and the information presented in the course coincide.

### ***Exposure***

Framing the experience using sociological concepts and ideas is a crucial component of experiential education, particularly if instructors want to guard against students “blaming the victim” and seeing only individualistic explanations for social problems (Hollis 2002; Sullivan-Catlin 2002). In the first phase of our assignment, exposure, students are introduced to the idea of social class and statistics about rates of poverty in the United States, including who--by age,

race, and sex--is most likely to live in poverty. Students read about the experiences of working-class families and those who use welfare benefits as well as an excerpt from *Blaming the Victim* (Ryan 2001). We also spend a significant amount of time talking about how to study the links between individual experiences as influenced by structural factors. This is primarily accomplished and practiced as students keep a weekly journal where they are required to analyze their individual observations at their community-based placement sites and their own lives using course material. At the beginning of the quarter students are introduced to the method of observation. It is through their placement sites that students first learn how to be participant observers who can analyze people's experiences as part of a particular cultural and structural context.

Students also read Alex Kotlowitz's book *There are No Children Here*, which exposes them to structural factors that affect the lives of two boys growing up in housing projects in inner-city Chicago. The class considers and discusses the concept of relative poverty as students begin to understand the role of context in shaping life chances. We also talk about inequalities in the education system and the inability of minimum wage jobs to keep families out of poverty. As a first exposure to the reality of poverty in our geographical area, as it compares to inner-city Chicago and more rural areas, students look through the classified advertisements of the local paper and try to find employment and housing as a single parent of two with no more than a high school education. Then, based on where they find to live, students look up the achievement scores of the school(s) their children would hypothetically attend.

### ***Experience***

After being exposed to statistics about income and wealth as well as structural analyses of

poverty, and after reading about families who live at various points in the social class structure, students are given a paper assignment. The assignment requires that students make observations while taking the public bus from the campus to a local mall that, although only nine miles from the university, takes students into a very different economic reality.

Students are instructed to use their observational skills and to keep field notes where they describe who rides the bus and the neighborhoods it passes through, and keep track of time and their overall experience riding the bus. A one-page observation log (Appendix A) is provided to students for this purpose. While we discuss how to be keen observers and the importance of keeping field notes, instructors who wish to strengthen this part of the preparation for the experience could have students read Berg (2001) and Baca Zinn (1979) or other readings on observation techniques, then discuss issues associated with being an insider or outsider to the community being observed as well as role play how to make observations and keep fieldnotes.

***Riding the bus.*** Because it is important for students to observe the neighborhoods and communities the bus goes through, they are advised to ride the bus during the day. Students are also instructed to think about the structural constraints of the bus, such as time and cost. Was the bus they caught on time, and how long did it take to get to their destination? How does the cost of the bus compare to the cost of buying, maintaining, and driving a car? Finally, to ensure that they actually take the bus, students are required to note the bus number, date, and time they rode the bus in their observation log as well as to ask for a transfer slip that they can staple to their papers.

The bus route should be chosen wisely, because it is crucial to the effectiveness of the assignment. We recommend that instructors ride the bus first to make sure the route exposes



students to the relevant issues of the course. We picked the route students take for our class because it stops by the university, which is located in a rather wealthy part of town, proceeds through the downtown of our nearest large city, drives through one of the poorest areas in our county, and finally stops at a local mall where students can catch a bus that brings them back to campus. The trip takes about 50 minutes each way. The route up and back is similar so students can break up their observations, first observing on the bus and then, on the return, observing what they see outside the bus (for more suggestions on picking bus routes see Appendix B).

When the instructor initially assigned riding the bus students were required to take the bus to their various community-based learning sites. For some students this required up to three transfers and several hours of travel. While this experience better approximated what it is like to take public transportation, it made the discussion of the experience in the classroom difficult because each student had seen such different areas of the community (Carter et al. 2002). As a result, the instructor now requires that students ride the same bus line with a similar starting and ending point. This has allowed for a more systematic discussion of the geographical changes they notice. However, if the main purpose of the bus riding experience is to expose students to one of the realities of living in poverty, the assignment could be changed in ways that require students to figure out how to get from point A to point B and to take multiple buses at multiple times throughout the quarter or semester. Doing a systematic and critical examination of their experience would include how many buses were on time, the crowdedness of each bus, how difficult it is to get to their destination on time, the existence of covered shelter in different locations, etc. Such expansions of the experience would further help counter impulses of students to confirm stereotypes and/or “blame the victim.”

***The written assignment.*** After students complete their observations, the next step is the paper assignment. In the first part of the paper students use their observation logs to succinctly describe the bus ride, including the demographics of the ridership, how long it took, changing neighborhood conditions, and any other observations they made during the trip. The second part of the paper requires students to think about what it would be like to be in the place of someone who relies on the bus as his/her only form of transportation.

