2 The bus trip

Constraints, hierarchies and injustice

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The driver just hit the gas and the customer had to hold fast to the armrests, close to falling out. In the end, the customer could not take it anymore and asked the driver to stop the bus, which also happened. However, the driver was not helpful and the customer had to roll the wheelchair backwards out of the bus...

The narrative above is an example of how buses can become a domain accessible only for some passengers, a domain which sometimes requires confrontation and negotiation even to be accessed. The speaker describes how the driver did not kneel (lower) the bus, nor open the middle doors, so the passenger had to enter the vehicle from the front. The passenger explains how they were stuck in the narrow passage inside the bus, trying to reach the designated space for wheelchairs. However, after a while they ‘could not take it anymore’. The bus became a closed domain, negotiations failed and the passenger saw no other option than to leave the vehicle.

This is a situation in which the passenger was ‘stranded’ and ‘overlooked’ (cf. Egard & Hansson, 2020). Such situations may create feelings of frustration and a fear of public transport which, in the end, may lead passengers to avoid traveling by public transport at all. Research shows passengers with disabilities continue to face widespread challenges, despite active efforts to remove barriers in public transport systems in several parts of the world (Bezyak, Sabella & Gattis, 2017; see also Kristofer Hansson’s chapter in this book). These barriers have been shown to be not only physical, but also social and attitudinal. A commonly reported barrier, for instance, is the attitude of the driver (Park & Chowdhury, 2018).

Under Swedish societal goals and legislation, public transport is a domain that should be accessible to all. However, experiences with public transport vary. Although Sweden was early to implement legislation on accessible public transport for disabled people (Swedish Parliament, 1979: 558), a recent investigation on behalf of the government has revealed several shortcomings, with organisational responsibility and regulations on accessibility found to be fragmented. The writers of the review concluded that accessibility is not handled as an integrated part of the overall quality system, but rather as

individual efforts (Trafikanalys, 2019). Researchers have also criticised how public transport has become more and more adapted to an ‘ideal traveller’: an able-bodied, financially stable passenger, who primarily uses this mode of transport to get to and from work during regular office hours (Lubitow et al., 2017).

In the light of the climate crisis, together with growing urbanisation, the role of public transport in daily commuting has gradually increased. There is in Sweden a strong ambition to increase the market share of public transport relative to cars. This puts pressure on the effectiveness of the public transport system and may affect working conditions for drivers (such as greater time pressures), changed routes or the withdrawal of bus stops, for instance. A more effective system may benefit daily commuters by decreasing commuting time, but it might also be a challenge for passengers who need extra time, help and support. It is reasonable to believe that such a development would lead to conflicts between societal goals, illustrating the complexity of accessibility issues in public transport. Public transport should not be viewed as a single element; it is situated within a societal context, competing with other societal functions.

This chapter aims to provide new knowledge about how travellers experience barriers in public transport. The focus is on bus journeys, particularly on getting on and off the vehicle. The empirical material for this study consists of complaints concerning accessibility issues on buses received by the Greater Stockholm Local Transit Company (SL) between January and October 2018, with emphasis on travellers’ personal negative experiences using public transport.

SL is the main actor in public transport in the Stockholm region; it is responsible for the metro, buses, commuter trains and boats, as well as public tenders for public transport. Around six procured companies run the various parts of the transit network. According to SL, about 900,000 trips are made daily in the whole region using public transport (Storstockholms Lokaltrafik, 2021a).

SL has made a comprehensive work on accessibility in public transport for many years and, for example, has established guidelines about accessibility for children, older people and disabled people. These guidelines were created in 2008 and have since been revised six times. The guidelines cover everything from the personal treatment of disabled people and employee education, to information in stations and aboard vehicles (written and verbal). Under the guidelines, all employees must complete a basic course about accessibility in public transport every three years (Trafikförvaltningen, 2018).

According to SL, all buses in Stockholm are low-floor buses with the accessibility function of ‘kneeling’, which reduces the height difference between the vehicle and the kerb. All buses are also equipped with a ramp by the middle door and the driver is responsible for manually unfolding the ramp when necessary. Buses have a designated space for wheelchairs (Storstockholms Lokaltrafik, 2021b).

