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Feeling the commute: Affect, affordance and communities in motion

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Abstract

This chapter draws upon research conducted in 2012-2013 in the English town of Glossop, Derbyshire, UK, exploring notions of affect, affordance and interconnections as part of a project within the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) Connected Communities programme: *Revisiting the mid-point of British Communities: a study of affect, affordance and connectivity in Glossop*. The project aimed to explore how an affectual analysis of place, space and mobility reveal a deeper understanding of how non-familial residents of Glossop connect/ disconnect with each other. This chapter will specifically focus on experiences of Glossop train station, illustrating research data gathered during the train commute from Glossop to Manchester, as well as the affordances of the train station itself. Highlighting contemporary residential migration patterns, practices of commuting and everyday mobilities, this focus asks how people's senses and feelings of community are constituted in relation to these mobilities and the affordances of particular spaces. The findings of this chapter further reveal that amalgamating a study of affect and atmospheres within social and cultural contexts can impact on the design of mobility, transport and spaces which are designed to facilitate community (dis)connection.

Introduction

Operating an understanding of mobilities that move beyond the representational, this chapter will examine how bodies relate beyond verbal communication is crucial to design, connections and community. The discussion will begin with an exploration of embodied affects in the social sciences more broadly, highlighting the potential for

those who design spaces of mobility (transport, stations) to borrow established and emerging work within sociology and human geography, and setting the foundations for how a close reading of affect and emotion can shape our understanding of designing mobility. The chapter shall then introduce the project on which this case study is based, outlining the methodologies employed to capture embodied affects 'on the move' during a train commute between Glossop and Manchester, UK.

This chapter focuses specifically on experiences of Glossop train station and the train journey between Glossop and Manchester Piccadilly, drawing upon research data gathered during the train commute from Glossop to Manchester, as well as the affordances of the train station itself. This research was conducted in 2012-2013 in the English town of Glossop, Derbyshire, UK, exploring notions of affect, affordance and interconnections as part of a project within the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) Connected Communities programme: *Revisiting the mid-point of British Communities: a study of affect, affordance and connectivity in Glossop*¹. The project explored how an affectual analysis of place, space and mobility can reveal a deeper understanding of how non-familial residents of Glossop connect and disconnect with each other. Highlighting contemporary residential migration patterns, practices of commuting and everyday mobilities, this focus asks how people's senses and feelings of community are constituted in relation to these mobilities and the affordances of particular spaces.

The chapter explores atmospheres of places and journeys, highlighting how they often involve multi-sensory mingling of soundscapes, land- and city-scapes. Instances of sensory overload, pleasurable sensations, senses of calm, and the unfamiliar are presented, drawing on mobile interviews and participation observation. Illustrative examples presented include journeying with commuters as they traverse through the

¹ The *Connected Communities* Research Programme aims to "understand the changing nature of communities, in their historical and cultural contexts, and the value of communities in sustaining and enhancing our quality of life" (www.ahrc.ac.uk). The town of Glossop was seen in the mid-twentieth century as being a place of an autonomous community lying between the rural and the urban but is now widely viewed as a commuter settlement with many residents spending much of their daily lives outside of the settlement in a series of urban and peri-urban spaces. A large population of Glossop now commute to spaces of leisure and employment in surrounding cities of Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. With thanks and acknowledgements to Principle Investigator Professor Martin Phillips, University of Leicester

diverse multisensory atmospheres of an early morning train station, a familiar yet silent train carriage and a noisy, neon-lit, smell-ridden and body filled metropolitan station. The chapter builds on earlier works of Bissell (2009, 2010, Bissell and Fuller 2011) to reveal the significance of mobility and the affordances of space in creating feelings and emotion of connection and separation, belonging and exclusion, community and individualisation, are explored.

