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An Ambience of Power? Challenges Inherent in the Role of the Public Transport Transit Officer

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Abstract

In the contemporary urban environment of mass transit, it falls to a small group of public officers to keep large number of travellers safe. The small size of their force and the often limited powers they exert mean that these public safety 'transit officers' must project more authority and control than they really have. It is this ambience of authority and control which, in most situations they encounter and seek to influence, is enough to keep the public safe.

This paper examines the ambience of a group of transit officers working on the railway lines of an Australian capital city. We seek to show how transit officers are both influenced by, and seek to influence, the ambience of their workplace and the public spaces they inhabit whilst on duty, and here we take ambience to apply to the surrounding atmosphere, the aura, and the emotional environment of a place or situation: the setting, tone, or mood.

For these transit officers to keep the public safe, they must themselves remain safe. A transit officer who is disabled in a confrontation with a violent offender is unable to provide protection to his or her passengers. Thus, in the culture of the transit officers, their own workplace safety takes on a higher significance. It affects not just themselves. The ambience exuded by transit officers, and how transit officers see their relationship with the travelling public, their management and other organisational work groups, is an important determinant of their work group's safety culture.

Researching the Working Lives of Transit Officers in Perth

Our discussion draws on an ethnographic study of the working lives and communication cultures of transit officers (TOs) employed by the Public Transport Authority (PTA) of Western Australia (WA). Transit officers have argued that to understand fully the challenges of their work it is necessary to spend time with them as they undertake their daily duties: roster in, roster out. To this end, the research team and the employer organisation secured an ARC Linkage Grant in partnership with the PTA to fund doctoral candidate and ethnographer Christine Teague to research the workers' point of view, and the workers' experiences within the organisation.

The two-hundred TOs are unique in the PTA. Neither of the other groups who ride with them on the trains, the drivers and revenue protection staff (whose sole job is to sell and check tickets), experiences the combination of intense contact with passengers, danger of physical injury or group morale. The TOs of the PTA in Perth operate from a central location at the main train station and the end stations on each line. Here there are change lockers where they can lock up their uniforms and equipment such as handcuffs and batons when not on duty, an equipment room where they sign out their radios, and ticket-checking machines. At the main train station there is also a gym, a canteen and holding cells for offenders they detain. From these end stations and central location, the TOs fan out across the network to all suburbs where they either operate from stations or onboard the trains. The TOs also do 'delta van' duty providing rapid, mobile back-up support for their colleagues on stations or trains, and providing transport for arrested persons to the holding cell or police lock up.

TOs are on duty whenever the trains are running—but the evenings and nights are when they are mainly rostered on. This is when trouble mostly occurs. The TOs' work ends only after the final train has completed its run and all offenders who may require detaining and charging have been transferred into police custody. While the public perceive that security is the TOs' most frequent role, much of the work involves non-confrontational activity such as assisting passengers, checking tickets and providing a reassuring presence.

One way to deal with an ambiguous role is to claim an ambience of power and authority regardless. Various aspects of the TO role permit and hinder this, and the paper goes on to consider aspects of ambience in terms of fear and force, order and safety, and role confusion.

An Ambience of Fear and Force

The TOs are responsible for front-line security in WA's urban railway network. Their role is to offer a feeling of security for passengers using the rail network after the bustle of the work day finishes, and is replaced by the mainly recreational travels of the after hours public. This is the time when some passengers find the prospect of evening travel on the public transport rail network unsettling—so unsettling that it was a 2001 WA government election promise (WA Legislative Council) that every train leaving the city centre after 7pm would have two TOs riding on it. Interestingly, recruitment levels have never been high enough for this promise to be fully kept.

The working conditions of the TOs reflect the perception, and to an extent, the reality that some late night travel on public transport involves negotiating an edgy ambience with an element of risk, rubbing shoulders with people who may be loud, rowdy, travelling in a group, and or drug and alcohol affected. As Fred (all TO names are pseudonyms) comments:

You're not dealing with rational people, you're not dealing with 'people': most of the people you're dealing with are either drunk or under the influence of drugs, so they're not rational, they don't hear you, they don't understand what you're saying, they just have no sense of what's right or wrong, you know? Especially being under the influence, so I mean, you can talk till you're blue in the face with somebody who's drunk or on drugs, I mean, all you have to say is one thing. 'Oh, can I see your ticket please', 'oh, why do I need a fucking ticket', you know? They just don't get simple everyday messages.

Dealing with violence and making arrest is a normal part of this job. Jo described an early experience in her working life as a TO:

Within the first week of coming out of course I got smacked on the side of the head, but this lady had actually been certified, like, she was nuts. She was completely mental and we were just standing on the train talking and I've turned around to say something to my partner and she was fine, she was as calm as, and I turned around and talked to my partner and the next thing I know I ended up with her fist to the side of my head. And I went 'what the hell was that'? And she went off, she went absolutely ballistic. I ended up arresting her because it was assault on an officer whether she was mental or not so I ended up arresting her.