Public transport and everyday mobility: a time-geographical approach

Public transport can play a pivotal role in society, ensuring access to education, employment, daily activities and social interaction. It enables citizens to be a part of society, yet accessibility in public transport remains a complex area.

Situated in a societal context, public transport exists within competitive environments with scarce resources. The market-oriented economy has limited capacity to handle larger differences among citizens and only allows differences to a certain degree (Berg & Grönvik, 2007). Public transport is often regarded as important for achieving other societal goals and public values such as economic growth and environmental sustainability (Stjernborg & Mattisson, 2016). Conflicts of interest, together with conflicts of goals, can create barriers, which may influence the possibilities for individuals to stay mobile. For instance, the speediness and effectiveness of the transport system can favour some, while creating barriers for others, depending on individual capacity and potential for movement.

Barriers in public transport differ in character. They may be physical (narrow pavements, high kerbs, vehicles without ramps), informational (shortcomings in design, a lack of available information channels) or social (other passengers, drivers, staff). Organisational deficiencies can also create barriers.

Movement and mobility

To understand barriers in public transport, we need to consider how movement occurs. Movement is located within a context of time and space (Cresswell, 2006). *Mobility* is more than movement; it includes factors such as type, strategies and implications of the movement, and it is a concept loaded with power and meaning. It is not only corporeal or physical, it is also temporal and concerns the individual's spatial access to places and activities (Cass, Shove & Urry, 2005). In spatial terms, mobility is shaped by a variety of tangible, intangible, individual, contextual and environmental barriers.

Mobility is essential in people's daily lives for managing everyday activities, participating in society and maintaining social relations. The possibility to be mobile is associated with independence, freedom and wellbeing. Limited mobility may result in social deprivation, marginalisation and exclusion (Urry, 2007).

Access to mobility varies and is unevenly distributed. People's capacity for being mobile varies and may change with time and during the life course.¹ Questions of differential mobility can be related, on one hand, to age, gender, class, ethnicity and the capabilities of different bodies. On the other hand, it can be related to economical resources, namely financial capital (and access to travel documents, for instance), cultural capital (such as higher education and professional qualifications) or access to vehicles and transport infrastructure. *Mobility justice* refers to structural inequalities based on differential

capabilities and possibilities to be mobile (Sheller, 2018). A time-geographical approach is a useful means of understanding human movement and activities in time-space.

Time geography

Time geography is a bottom-up approach to the study of human movement and activities within the context of time and space (Miller, 2008). This approach was developed in the 1970s by the Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand, who emphasised the need to study individuals' daily activities and movements in relation to their everyday environments (Hägerstrand, 1970). Hägerstrand focused on relations in time-space and the context in which individual movement is situated. Activities put demands on time and space, and a variety of resources are necessary to fulfil them. Activities establish daily paths, weekly paths and life paths. Beyond this, individuals have different roles and different temporal and spatial projects that shape everyday life, and these generate the patterns of daily life which mostly revolves around a few nodal places, the home being the most central (Ellegård & Vilhelmson, 2004).

In the time-geographical perspective, we recognise how our lives are controlled in different ways by our physical condition, employment, family situation, economic conditions, working conditions, working hours, accessibility in society, societal rules, guidelines and so on. In this approach, structures and hierarchies in society are given greater visibility, both on a micro and a macro level (Kjellman, 2003). Analyses of mobility in time-space require awareness of constraints that enable and limit movement.

Time geography includes some central analytical concepts, such as individual trajectory (how the person moves in time and space) and projects (refers to individuals' activities in daily life). Some projects are more dominant, some projects are wrecked and never fulfilled, and can create restrictions when moving in time-space. Projects in time-space may compete for access to space, which often leads to injustices. The competition results in some individuals having to stand aside and wait for their projects, or sometimes to abandon them altogether. An example is how people with a wheelchair often must wait for other passengers to enter the bus before the ramp can be used. The introductory quote in this chapter is an example of a wrecked project, when the passenger felt no option was available other than to leave the vehicle.

The projects create hierarchies in daily life, where some projects become more dominant than others, while others are pushed aside or never fulfilled at all (Åquist, 1992).

