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Missed connections? Everyday mobility experiences and the sociability of public transport in Amsterdam during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Various measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 have altered mobility flows worldwide and caused people to adopt new ways of being and moving in public space. These changes have been considerably pronounced across modes of public transportation. This paper explores the experiences of individuals who continued riding and working in public transport throughout the pandemic to yield insight into changing mobility meanings and grounded realities of urban mobility processes in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. Through the combined analysis of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observations and interviews, the paper unpacks lived experiences of riding and working in public transport in the city of Amsterdam during lockdown by addressing the changed nature of embodied encounters and mobile sociability in public transit. Findings denote that COVID-19 has altered the conditions of mobile sociability in spaces of public transport, and has produced complex experiences of daily travel with others involving mutually negative and positive impressions. As a result, we argue that when challenged by COVID-19 related restrictions, mobile sociability and fleeting encounters on the move significantly shape the experience of traveling with others in ways that call into question how we think of public transport as a social space in cities.

¿Conexiones perdidas? Experiencias cotidianas de movilidad y la sociabilidad del transporte público en Ámsterdam durante el COVID-19

RESUMEN

Varias medidas para mitigar la propagación del COVID-19 han alterado los flujos de movilidad a nivel mundial y han provocado que las personas adopten nuevas formas de ser y moverse en el espacio público. Estos cambios han sido considerablemente pronunciados en todos los modos de transporte público. Este documento explora las experiencias de los individuos que continuaron viajando y trabajando en el transporte público durante la pandemia para aportar información sobre los significados cambiantes de la

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movilidad y las realidades fundamentadas de los procesos de movilidad urbana en el contexto de COVID-19 y más allá. A través del análisis combinado del trabajo de campo etnográfico, las observaciones y las entrevistas con participantes, el documento desglosa las experiencias vividas de viajar y trabajar en el transporte público en la ciudad de Ámsterdam durante el encierro, al abordar la naturaleza cambiante de los encuentros corporales y la sociabilidad móvil en el transporte público. Los hallazgos denotan que el COVID-19 ha alterado las condiciones de sociabilidad móvil en los espacios de transporte público, y ha producido experiencias complejas de desplazamiento cotidiano con otro, involucrando impresiones mutuamente negativas y positivas. Como resultado, argumentamos que cuando se enfrentan a las restricciones relacionadas con COVID-19, la sociabilidad móvil y los encuentros fugaces en movimiento dan forma significativa a la experiencia de viajar con otros de maneras que cuestionan cómo pensamos en el transporte público como un espacio social en las ciudades.

Correspondances ratées ? Les expériences quotidiennes de mobilité et la sociabilité des transports en commun à Amsterdam pendant la pandémie de COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Diverses mesures visant à limiter la propagation de COVID-19 ont modifié le flux de mobilité autour du monde et forcé les gens à adopter de nouvelles façons de fréquenter les espaces publics et de s'y déplacer. Ces changements ont été très prononcés pour les modes de transports en commun. Cet article explore les expériences de personnes qui ont continué à utiliser les transports en commun, ou à y travailler, pendant la pandémie avec pour but d'aider à comprendre la signification de la mobilité changeante et les réalités ancrées des processus de mobilité urbaine dans le contexte de la pandémie de COVID-19 et au-delà de celle-ci. Par le biais d'une combinaison d'analyses ethnographiques sur le terrain, d'observations, de participations et d'entretiens, il analyse des expériences vécues de trajets et de travail dans les transports en commun de la ville d'Amsterdam pendant le confinement en abordant la nature changeante des rencontres concrètes et de la sociabilité mobile dans les transports publics. Les résultats indiquent que le virus a modifié les modalités de la sociabilité mobile dans les espaces de transport en commun et a produit des expériences complexes de trajet quotidien en compagnie d'autres individus qui consistent d'impressions négatives et positives. De ce fait, nous soutenons que, quand elle a été remise en question par des restrictions liées à la pandémie de COVID-19, la sociabilité mobile et les rencontres fugaces en transit ont considérablement orienté l'expérience des trajets avec d'autres personnes de manières qui remettent en cause la façon dont nous percevons les transports en commun en tant qu'espaces sociaux urbains.