For this part of the assignment students imagine that they are a low-income single parent of two small children who lives near the mall and works at the university, with no other transportation options besides the bus (for a copy of the assignment see Appendix C). The assignment not only gives students the opportunity to interpret their own experience but, equally important, allows them to consider what it is like to “walk in the shoes” of someone else. If instructors wish to emphasize this portion of the assignment, multiple bus rides at different times of the day and evening are recommended.

Given the scenario, students think about and answer the following questions: What would it be like to use public transportation to drop a one-year-old child at day care and a six-year-old at school as well as get to your 36-hour-a-week job serving food at the university’s cafeteria? What would your day look like? And how would you deal with issues such as if one of your children was ill or your work hours were changed from the day to serving dinner in the evenings?

Finally, students compare what they observed during their bus experience in terms of housing, neighborhood characteristics, race, and employment opportunities for single parents to the conditions of inner-city Chicago described in *There Are No Children Here* (Kotlowitz 1991). This final part of the assignment allows students to consider how structural forces contribute to

different life experiences and opportunities, with special attention to those who live in poverty.

Students are also asked to turn in their field notes along with their formal paper.

### ***Examination***

Both the paper assignment and the class discussion allow students to examine more closely the connections between course concepts and what they observed on the bus. The main concepts that students observe in their experience riding the bus and then write about in their papers are issues of inequality and their observations about the intersections of race, class, and gender (see Appendix D for a full list of concepts students have observed). Students are especially adept at noticing the differences in neighborhood conditions throughout the bus ride. As the bus winds through the downtown and poorer areas of town they comment on changes in the quality of the street pavement, street signs, the numbers of stores with bars on the windows, and the increase in the number of small homes and apartments with multiple cars out front, evidence of the density of people living in single-home dwellings. They are also able to contrast what contributes to differences in living conditions for the people in our community to the inner-city environment described in *There Are No Children Here*. Because of the changing neighborhood conditions that they observe on the bus rides, most students explore how things such as housing conditions, access to types of stores, and control over one's time differ based on one's social class status.

While the paper assignment helps students reflect on and connect their experiences and observations on the bus to the course material, additional discussions in class once the paper has been turned in allow students to compare their individual experiences with one another and in light of existing data on bus ridership. Our local county transportation agency periodically

surveys its riders, and the instructor presents statistics on the demographics of the ridership in our county to the class—including the income levels, gender, race/ethnicity, occupations, ages, and average times a week people ride the buses—so students can see how well their observations and perceptions on their individual bus rides match the overall ridership. If local data are not available, national statistics on public transportation users can be obtained from the American Public Transportation Association (2002). In presenting these data and in student discussions about how their observations did or did not match the data, the class can discuss the differences between bus rides.

At the beginning of the discussion the first comments made by students are typically remarks of surprise: surprise about the number of people who ride the bus, how different neighborhoods are close to campus, and a disbelief that some people actually have to rely solely on the bus for transportation. Even though earlier in the quarter we discuss segregation and how it impacts the educational outcomes of the county's children, after their bus rides students are shocked about the extent of segregation in our county. The European American students almost always comment that they were the only white persons on the bus from the downtown area to the final stop, further illustrating issues of white privilege discussed earlier in the course. Students also ask about why at certain stops there are large numbers of people who get on and off the bus at one time. This provides an opportunity to talk about transfers and the time involved in taking multiple bus rides to get to one destination. Thus, we also use the discussion time to consider how easy or difficult it is to arrange one's schedule given the limitations of the bus schedule, stops, and the time it takes to ride. This gives rise to a discussion that challenges ideas about blaming the victim as students talk about the barriers that the bus creates in being able to have

autonomy over one's schedule and in one's ability to add other pursuits, such as further education or job training, to one's day. We talk about the costs associated with owning or leasing a car versus the daily cost of riding the bus and why the monthly and annual bus pass, although cheaper in the long run, might not be affordable to people living on a very limited income (similar to the concept explored in the assignment by Folse [2002] "The Poor Pay More").

The instructor typically ends the discussion asking students if she should continue to use the assignment as part of the class. In the discussion and anonymous evaluations of the assignment students have shown overwhelming agreement about the value of the assignment. One student remarked in an evaluation of the experience, "(riding the bus) was a very eye-opening learning experience to see many of the concepts that we studied in class being lived out in everyday life." The phrases "eye-opening" and "reality check" are mentioned over and over again in the evaluations. Because we are primarily a residential campus, many students also comment on how nice it was to be in the "real" community, away from campus.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

The bus assignment helps students think about how structural conditions influence individual experiences and the dynamics of the intersections of race, class, and gender. This analysis is possible both for students who know the neighborhoods and/or take the bus often as well as for those students for whom it is the first time on the bus and/or in the particular neighborhoods the bus passes through. One student wrote in the evaluation, "Though I knew the neighborhood (before this assignment) I never questioned or assessed the situation of the passengers/neighborhood at a structural or cultural level but rather at an individual level." Said another student who has taken the bus often, "I have never thought so deeply about sociological

concepts before while riding the bus.” In the evaluations students list numerous concepts and ideas from the course that they observed on their bus rides (Appendix D).