Sets of constraints

Within the time-geographical approach, we can identify at least three significant aggregates or sets of constraints: capability (or corporeal) constraints,

coupling (spatial) constraints and authority (systemic/structural) constraints. *Capability constraints* are restrictions on activities due to human biology and/or the tools available to us in living our lives. Humans have basic needs, such as the need to eat and sleep. The physical and mental capacity of our bodies varies. The tools that individuals have access to also vary and depend on individual knowledge, type of housing, technical equipment (such as access to different modes of transport) and so on.

Coupling constraints are restrictions caused by the need for coordination among individuals and between individuals and tools. Most projects in daily life require coordination so that the individuals and tools involved are in the same place at a certain time. During this time, the place, the individuals and the tools are occupied and are unavailable to participate in other projects (Åquist, 1992; Kjellman, 2003). For example, if a passenger with a wheelchair would like to travel by bus, it requires coordination in time–space. The individual and the bus must be in the same place at the same time (according to a timetable), the accessibility equipment (the ramp) of the bus must be used as intended, and the space designated for wheelchairs must be available (not occupied by someone or something else).

Authority constraints are about hierarchies and power relations. Hägerstrand uses the concept of domains to refer to ‘a time–space entity within which things and events are under the control of a given individual or a given group’ (1970:16). Access to different domains varies for different individuals; some domains are not accessible at all, others are accessible by invitation or by payment, and some can be accessed only by putting up a fight. Domains differ in character; they can be small, like a place in a queue or a preferred seat, or they can be larger and have varying types of legal status, such as the home, the nation and so on. Some domains are temporary, such as a seat on the bus, while others are permanent.

These three different types of constraints interact in several ways, both directly and indirectly. They are also closely related to power; a higher income, for instance, normally gives greater access to domains (Hägerstrand, 1970).

Methodology

The empirical material for this chapter comprises the 389 passenger complaints concerning accessibility on buses received by SL for the period between January and October 2018. The complaints, which are publicly available, are divided by SL into the following categories: ‘kneeling the bus/closeness to the kerb/ramp’; ‘elevator/escalator availability’; ‘escort service’; ‘timetables’; and ‘other’ (for an overview of the complete material, see Stjernborg, 2019).

This chapter is specifically concerned with complaints related to ‘kneeling the bus/closeness to the kerb/ramp’, the largest category with a total of 214 complaints. All the complaints concerned buses in Stockholm and were communicated to SL through different channels, including social media (e.g. Facebook), phone and email. The empirical material was compiled in an

Excel file with information on the points of origin and destination, the date and time, route number, the channel through which SL received the complaint, and a brief description of the complaint itself. In some cases, where the traveller left written complaints, the description is in the travellers' own words. In other cases, descriptions were summarised by the SL customer service employee who received the phone call. Most of the complaints were left by telephone.

The complaints describe only the passenger's perspective and interpretation of the situation and do not include the bus driver's perspective. Several of the passengers describe their declining health and functional limitations, and/or the use of a mobility aid. In some cases, complaints are left by passengers who were travelling with strollers and described the same challenges as those with personal mobility issues.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted in a stepwise manner, with a focus on both the manifest and latent content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The researcher read the complaints repeatedly and in full, to create a feeling for the text and content. The next step was to identify meaning units, which were then condensed and grouped. The data was analysed using a time-geographical approach. Three themes were identified: a) negotiations about the kneeling function/the ramp; b) stopping far from the kerb; and c) being refused access to the bus/being left behind.

Negotiations about the kneeling function/the ramp

The largest theme concerned the misuse (or disuse) of the kneeling function of the bus. A recurrent complaint was that travellers had to negotiate to convince the driver to use the equipment. According to the complaints, drivers gave different reasons for not using the equipment as intended. For instance, they claimed they did not know how to use the function, or that it was out of order. In some cases they simply refused to use it without giving a reason.

Several of the complaints describe this misuse (or disuse) of the kneeling function as a recurrent challenge. Some also describe how the traveller used the blue button – a special button on buses which lets the driver know a passenger wants to use the kneeling function – only to have their request ignored. Some of the narratives describe the behaviour of the driver as rather offensive.

The narratives often include a short description of the traveller's physical health, explaining the importance of the accessibility equipment being used as intended. Physical health becomes a capability constraint for getting on and off the bus.

I travel with crutches [...]. The drivers think that I can get on in the same way as anyone else. I've had to complain about the drivers every time I take the bus.