1. Introduction

Public transport has been impacted by the emergence of COVID-19 in complex ways. Ridership numbers across cities worldwide witnessed devastatingly low records as a result of newly adopted measures to halt the spread of the virus and limits on non-essential travel, and a withdrawal of passengers relating to fear and risk-perception of COVID-19 transmission on public transportation. In the Netherlands, public transportation use fell by >90% during the country's 'intelligent lockdown' period (De Haas et al., 2020) making it one of the most severely impacted sectors as a result of the pandemic. So far, insights from quantitative research have provided understanding of a changed public transport landscape: changed ridership metrics, new patterns of daily travel as well as prognoses of the long-term effects of working from home (e.g., Aloï et al., 2020; Borkowski et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021). Beyond ridership, however, lie further points of qualitative enquiry into the changed experience of public transport use during COVID-19. What new practices and norms have emerged? How are spaces of public transport lived and felt by those who continued to ride and work in its spaces throughout the pandemic? By asking these questions, this paper contributes to understanding the changing nature of public transport during COVID-19 and examines how mobile sociability and interactions on the move with others are enacted, challenged and transformed as a result of the restrictions brought on by the pandemic.

Research has engaged how feelings of connectedness emerge in spaces of public transport by way of intensity and close corporeal proximity to others beyond our own social circles, and create social environments for volatile 'situational communities in transit' to materialize (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017; Tonnelat & Kornblum, 2017). Other studies have similarly worked to expand non-social imaginaries of public transport by challenging norms of social disconnection during journeys (Epley & Schroeder, 2014), raising the significance of mobile encounters (Koefoed et al., 2017; Shaker, 2021; Wilson, 2011), and advancing the value of non-representational affective registers of experience (Bissell, 2010). While there is debate surrounding what kind of social space public transport is, or whether, if at all, fleeting encounters create meaningful connections between those we only meet in passing (Valentine, 2008; Valentine & Sadgrove, 2014), these discussions do provide theoretical opening for unpacking how public transport may be understood as a unique site of 'missing' sociality during COVID-19. Furthermore, they invite thought-provoking inquiry into how public transport spaces can factor into broader theorisations on publicness (Tuvikene et al., 2021) and sociability both as a result of the context of COVID-19 and beyond.

Recent studies have begun to engage the qualitative dimensions of how COVID-19 is shaping new mobile cultures, drawing particular attention to living without commuting, working from home, and travel appreciation time (Aoustin & Levinson, 2021; Nikolaeva et al., 2021; Rubin et al., 2020). So far, there have been few empirical studies looking into the social effects of COVID-19 in spaces of public transport particularly from the perspective of those who have continued to ride public transport and perhaps even more, from the perspective public transport employees working throughout the pandemic. Drawing on theorisations of public transportation as a social space and research on affective atmospheres (covered in [Section 2](#)), we address this gap by investigating how people's feelings and experiences of public transport have been impacted by the pandemic and

how it has affected cultures of interaction of being mobile with others. Focusing on lived experiences and the grounded realities of public transport use across Amsterdam's public transport network, we unpack the changing norms of copresence and daily travel, affective atmospheres, and mobile sociability as shaped by these dimensions.

The data of this study was collected in Amsterdam from March to April 2021 using 'mobile methods' and complemented with traditional semi-structured interviews with public transit passengers. The paper is structured as follows: first, we provide an overview of literature on public transport as a social space and affective atmospheres. We then lay out the design and methodology of the research before proceeding to our findings and discussion of results.

2. Public transport as a social space

Public transport is a unique kind of public space. It enables social interaction characterized by intensity and proximity (Bissell, 2010), and is also one of the few public spaces that is controlled through fare pricing (Cats et al., 2014), ticket enforcement and various other (in)formal norms of behaviour that are continually produced and challenged in its spaces. Although public transport seldom appears in dominant literatures on public space, public transport enables mobile interactions with unacquainted 'strangers', governed by a set of tacit rules that in essence, supports the existence of publicness (Jensen, 2006; Tuvikene et al., 2021). Recent efforts to examine public transport as public space have valorised public transport as a site of publicness where various intensities, experiences, contestations and social dynamics unfurl (see for example, Tuvikene et al., 2021). Interrogating public transport through this lens enables a perspective of transit spaces as communal spaces that stage both the banal and everyday as well as the significant, identity-producing and political conditions of publicness. Further, it serves to posit mobile spaces like public transport beyond traditional technocratic planning perspectives that have long disregarded the significance of how movement itself is experienced, lived and felt. In this section, we turn to the interdisciplinary body of research that gives prominence to the seemingly banal daily mobilities and their sensorial, emotional and social value.