The findings of this chapter reveal that amalgamating a study of affect and atmospheres within social and cultural contexts can impact on the design of mobility, transport and spaces which are designed to facilitate community (dis)connection. The concluding discussion will invite further discussion into the very crucial challenge that not all bodies may experience affects equally, and that borrowing theories of affect and inequalities from across the wider social sciences can enable designers to shape mobilities based on enhanced understandings of social factors. There is great potential for a nuanced understanding of affect in the social sciences to indeed affect design and move beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Embodied affects: The potential for designers

Research into embodied emotions has benefited from the significant emergence of 'affect' in human geography. The 'affective turn' in the social sciences moves beyond previously constructed embodied approaches, as well as building on the politics of emotion within the social sciences, offering new insights into the atmospheric dimensions of human geographies (Thrift 2004; Anderson 2009; Bissell 2010). Affect expands the notion of the social to incorporate not just people, but a relational understanding to bodies, places, spaces, objects, lights, sounds and atmospheres, and advances our 'understanding of how embodied emotions and affect are intricately connected to specific sites, contexts and practices' (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway 2010: 540) . Affect is therefore conceptualised as a different way of thinking about emotions that occur outside of the body, where bodies are susceptible to a variety of external factors at a semi-conscious level (Thrift 2004). Recent geographies argue that the boundaries between emotions, embodied responses, sensualities, rhythms

and flows become blurred as humans anticipate particular affective atmospheres and experiences (Edensor 2012). Literature that draws on the enhanced understanding of affect does not necessarily distinguish between the pre-cognitive affectual state and emotions as a consciously recognised socio-cultural form (Edensor 2012).

The affective dimensions of ordinary life (Stewart 2007) highlight the capacity to affect and be affected by everyday momentary encounters, but also how these ordinary affects connect with the wider social and political world. I return to this imperative in my concluding discussion, where I argue that a socio-political understanding of affect could be potentially crucial to designers of space, bodies and movement. I argue that the concept of affect enables us to think differently about 'senses' of community, mobility and connection, and how this in turn influences how we may *(re)design* such spaces in order to facilitate feelings of belonging and community cohesion. There is significant scope for exploration of affect and emotion in designing mobilities, yet to date the links between these areas of study have remained limited. How can affect and affordance help us understand how designing mobilities can affect feelings of belonging, home and community?

Affecting mobilities: The study of the train journey

This is not to say there have not been in depth studies into affect and commuting; indeed Bissell (2009, 2010, Bissell and Fuller 2011) has provided significant insight into the affective dimension of the passenger commute through the train journey. Bissell coins the term 'affective communication' (2010) when referring to the semiconscious communication between (unknown) train passengers during their journey. This communication is not verbal, and doesn't even have to include eye contact, but is significantly felt between bodies and the affective realm. For example if a train unexpectedly slows down without warning, or grinds to a halt, the affective feeling of acquisition, dread, uncertainty or frustration circulates round the bodies in the carriage. Bissell argues that these affects are infectious, and the most significant communication between strangers moves beyond discursive registers: '(t)he

precognitive, prediscursive affective registers of communication whilst travelling on public transport can significantly impact on the journey experience and what passengers can do' (Bissell: 2010: 271). Affective registers circulate so we can feel the embodied emotions of our fellow passengers whilst on the move, and become attuned to their tensions, irritations, relaxation, and excitement. These affects are deeply related to the time of day, the season; for example the affects felt on a Monday morning commute may be experienced very differently to the uplifted mood Bissell describes of a Friday night train where some passengers are on their way to leisurely and social gatherings. Affective atmospheres within a train carriage is instrumental in facilitating what people do, for example the practice of working on their laptops, drinking with friends, disrupting the relative peace of the carriage. Our prior knowledge and social positioning touches upon our sense of what is deviant, when noise is routine or disruptive. What can these shared, affective registers mean for designing mobilities in light of studies into community (dis)connection? How do we feel mobilities, the daily commute, the sensual variables of the train journey and station, but more importantly how can we situate these feelings in wider social and cultural contexts of change, community, connection and disconnection? There is great potential for a nuanced understanding of affect to affect design. The following section will provide a preliminary insight into how affects of the commute can be captured.