Several narratives describe how declining physical health often entails the use of an aid, such as a walker, a wheelchair or crutches. The coordination

between the individual, the aid and the vehicle create coupling constraints, making it harder for passengers to enter the bus and creating barriers in public transport. Some of these complaints were by travellers with strollers, describing similar challenges when the kneeling function was misused.

The complaints also describe the difficulties that arise when travellers with capability constraints do not bring an aid, since their need to use the kneeling function may not be obvious. In this case it is about visibility, and some passengers find that one needs to bring an aid simply for the functional limitation to 'become visible', which might facilitate negotiations with the bus driver:

It feels like it takes a wheelchair or a walker, otherwise you almost have to beg to make them lower the bus. It's a tiresome experience and in some cases, it can also be worse than that when some drivers get really unpleasant as a consequence of a request to lower the bus. Some also refuse to lower it.

Some complaints describe how drivers insulted passengers who requested that the bus be lowered:

An elderly lady was about to get off the bus with a shopping cart and asked the driver to lower the bus. He refused in spite of several requests and the lady tried to struggle on with the cart, pushing it along, but it got stuck in the gap between the pavement and the bus. Another woman had to help her off. Later, the driver mocked the lady with a friend who was sitting next to him.

Another narrative describes how the bus driver had a negative and disparaging attitude and refused to kneel the bus, leaving the traveller with feelings of worthlessness.

Other complaints concern misuse of the accessibility ramp. For example, one narrative describes how a driver refused to help a passenger with a wheelchair use the ramp and laughed when other passengers had to help the traveller board. Some complaints describe how passengers were hurt getting on or off the vehicle, or felt unsafe travelling by bus.

The passenger fell backwards and hit her head. A week later she still has a bump in the head and a scratch mark on her leg. There were kind fellow passengers who helped her and made sure she got home.

Some complaints note that part of the problem is that the drivers are stressed and working under time constraints that do not allow them to ensure that all passengers are getting on or off safely. One narrative describes how the driver initially refused to kneel the bus and thereafter showed dissatisfaction because of the extra time the traveller needed to enter the bus.

The passenger feels that drivers' stress about departing on time has become worse and she doesn't feel safe travelling by bus. There isn't enough time to get on when you have a walker and the problems with drivers who don't lower the bus or open the doors in the middle have increased lately.

This is an example of how mobility is hierarchical and a resource that is not equally available to everyone. The passengers in need of some extra time may be regarded as a burden in a system increasingly focused on efficiency.

We asked the bus driver to lower the bus for her to more easily get on the bus, but the driver refused. After a long time, he lowered the bus and then sat there complaining loudly because it took a bit longer for her to get on the bus and to sit down. To try to speed up the whole thing he also pointed out that there was a line behind her.

Many of the complaints describe the important role of other passengers. Several narratives describe how getting on or off the bus would be impossible without help from other passengers (see also David Wästerfors' chapter in this book).

Stopping far from the kerb

Another theme in the collected material is how the bus may come to a stop so that there is a gap between the vehicle and the kerb. The narratives include descriptions of authority constraints because of hierarchies and power relations.

The behaviour of the bus driver is described as essential in determining whether some passengers can travel on public transport or not. Several of the complaints describe drivers with nonchalant or abusive attitudes, rendering travellers with capability and coupling constraints even more vulnerable. The three constraints (capability, coupling and authority) normally interact in several ways, both directly and indirectly. This is also apparent in the complaints.

I am waiting for the bus, it's dark and I have reflectors on my crutch which are clearly visible. When the bus comes, he stops so far from the pavement that I can't get on. He lets other passengers get on and then drives a bit further on, but it was too long a step for me there too. New passengers are let on first. He then lowers the side of the bus and with great effort I get on the bus.

In the quote above, power relations become visible, as well as the interaction between the different types of constraints. The traveller is affected by capability constraints because of a condition that requires the use of a mobility aid. They are also affected by coupling constraints because the

accessibility equipment is not used, making it difficult for them to enter the bus. At the same time, they are forced to wait until other passengers have entered the bus, illustrating authority constraints (and hierarchies).

Being refused access to the bus/being left behind

Some narratives describe situations where travellers are left on the street and are not even allowed to enter the domain of the bus:

A passenger who needs a cane to walk asked the driver to lower the bus for him to get on but instead got the door closed on him and the driver drove away.