2.1. Mobile encounters

Mobilities scholarship has established essential theoretical grounding for acknowledging the embodied experience of mobility as something necessarily experienced in relation to others (Cresswell, 2006, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Mobility is dependent on, or at the very least connected to the movement of others, making it an intensely relational experience imbued with countless embodied encounters, social interactions and emotional tenors. Empirical research on public transport and everyday mobile interactions has since raised the significance of transport spaces as sites of interpersonal negotiation and embodied encounter (Koefoed et al., 2017; Shaker, 2021; Wilson, 2011) focusing on race (Rokem & Vaughan, 2019), religion (Shaker, 2021), and different intercultural aspects of urban encounters on the move. While these studies mainly emphasise how 'Otherness' is maintained and foregrounded in passing meetings with those whose company we cannot control nor choose (Bissell, 2010; Butcher, 2011) they draw valuable attention to the complex social dynamics that public transport spaces orchestrate and stage.

The extent to which public transport and the fleeting encounters produced within its spaces amounts to 'meaningful contact' (Darling & Wilson, 2016) or significant social connections across difference, however, is debated among urban geographers who admonish idealising passing interactions as themselves leading to mutual respect or social cohesion (Valentine, 2008). Still, these analyses impart important insight into the significance of mobile encounters, as public transport offers the highest potential for different (deep) social interactions to occur across mobility modes (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017), and how PT creates complex social formations and opportunities to encounter relations beyond familiar social circles with transformative potential (Koefoed et al., 2017; Wilson, 2011).

Stéphane Tonnelat and William Kornblum expand on transitory meetings of unacquainted strangers calling them 'situational communities in transit' (2017, p. 99). Underscoring conditions of social order and interpersonal trust, the authors highlight different norms, expectations and competencies of 'being-with' (Bissell, 2010) other passengers that establishes a link between the experience of subway travel and the fundamentals of what it means to live in community (2017). While travel can be an isolating experience or a way to seek solitude, it is simultaneously acknowledged that transient communities do emerge through various in/voluntary circumstances necessitated by public transport (Tonnelat & Kornblum, 2017; see also, Tuvikene et al., 2021).

2.2. Situational communities and norms of co-presence

In discussion of public transport and demanded co-presence, David Bissell upholds broader understandings of community as 'togetherness' and the 'event-of-being-with' (citing Welch & Panelli, 2007, p. 351) supporting the recognition of the fluid relations individuals have to transient communities that transpire during public transport journeys. Like communities, subways are social environments where countless momentary interactions continually create and remake the social order that governs 'society'. As we journey, we read and react to looks, bodily gestures, utterances, and each other's motions or appearances that shape the normative order we experience in any social situation, including public transport settings.

Sociality in the subway is thus established through the presence of trust and order necessitated by the ability to navigate the complex interactional cues that arise in transit (Tonnelat & Kornblum, 2017). A more present-day example of which may be drawn from the societal expectations under COVID-19 conditions, where 'appropriate' behaviour in public is communicated and reinforced through cues like coughs or shuffles, and actively working to avoid others in a creation of new social compliance for feeling safe in everyday public spaces (James, 2020, p. 189).

Somewhat paradoxically, these situational communities hinge on maintaining anonymity and civil inattention towards fellow passengers through public avoidance practices, or 'involvement shields' (Goffman, 1966) that undergird the navigation of corporeal proximity and intensity to other people. The embodied conditions of public transport involves a series of norms of mobile co-presence that guides the 'seat-drama' inside vehicles by actively avoiding sitting or being sat next to, or reacting to tactics of spatial control some passengers practice, for example, using the things they carry or wear (Rink, 2016; Wilson, 2011). This 'collective choreography' (Löfgren, 2008) reveals clear seating

and spatial preferences and placement tactics that guide how passengers negotiate space (see for example, Berkovich et al., 2013), making public transport a distinct public space filled with particular tacit norms and expectations.

Research on travel behaviour and public transport supports that there is value to indifference or 'doing nothing', and social benefits to wellbeing that are gained from seeking solitude during travel (Russell et al., 2011). Likewise, avoiding interactions like eye-contact or pleasantries and generally keeping to oneself, particularly during COVID-19 also enables individuals to access feelings of safety in public spaces (James, 2020). At the same time, a study by Epley and Schroeder (2014), found that those who actively sought out conversations with other commuters in buses and trains reported higher feelings of wellbeing and social connectedness than those who did not. Their study revealed that keeping to oneself is often a misunderstanding of the consequences of distant connections, and that interacting in public transport spaces actually produces positive and socially contagious outcomes when challenged. This not only confronts the imaginary of public transport as an antisocial space, but points to the possibilities of 'missing' social engagement in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak more relevantly.