Methodologies: Capturing 'affect, affordance, connectivity'

To understand the embodied and emotional experiences of community within a wider affective framework requires a mixed-methods qualitative approach. A mixed-methodological framework specifically aims to 'get at' making sense of affective experiences. Qualitative mixed-methods triangulation has been suggested to be particularly suitable for interdisciplinary research (Decrop 1999). Encapsulating affective experiences is indeed one of these 'complex purposes'. Geographical research has focused on the tactful 'chorography' of the mobile collective in public spaces, where bodies weave through streets, stations and markets and urban environments in close proximity (Edensor 2000, Bissell 2010). If we are to study mobility and affect, in order to capture how community residents *feel the commute*,

we as researchers must also move through these spaces ourselves. The data for this project derived from movement, sensual observations, banal commentary of our changing surroundings, reflections and momentary stillness and pausing, as opposed to static, retrospective interview narrative.

To do this, the project employed three key methods: Mobile Interviews, Commuting Interviews and Creative Methods.

Mobile Interviews: Walking, driving and mapping methods

There has been a strong emergence of methodologies in the human sciences that focus on the benefits of 'walking and talking' (Stals et al 2014). The walking interview, where participants are encouraged to reflect as they move through particular spaces and environments, has been used to demonstrate the profound relationship between what people say and where they say it (Evans and Jones 2011). In order to capture how residents of Glossop felt about their environment, it was necessary for their reflections and observations to take place as we moved through both the town of Glossop and its surroundings. The mobile interviews took place in two stages. Firstly, we met at the home or workplace of the participants, and conducted a brief, static interview, collecting general information about their lives, histories and everyday movements. We then asked participants to take us to a place which 'best represents community', or if this did not apply to them, a 'place which they felt was important to their everyday lives'. We then accompanied participants to their selected location, either on foot or in the car (the researchers drove, with participants in the passenger seat). During the mobile interview, data was collected in two ways: firstly, all narrative and discussions were digitally recorded; secondly, journeys were mapped via GIS tracking technologies. Mapping the journeys was of crucial importance; this allowed the research team to track the distance of participants journey's in relation to their place of residence/work, as well as map out overlaps and intersections between participant mobilities, highlighting the most frequently visited places or routes. Mapping methods therefore became an integral part of data analysis, in order to

identify where participants connected (or not). During the interview, photographs were taken by the researcher of places, buildings or objects visited or talked about.

Commuting Interviews and participant observation

With a similar rationale to the mobile interviews, commuting interviews involved a specific journey to the participant's place of work. As discussed, Glossop has become a settlement with a significant rise in workers who commute outside of the town to places of work in surrounding cities of Manchester, Sheffield and Leeds. During the commuting interview, which almost always involved a train journey to one such city, a member of the research team met with participants at the train station early in the morning and accompanied the participants on their journey, terminating the interview when they had reached their destination. During the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their journey and surroundings, and all narratives were recorded. In addition, the researchers took extensive notes, recording their own observations of the station (both Glossop train station and the train station of the final destination), the weather, the sensual affects (sound, temperature, feeling, moods, interactions between passengers). This was markedly determined by temporality, and the time of day become of crucial importance to their observations of the commute. Researchers specifically chose to travel at different times of the day in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how the rhythm of the commute has a direct impact on affective feelings of (dis) connection.

Creative methods: Interactive play, art and visual activities

In partnership with a local community arts organisation, researchers on the project adopted a variety of creative methods in order to engage members of the community. This involved working in schools, care and residential homes, community groups and in the main outdoor shopping market on a Saturday with local shoppers and passers-by. Participants were encouraged to express their feelings about community and the town of Glossop through drawings, photographs, mind maps, scribbles and doodles and creative writing. In addition, the researchers and community arts workers devised interactive board games ('Glossopoly'- a reinvention of the traditional Monopoly board game) which featured local places of interest (the station, the school, the town hall, the market, the butcher, the rugby club) to land on once the dice was thrown, and

question cards to invite commentary and reflection of their experiences of such places.