One complaint describes how a traveller with a wheelchair was left on the street several times:

On numerous occasions the bus driver has ignored the passenger and closed the doors and gone off.

Another complaint describes how the traveller was told to take the next bus because the driver was unwilling to kneel the bus:

... when the passenger's mom asked the driver to lower the bus, the driver refused to do so and instead referred her to the next bus.

Thus, projects in time-space compete for access to space, which often leads to injustices, with some individuals having to stand aside and wait for their projects to be accomplished, while other projects are never fulfilled at all.

Conclusion: access to public transport

An analysis of travellers' complaints about barriers in public transport show that travellers repeatedly have to negotiate with drivers to make use of accessibility equipment. The bus becomes a domain that is accessible only for some passengers, and which sometimes requires a fight and negotiations before it is made accessible. In some cases, the bus becomes a closed domain when negotiations fail and travellers are left on the street. Mobility can therefore be seen as a resource that is not evenly distributed (Sheller, 2018). The uneven distribution is seen in the complaints in various ways, as are the power relations between the driver, the passenger and other passengers.

The complaints illustrate a reality in which accessibility cannot be taken for granted, and resistance to accessibility in those transport-related situations is apparent. Challenges around boarding or getting off the buses are frequently described as recurrent and as evoking feelings of vulnerability, unsafety and frustration. Some even question if their presence on public transport is desirable.

Public transport, including buses, should, after payment of the fare, offer accessible domains for all. In fact, this is specified in the law on accessible public transport for disabled people (Swedish Parliament, 1979: 558). However, public transport is situated within a societal context and competes with other projects in time-space (or with other societal ambitions and goals), which may result in injustices. The competition results in some individuals having to stand aside and wait for their projects, or abandon them altogether (Hägerstrand, 1970). Accessibility is repeatedly seen to be given lower priority in the interplay between the driver, the vehicle and the surrounding context. This creates inequalities because of differential capabilities and possibilities to be mobile.

Thus, despite legislation, ambiguous goals and a transport policy that aims to support accessible public transport, and even though there has been extensive work on physical accessibility (with low-floor buses, ramps and so on), the accessibility challenges in public transport for some passengers remain obvious. Generally, there has overall been less attention paid to the social dimensions of accessibility, such as the behaviour of the driver. This greater focus on physical barriers may have been influenced by the social model of disability, which distinguishes between impairment and disability. Impairment is considered to be individual and private, while disability is regarded as structural and public. Disability is viewed as a social construct, created in the interaction between society and the individual (Shakespeare, 2017). However this model has been criticised for its rather narrow view of disability focusing mostly on physical impairments and failure to account for differences between disabled people (e.g. McRauer, 2006; Oliver, 2013; Goodley, 2013; Kafer, 2018). Much of the focus of the social model has been on the built environment, such as pavements, buildings and transportation technologies. This may have prevented disability scholars from applying a more comprehensive approach (e.g. Shakespeare, 2017), and the lived experiences of disability have generally gained less attention (e.g. Kafer, 2018).

Access to public transport can mean the difference between an active life and a life of isolation and marginalisation. That one has to negotiate with bus drivers about the use of accessibility equipment, that the guidelines of the operators are not followed, and that discriminatory behaviour seems to occur regularly, are social practices that limit accessibility in public transport. Highlighting social practices that counteract efforts to build an accessible society is important, not least to understand everyday resistance to inclusion faced by persons with disabilities. However, further research is required from a user-oriented perspective, on how well accessibility adaptations in public transport actually work and how trips are experienced, including comprehensively identifying the variety of social practices that hinder ambitions to ensure that an accessible public transport system is available to all citizens.

Note

- 1 A useful theoretical term in this context is *motility*, meaning the potentials and capabilities for mobility by individuals and groups (Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye, 2004; see also Egard & Hansson, 2020). It implies a consideration of physical ability and capacity, the individual desire or aspiration to be mobile (or not), and access to transport and telecommunication systems. Motility thus addresses three dimensions; the social conditions of access (for example conditions making it possible to use the transport system), the skills to use it, and mobility plans (and the actual use of transport to fulfil those plans) (Dubois et al., 2015:102).

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