2.3. Affective atmospheres in spaces of public transport

Much of the interactional dynamics discussed above point to the embodied or discursive registers of experience that shapes sociality within public transport spaces. However, many studies have paid increasing attention to 'affect' in travel experiences (Honkatukia & Svnarenko, 2019; Purifoye, 2015; Shaker, 2021) and their significance in producing the backdrop of mobile experiences with others. Notably, Bissell (2010) has laid essential groundwork for thinking of non-discursive registers of communication that transpire in public transport that serve to expand the notion of 'sociability' as it relates to daily mobilities. This body of research establishes that social interactions on the move are deeply imbued with sensations, feelings, tempers, cultural embeddings and imaginaries that give shape to the nature of our encounters with others (Augé, 2002; Jensen, 2009; Koefoed et al., 2017).

Emotional fields, or 'affects' have also been embraced in mobilities research that seeks to explicate the non-representational (Thrift, 2008) dynamics and feelings of movement and mobile subjectivity therein (Bissell, 2007, 2010; Conradson & McKay, 2007). More recently still, scholarship on affect theory has witnessed conceptual emphasis on 'atmospheres' as 'spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with' (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). The compound term 'affective atmosphere' then, allows a centring of the collective experience over the individual (Bille & Simonsen, 2021) echoing the reasoning of Derek McCormack who claims affective atmospheres to be 'something distributed yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies while also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal' (2008, p. 413).

Affective atmospheres are thus imbued with the capacity to bring people together as part of the mobile collectives forming a significant part of the 'being with' others in spaces of public transport that Bissell describes (Bissell, 2010). This is not to suggest the individual experience is insignificant, but to explicate how affective atmospheres give shape to a collective feeling of a situation which become 'stuck' (Ahmed, 2004) to bodies as they

are registered corporeally (Bissell, 2016). In other words, the feelings and sensorial experiences, or the atmospheres generated in spaces of transport, uncover different registers of sociability that influence the experience of mobilities. For this reason we turn to affective atmospheres in this paper to unpack further non-discursive registers in which COVID-19 impacts people and becomes shared as collective feeling, while remaining alert to the relevance of how it is, also, individually experienced.

3. Methodology

The empirical part of this research takes inspiration from mobile methodologies (Fincham et al., 2010) and qualitative research 'on the move' (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Considering the methodological challenges of representing the momentariness of mobile experiences, of passing 'in-between', we combined visual and participatory observations on the move with interviews to fulfil deeper explorations of mobile sociability and the interactions, feelings and meanings of riding and working in public transport under COVID-19.

This research is focused on the public transport network of the city of Amsterdam, in the Netherlands. The first part of the study involved fieldwork across multiple sites of Amsterdam's public transport network during the months following the country's second lockdown period and curfew mandate. The objective was to 'be there' at different times and days of the week and observe *in situ* what was going on at stations and stops, and on buses, trams and metros. We carried out ethnographic fieldwork and participant observations for four weeks from March to April 2021 making detailed observations and conducting on-the-spot interviews with passengers and public transport employees. Researchers followed the same fieldwork protocol, attending to embodied encounters and behaviours (what people said, their facial expressions, bodily gestures and movements), interactions with other people, the materiality of transport lines and stations, and the different sensorial, emotional and affective atmospheres generated within transport spaces. Detailed observations were recorded on-the-move or immediately afterwards in field journals and research diaries, and findings were shared, compared and reviewed throughout the fieldwork period.

At the time of conducting fieldwork, the Netherlands was under partial lockdown and a nation-wide curfew mandate. Within these restrictions, fieldwork took place in the hours outside curfew and ended before 20:30 o'clock each day. Observations made from inside vehicles took place only in the event that a minimum two meter's distance could be guaranteed, meaning that in-vehicle observations were limited to rides with fewer passengers. To achieve deeper consideration for the different meanings, feelings and relations involved in being on-the-way with others during COVID-19, we carried out on-the-spot conversational interviews with passengers and public transport employees to ascertain how individuals reflected on their own subjectivities and experiences regarding the effect of COVID-19 on public transport. These interviews consisted of informal talks covering how participants reflected on their mobility experiences on public transport in the past year, what changes they observed, how the pandemic affected their travel habits and practices, and what aspects of daily travel on public transport, and working in its spaces were 'missed', if any. After each interview, researchers asked participants if they were willing to partake in longer semi-structured interviews.