The creative and kinetic methodology employed on the project proved integral to capturing affect and how it relates to community and (dis)connection. The following extract from the research data exemplifies how reflection occurs within certain environments, evoked by particular affordances. Julia, a lone mother in her early 40s, and I were in the station, at the very bench on which she reflects on her memory, as this recording occurred.

Julia (Walking Interview) : 'We walked up the, up to the train station, my father and I, and we were looking at the trains, and he said 'Oh there's lots of trains from Manchester, every 25 minutes, that's very good', I said 'yes, I'd probably come up again on a Sunday, because it was a nice place'. And he sat me down on the bench on the, on the platform, and he said, um, well I've spoken to your sisters and they've all, all agreed that I'm going to re-mortgage the house and give you your share that you would get when we die now, so we can give you a percentage to put towards getting a mortgage yourself now, so my dad basically put a quarter of the money up so I could get this little terrace for (my son) and I, so we came here'.

Here, Julia reflects on a memory of a conversation with her father, directly relating this conversation to a pivotal moment in her life trajectory, where important decisions took place, enabling her arrival into Glossop. What is crucial to this example is that this reflection took place on the bench highlighted in the story, at the station. For Julia, the station has become meaningful beyond the practical connections of commuting and travel. Thrift (2004) speaks of 'still points'- sitting down stimulates you into reflection in mobile world. As we walk to the station, and sit on the bench this story gets remembered and narrated. Such rich data occurred in moments of movement and mobility, on our way somewhere, but also as we paused for moments of stillness and reflection during mobile interviews. This could not be captured in interview narrative. Both the participants and researchers had to feel it, see it, and experience it. This is, of course, dry and wind-free weather allowing. Acknowledging the weather is an

increasingly important consideration in sensual ethnographies of social life and daily interaction (see Mason: *Living the Weather*) and has until recently rarely been signposted as a significant factor in qualitative data collection. Had we chosen a rainy or windy day for the interview, this reflection may have been very different. It is these methodological insights which shape the case for a closer, affective exploration of commuting environments and the embodied emotions they facilitate.

Feeling the commute: Affective environments of the train carriage

This chapter draws upon affective data from a particular observation during the train commute from Glossop to Manchester, on a December morning in 2012. The following journeys took place over one particular morning, but at various times. This section will explore the affective environment of the train carriage, as well as temporalities and rhythm, in order to surmise how the commute is 'felt'. Consider the following extract, illustrating the early morning atmosphere of the train carriage:

Conan has been commuting for 17 years. He gets the 7.08 every morning to Piccadilly, changes to his workplace in Bolton. I meet Colin inside the carriage, and we sit opposite each other in an empty berth, speaking softly as not to disturb the incredibly quiet carriage and wrap our coats around ourselves. Everyone still has their hats, gloves and coats on. Conan points out that people sit on the same seat on the train everyday. Same people, everyday, same spot. People are quite possessive about it, and need their own space. But he doesn't speak to any of them. By and large they keep themselves to themselves. Where Colin sits, the same guy sits two seats away. Everyday. On the 7.08. He doesn't know him. He is a member of "friends of Glossop station", and there is a lot of complaining on social networking sites such as twitter and facebook about Northern rail, satirised as 'Northern Fail' during virtual comments. People use these sites to interact about their view so the commute more than they do face to face. The carriage is silent, separate, and people stay in their

routinised, private spaces. (Field notes: Commuter interviews and participant observation, 2012).

The quiet stillness of the early morning carriage shapes bodies into silence and separation. Each has their own seat, which is familiar and comforting. We are cold, and do not remove our outer garments, very much contrasting the intended warm and welcoming design of public spaces of hospitality (cafes, lounges, restaurants). Despite routines of familiarity (same seats, same people) these affects produce very little social interaction. Any communication occurs through the solitary medium of mobile phone technologies and social networking through Twitter. Whilst online communities and social media networks have a profound influence on the way we (dis)connect in changing ways (Kraut et al 2012), the bodies present in the carriage are attuned to environmental affects which 'shrink' the body into individualised, contained spaces- the quiet, the dark, the cold. The choreography of affective bodies respond to the atmosphere of the carriage, and in turn (lack of) connection.