Students are also able to make connections between the people on the bus they see wearing uniforms from places they frequent (such as fast-food restaurants, Target, and our school cafeteria) to the neighborhoods the bus passes through. The statistics and scenarios we read about and discuss in class appear to be more real for students once they see them for themselves and begin to realize the benefits of privilege. One student, who was initially nervous about riding the bus, commented, “the experience made me really see how society does have inequality and (that) many people have to come face-to-face with it every day of their lives.”

On the evaluations a few students complained about the in-depth requirements of the paper and suggested instead that the assignment be solely about the experience of taking the bus. However, other students mentioned that having the parts of the assignment in their heads while riding the bus caused them to pay attention to things (such as the neighborhoods they were passing through) they probably would not have noticed had that not been part of the assignment. Because there is little time to give students in-depth instruction in how to do observations and keep field notes, the structure of the observation logs and of the assignment help novice observers focus on class concepts during the experience. It is also useful that the bus ride and assignment take place near the end of the quarter when students are more steeped in the concepts and readings about stratification.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall the bus assignment is a useful teaching tool as most students note that the experience allows them to "see stratification" all around them. In the final course evaluation one

student wrote, "Every day I experience things that we talk about in class: in the cafeteria, on the streets, and in the classroom. This class has made me start asking *why* things are the way they are" (emphasis in original). Through a simple process of exposure, experience, and examination, the bus assignment contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways structural factors influence individual experiences and provides a broader understanding of some of the difficulties that people living in poverty face. Further, the assignment helps students from all economic backgrounds consider the many factors that influence peoples' life chances.

## APPENDIX A

### Observation Log

Time Caught the Bus:

Date:

Where Caught the Bus:

Bus Serial Number:

Time Arrived at Destination:

(On plaque inside of the bus.)

1. Notice the people who get on and off the bus. Based on what they are wearing (uniforms, casual/formal clothes) or what they are carrying, where might they be taking the bus to and from, and what could be their social class status?
2. Notice the ages, genders, and races of people who take the bus. Who seems to take the bus, and does this change at different points in the bus ride?

3. Notice the neighborhoods that you are passing through on the bus. How do the conditions of the houses/yards, the types of businesses and stores, the conditions of the streets, etc., change throughout your bus ride? Conjure up images you have of the Henry Horner Homes that you read about in *There Are No Children Here*. How do these neighborhoods compare? What is different about them? How do these comparisons relate to the concept of “relative poverty”?

## APPENDIX B

### Choosing a Bus Route

Information about public bus routes and schedules can be found through your local county transportation authority. It should be noted that trains and light rail service usually attract a wealthier ridership than does the bus. Further, in wealthy areas, bus riders are generally elderly, using the bus primarily for shopping purposes. By choosing a well-traveled bus route that passes through neighborhoods with differing economic resources the instructor can ensure that students will be exposed to a wide variety of people of different ages who ride the bus for varying purposes as well as be able to observe changing neighborhood conditions. In addition to the route of the bus, instructors should also consider issues such as times at which it runs and where students can catch the bus. In the past some students have expressed reluctance to ride the bus alone (two students stated that their parents were nervous about them taking the bus); therefore, if students are more comfortable taking the bus with another student, they are allowed to go in groups of two or three as long as they do not all sit together. There is also an alternative assignment (doing an in-depth research paper on a social problem in the county such as housing, education, employment/unemployment) if students choose not to take the bus.



## APPENDIX C

### **Paper Assignment:**

For this assignment you need to take the designated bus from campus to the end of the line and back. In your paper spend one page or less describing what bus(es) you took, the destination, how long it took, and how much the bus costs, and make observations about the characteristics of those who rode the bus (if you cannot take the bus for some reason come talk to me for an alternative assignment).

For the next part of your paper (3-5 pages) imagine that you are a low-income single parent of small children and you have no other transportation options besides the bus. Write about what it would be like to use public transportation to drop a one-year-old child at day care and a six-year-old at school as well as get to your 36-hour-a-week job serving food in the campus cafeteria. What would your day look like, and how would you deal with issues such as if one of your children was ill or your work hours were changed from the day to serving dinner in the evenings? Compare what you observed on your bus experience to the conditions that were described in the book *There Are No Children Here* in terms of housing, neighborhood, race, and employment opportunities for single parents. Make sure you staple your fieldnotes to your assignment.

## APPENDIX D

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 Concepts/Ideas Students Mention They Noticed on the Bus Ride
 

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Social class	Income/wealth distribution
White/pink/blue-collar	Relative poverty
Occupation	Social/cultural/human capital
Working poor	Balancing work and family
Race, class, and gender	Geographical segregation
Inequality/stratification	Feminization of poverty
Theories of stratification	Patriarchy
Marx, Weber, Durkheim	Capitalism
Social status	Opportunity structures
Life chances	Service sector
Housing conditions	Minimum-wage jobs
Housing instability/homelessness	Gentrification
Language	Post-industrial economy
Culture and structure of poverty	Privilege

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