Although Jo here is describing how she experienced an unprovoked assault in the early days of her career as a TO, one of the most frequent precursors to a TO injury occurs when the TO is required to make an arrest. The injury may occur when the passenger to be arrested resists or flees, and the TO gives chase in dark or treacherous circumstances such as railway reserves and tunnels, or when other passengers, maybe friends or family of the original person of concern, involve themselves in an affray around the precipitating action of the arrest.

In circumstances where capsicum spray is the primary way of enforcing compliance, with batons used as a defence tool, group members may feel that they can take on the two TOs with impunity, certainly in the first instance. Even though there are security cameras on trains and in stations, and these can be cued to cover the threatening or difficult situations confronting TOs, the conflict is located in the here-and-now of the exchanges between TOs and the travelling public. This means the longer term consequence of trouble in the future may hold less sway with unruly travellers than the temptation to try to escape from trouble in the present.

In discussing the impact of remote communications, Rubert Murdoch commented that these technologies are "a powerful influence for civilised behaviour. If you are arranging a massacre, it will be useless to shoot the cameraman who has so inconveniently appeared on the scene. His picture will already be safe in the studio five thousand miles away and his final image may hang you" (Shawcross 242). Unfortunately, whether public aggression in these circumstances is useless or not, the daily

experience of TOs is that the presence of closed circuit television (CCTV) does not prevent attacks upon them: nor is it a guarantee of 'civilised behaviour'. This is possibly because many of the more argumentative and angry members of the public are dis-inhibited by alcohol or other drugs. Police officers can employ the threat or actual application of stun guns to control situations in which they are outnumbered, but in the case of TOs they can remain outnumbered and vulnerable until reinforcements arrive. Such reinforcements are available, but the situation has to be managed through the communication of authority until the point where the train arrives at a 'manned' station, or the staff on the delta vehicle are able to support their colleagues.

An Ambience of Order and Safety

Some public transport organisations take this responsibility to sustain an ambience of order more seriously than others. The TO ethnographer, Christine Teague, visited public transport organisations in the UK, USA and Canada which are recognised as setting world-class standards for injury rates of their staff. In the USA particularly, there is a commitment to what is called 'the broken windows' theory, where a train is withdrawn from service promptly if it is damaged or defaced (Kelling and Coles; Maple and Mitchell). According to Henry (117):

The 'Broken Windows' theory suggests that there is both a high correlation and a causal link between community disorder and more serious crime: when community disorder is permitted to flourish or when disorderly conditions or problems are left untended, they actually cause more serious crime. 'Broken windows' are a metaphor for community disorder which, as Wilson and Kelling (1982) use the term, includes the violation of informal social norms for public behaviour as well as quality of life offenses such as littering, graffiti, playing loud radios, aggressive panhandling, and vandalism.

This theory implies that the physical ambience of the train, and by extension the station, may be highly influential in terms of creating a safe working environment. In this case of 'no broken window' organisations, the TO role is to maintain a high 'quality of life' rather than being a role predominantly about restraining and bringing to justice those whose behaviour is offensive, dangerous or illegal. The TOs in Perth achieve this through personal means such as taking pride in their uniforms, presenting a good-natured demeanour to passengers and assisting in maintaining the high standard of train interiors.

Such a priority, and its link to reduced workforce injury, suggests that a perception of order impacts upon safety. It has long been argued that the safety culture of an organisation affects the safety performance of that organisation (Pidgeon; Leplat); but it has been more recently established that different cultural groupings in an organisation conceive and construct their safety culture differently (Leith). The research on 'safety culture' raises a problematic which is rarely addressed in practice. That problematic is this: managers frequently engage with safety at the level of instituting systems, while workers engage with safety in terms of behaviour. When Glendon and Litherland comment that, contrary to expectations, they could find no relationship between safety culture and safety performance, they were drawing attention to the fact that much managerial safety culture is premised upon systems involving tick boxes and the filling in of report forms. The broken window approach combines the managerial tick box with managerial behaviour: a dis-ordered train is removed from service.

To some extent a general lack of fit between safety culture and safety performance endorses Everett's view that it is conceptually inadequate to conceive organisations as cultures: "the conceptual inadequacy stems from the failure to distinguish between culture and behavioural features of organizational life" (238). The general focus upon safety culture as a way of promoting improvements in safety performance assumes that compliance with a range of safety systems will guarantee a safe workplace. Such an assumption, however, risks positioning the injured worker as responsible for his or her own predicament and sets up an environment in which some management officials are wont to seek ways in which that injured worker's behaviour failed to conform with safety rules or safety processes. Yet there are roles which place workers in harm's way, including military duties, law enforcement and some emergency services. Here, the work becomes dangerous as it becomes disorderly.