Mobility, temporality and rhythm

Edensor (2012) , who has done extensive work into geographies of rhythm, argues that everyday temporalities circulate around our habits, bodily rhythms (mealtimes, tiredness) as well as fixed timetables, schedules, the conventional order of events and norms. We simultaneously desire rhythm regularity and well as difference, in our collective life. Elsewhere, I have argued that rhythm and temporality are crucial to how we embody experiences of mobility, tourism and long term travel (Falconer 2013), especially with regard to eating and taste after prolonged periods of time 'on the road' and in transit.

Here I take this further to think how designers could work with this complex and multifaceted embodiment of rhythm, to see what bodies do when we are awakened in the same place each day. This is essentially very much embedded in both seasonal and daily temporalities- which can change the affect of the commuting journey within a matter of hours. For example the commuters of Glossop are enveloped in silence during the early mornings of the winter months, and 'wake up' to work life when they

arrive into Manchester Piccadilly train station, and light, dark, sound and affective atmosphere is crucial to this accidental design. This is not exclusively particular to these places, but can be said for multiple commuter type stations and large, city intersections, yet how these spaces work with our embodied rhythms have yet to be fully explored:

7.08 am service: It's a dark, freezing morning. The station is full, but almost silent. A quiet, sleepy crowd. The platform is packed, but the quiet is very noticeable- voices are low, there are no announcements, no bright lights, no whirring of coffee machine. A Christmas tree glows in the corner.

9.08am service: I return to Glossop station in full light to collect George to ride on the 9.08 service. The station is now in full daylight, and this appears to effect the sound- it is no longer the enveloped, slice of the dark that was the 7.08 service. People are talking, the automatic doors of the co-op (local supermarket) are opening and closing, background music is coming from somewhere. People interact on the platform, they are now travelling with each other, family members are on their way to Manchester for Christmas shopping perhaps, and there is a distinct lack of individual separatism that there was a few hours earlier. Garry and I chat on the platform for some time about the project, and my work generally. We don't need to lower our voices, self-consciously as not to disturb others, like I did with Conan.

We discuss the sensory differences of Piccadilly station. Arrival, security guards everywhere checking tickets. You emerge and it's a world away from Glossop There is the sensory experience of moving media, bright neon lights, advertising, endless hollow announcements, untrusting ticket checks- you are in a city! **(Field notes: Commuter interviews and participant observation, 2012).**

This close reading evokes the question of how time and temporality (including seasons, annual festivals, temperature, and weather) affect how we experience the commute. Emerging from the rural sleepiness of a cold, dark morning into the stimulus of an inner city, major transport hub has profoundly affective impacts. Anderson (2009) asks how atmospheres 'envelop' and 'press' upon life. As we arrive into Manchester Piccadilly we are ejected from the thick atmosphere of silence and familiar faces and routine into a stimulating crowd, awakening all senses. Mindful of the multiple sensual variants that create the 'affective envelop', designers can facilitate affects of being closed, cocooned in thickness of darkness and silence, or lost in a sea of stimulus.

Moreover, these temporal sensations impress upon moments of (dis)connections, and have further implications for thinking about communities and how they may be understood:

We look around the carriage, I ask if this is normal. George explains this is quite quiet. People tend to meet and sit together and have a coffee. There is a difference which train you get.