An Ambience of Roles and Confusion

As the research reported here progressed, it became clear that the ambience around the presentation of the self in the role of a TO (Goffman) was an important part of how 'safety' was promoted and enacted in their work upon the PTA (WA) trains, face to face with the travelling public. Goffman's view of all people, not specifically TOs, is that:

Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This will largely be through influencing the perception and definition that others will come to formulate of him. He will influence them by expressing himself in such a way that the kind of impression given off will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. (3)

This 'influencing of perception' is an important element of performing the role of a TO. This task of the TOs is made all the more difficult because of confusions about their role in relation to two other officers: police (who have more power to act in situations of public safety) and revenue project officers (who have less), as we now discuss.

The aura of the TO role borrows somewhat from those quintessential law and order officers: the police. TOs work in pairs, like many police, to support each other. They have a range of legal powers including the power of arrest, and they carry handcuffs, a baton and capicum spray as a means of helping ensure their safety and effectiveness in circumstances where they might be outnumbered. The tools of their trade are accessibly displayed on heavy leather belts around their waists and their uniforms have similarities with police uniforms.

However, in some ways these similarities are problematic, because TOs are not afforded the same respect as police. This situation underlines of the ambiguities negotiated within the ambience of what it is to be a TO, and how it is to conduct oneself in that role. Notwithstanding the TOs' law and order responsibilities, public perceptions of the role and some of the public's responses to the officers can position these workers as "plastic cops" (Teague and Leith). The penultimate deterrent of police officers, the stun gun (Taser), is not available to TOs who are expected to control all incidents arising on duty through the fact that they operate in pairs, with capicum spray available and, as a last resort, are authorised to use their batons in self defence.

Furthermore, although TOs are the key security and enforcement staff in the PTA workforce, and are managed separately from related staff roles, they believe that the clarity of this distinction is compromised because of similarities in the look of Revenue Protection Officers (RPOs). RPOs work on the trains to check that passengers have tickets and have paid the correct fares, and obtain names and addresses to issue infringement notices when required. They are not PTA employees, but contracted staff from an outside company. They also work in pairs. Significantly, the RPO uniform is in many respects identical to that of the TO, and this appears to be a deliberate management choice to make the number of TOs seem greater than it is: extending the TO ambience through to the activities of the RPOs.

However, in the event of a disturbance, TOs are required and trained to act, while RPOs are instructed not to get involved; even though the RPOs appear to the travelling public to be operating in the role of a law-and-order-keeper, RPOs are specifically instructed not to get involved in breaches of the peace or disruptive passenger behaviour. From the point of view of the travelling public, who observe the RPO waiting for TOs to arrive, it may seem as if a TO is passively standing by while a chaotic situation unravels. As Angus commented:

I've spoken to quite a few members of public and received complaints from them about transit officers and talking more about the incident have found out that it was actually [RPOs] that are dealing with it. So it's creating a bad image for us It's Transits that are copping all the flak for it ... It is dangerous for us and it's a lot of bad publicity for us. It's hard enough, the job that we do and the lack of respect that we do get from people, we don't need other people adding to it and making it harder.

Indeed, it is not only the travelling public who can mistake the two uniforms. Mike tells of an "incident where an officer [TO] has called for backup on a train and the guys have got off [the train at the next station] and just stood there, and he didn't realise that they are actually [revenue protection] officers, so he effectively had no backup. He thought he did, but he didn't." The RPO uniform may confer an ambience of power borrowed from TOs and communicated visually, but the impact is to compromise the authority of the TO role. Unfortunately, what could be a complementary role to the TOs becomes one which, in the minds of the TO workforce, serves to undermine their presence.

This effect of this role confusion is to dilute the aura of authority of the TOs. At one end of a power continuum the TO role is minimised by those who see it as a second-rate 'Wannabe cop' (Teague and Leith 2008), while its impact is diluted at the other end by an apparently deliberate confusion between the TO broader 'law and order' role, and the more limited RPO revenue collection activities.

Postlude

To the passengers of the PTA in Perth, the presence and actions of transit officers appear as unremarkable as the daily commute. In this ethnographic study of their workplace culture, however, the transit officers have revealed ways in which they influence the ambience of the workplace and the public spaces they inhabit whilst on duty, and how they are influenced by it. While this ambient inter-relationship is not documented in the organisation's occupational safety and health management system, the TOs are aware that it is a factor in their level at safety at work, both positively and negatively.

Clearly, an ethnography study is conducted at a certain point in time and place, and culture is a living and changing expression of human interaction. The Public Transport Authority of Western Australia is committed to continuous improvement in safety and to the investigation of all ways and means in which to support TOs in their daily activities. This is evident not only in their support of the research and their welcoming of the ethnographer into the workforce and onto the tracks, but also in their robust commitment to change as the findings of the research have progressed. In particular, changes in the ambient TO culture and in the training and daily practices of TOs have already resulted from this research or are under active consideration. Nonetheless, this project is a cogent indicator of the fact that a safety culture is critically dependent upon intangible but nonetheless important factors such as the ambience of the workplace and the way in which officers are able to communicate their authority to others.

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