George explains that the **8.03am** is completely different atmosphere, and reminiscent of when he used to live in London. Crowded, sleepy, fixed on themselves, self absorbed, they think about what is going on in Manchester, not Glossop. The atmosphere is more competitive, more separate. The later service is far more relaxed. I look around. It feels it. But George says this is not place specific, the later services feel more quiet and friendly even on the tube in London! **(Field notes: Commuter interviews and participant observation, 2012).**

Glossop and Manchester appear to be two distinct worlds, two distinct relationships. You can see people transitioning from one to another. However, as exemplified, the time of day greatly influences the affects produced, and determines whether connections are made, and with whom. It can therefore be argued that it is not only spaces, but temporalities, which smooth connections and interactions, or conversely

encourage introversion, during the commute: allowing eye contact, talking loudly, 'warming' up to our surroundings or remaining contained within ourselves. This chapter argues that designers of transport, stations and leisure spaces can be greatly influenced by the seasonal and daily rhythms of everyday life and affective atmospheres.

Concluding discussion: Taking further steps

The disciplines of human geography and design have much to learn from each other. Combining the study of affect and emotion in the social sciences and human geography with studies of community, mobility and connection can provide valuable insights into the realm of design. Thrift, in a powerful discussion 'towards a spatial politics of affect' (2004), acknowledges the alliances between the social sciences and the arts; the 'engineering', he claims, produces both theoretical and practical knowledges 'which can simultaneously change our engagements with the world' (2004: 75). This chapter illustrates how affective environments, rhythm and temporality are deeply intertwined with the experience of the train commute, with specific focus on whether these affects enable or inhibit connections and interactions. This is a case study, but reflective of far wider patterns of mobility. Embodiment, emotion, affect and affordance can tell us about communities, and how community studies are evolving, but has further implications for those who design such spaces of movement and belonging. If seasonal and daily rhythms have a significant impact on whether people connect or disconnect- is there scope for designers to work with these affects? Affect is transmitted from body to body- we feel the commute collectively. Acknowledging these affects can determine whether stations, carriages and waiting rooms can be kept calm, light, dark, warm to fit in with our bodily rhythm, (for example a dimly lit carriage when the season is dark may keep it enveloped and sleepy, 'waking up' in the spring).

However, whilst this chapter calls for a communication between the disciplinary boundaries of design and social science, simple recommendations of how to work with these affects (soft sounds, chairs facing inwards, warm platforms) implies all bodies experience affects in the same way. This is not the case. Affect is, by its very slippery nature, very ambiguous. Anderson (2009) insists we need to embrace these ambiguities, not holding on to any certainty, concrete conclusions or 'exaggerated

trust' (2009: 78). This can be tricky for designing mobility, since we cannot fully grasp, fully capture what it is exactly *designers need to do*. What has not been explored in this chapter, but what remains crucial for further analysis into amalgamating affect and design, is how affect may *not* experienced equally with regard to gender, race, class and other social inequalities.

Elsewhere I have argued that sensual affects of dirt, cleanliness and disgust can deeply affect the inclusion (or otherwise) of certain social groups, specifically with regard to gender and social class (Taylor and Falconer 2014). Similarly, there has been recent work into how affects of fear of public transport are experience are deeply gendered (Loukaitou-Sideris 2014, Hewitt 2014). This line of thought follows Ahmed (2000, 2004), who claims that even unconsciously experienced affects, which cannot be recognised or attributed to a direct emotion through cognitive understanding, can be evoked by past encounters embedded in social and cultural histories, and inform the narratives of future embodied and emotional encounters. The process of designing mobilities and affect does not occur in a social vacuum – some bodies will be excluded and included, unequally, and this is a key concern for designers who need to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach to design by borrowing theories of affect and how this relates to social and cultural politics. To be clear, this responsibility is to work closely with sociological and cultural geography theories relating to unequal access to spaces, in order to be wary not to reproduce exclusive spaces and conflicts through producing particular affects. Be that as it may, I argue that designers can, and indeed should, work in conjunction with the emerging theories of affect theorised by social scientist and political geographers- in order to be mindful that the way bodies relate to each other and sensual atmospheres is important to inclusive spaces, (dis)connection and notions of community. I suggest how bodies relate beyond verbal communication is crucial to design, connections and community.

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ⁱProfessor Jennifer Mason: *Living the Weather*: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgan-centre/research/research-themes/relationalities-friendship-and-belonging/living-the-weather/>