Lastly, we complemented visual and participatory observations with ten semi-structured interviews with participants recruited separately during fieldwork to deepen analysis into how COVID-19 was being lived and felt by those occupying public transport spaces daily during the pandemic. Interviews lasted approximately 30–50 minutes and there was no overlap between individuals who participated in semi-structured interviews with those interviewed during fieldwork. Due to COVID-19 guidelines, interviews took place over online video conference services (Zoom) and over the telephone. Because online interview methods necessitate digital literacy skills, we addressed this challenge by offering three methods of interviews: physically distanced interviews in person, online video-call interviews, and interviews over the telephone to increase accessibility. Participants could thus choose for themselves which method they were most comfortable with and was most accessible to them.

The interviews were guided thematically (Pinkster, 2020) following questions on changing norms of copresence and daily travel, affective atmospheres, and mobile sociability as shaped by these dimensions. Interviews were transcribed and coded using an inductive coding approach. Our semi-structured interview sample was limited to participants who were (1) able and willing to communicate in Dutch or English language, (2) had access to internet and (3) had a certain degree of digital literacy in order to carry out online interviews. Importantly, this study does not aim to make broad claims of representativeness, rather to provide an in-depth snapshot of a situation that is unquestionably more complex than the scope of this paper alone.

4. Findings

4.1. *Is this seat available? New practices and norms of riding public transport*

COVID-19 has established a set of new norms that characterise how we navigate public spaces that are not all exclusive to public transport. Still, some of the ways this new negotiation of space and other tactics of placement take shape and take on particular meanings when on the move do exhibit exceptional qualities within the bounds of public transport. Navigating seating arrangements, for example, revealed a particular kind of performance of avoidance and distancing, underpinned by new social norms for handling personal space and other's space. Passengers showed a high sense of attuned awareness for those around them, moving around one another with as much physical separation as possible; swerving around others in more crowded areas, pulling in their arms or sucking in their breath as they passed by others, or retreating into empty corners of the vehicle to stay as far from others as possible.

On the metro, passengers left and occupied seats with relative ease. People entered metros, buses or trams searching for a space to sit or to stand, often without much direct contact with one another, following a relatively ordered composition of movement in the available space inside vehicles. However, the spatial economy inside transit vehicles appeared to unfurl in stricter terms when formal social distancing and rules of closeness and spatial separation were challenged. As several participants remarked, the general acceptance of occupying any available seat no longer followed the same norms as they might've before the pandemic. For example,

Before, you would sit in the nearest empty place that you would find, but now people try to walk a bit further away or look for a specific place along the metro or tram where there are a lot of empty seats and sit there.

(Natalia,¹ passenger)

On emptier metro rides, we noticed that five-seater horizontal benches would quickly 'fill up' once the two edge-most seats had been taken, leaving other passengers to walk further along to find other empty benches. While we found this particular pattern to be dependent on levels of crowdedness, most passengers articulated that they no longer found it acceptable to occupy just any available seat, even on more crowded rides. This new heightened sense of awareness and embodied sensitivity to remain adequately distanced from others has formed new practices of cautionary behaviour on the move that passengers and public transport employees express taking on as a result of COVID-19. Distancing plays out in more complex ways in confined space, and we observed placement strategies and various seating arrangements to be a continuous recital of cautiousness and responsiveness to the movement of others. As Manuela, an Amsterdam tram conductor reflects:

"If someone was standing there [priority area of the tram for wheelchairs and strollers] and then someone came to stand there too, that person would get up and move somewhere else. People don't want to be close to others."

(Manuela, tram conductor)

Not wanting 'to be close to others' comprises new layers of spatial ordering that is made visible in the scenario Manuela describes when new distancing norms and seating precedents become subverted. For many participants, practicing distance necessitates a new kind of vigilance to the closeness and overall physical company of others. We observed the dynamic of continual spatial reordering and strategies of changing places within vehicles in order to maintain proper distance to be an on-going affair of this new level of alertness.

A few interviewees articulated new tensions associated with trying to balance new social norms of adequate distancing with existing practices of close interactions with others, particularly when trying to help or assist others during journeys:

I saw someone struggling with carrying stuff and getting into the tram, and I didn't know if I should help or not. (...) I've struggled with that decision.

(Leo, passenger)

What I found particularly hard was one moment when an elderly lady became unwell. She fell to the ground. I wanted to help her, but that would mean I would move within one and half meter from her and I had a drink with friends last night. How safe is it when I help you?

(Lies, passenger)

These passages point to some of the more prosaic and slight gestures of kindness or courtesy that give shape to being on the move with others. As the above interviews show, small actions of offering help or support to fellow passengers become difficult to enact in light of new distancing measures and attempts to respect the safety of other people. One

interviewee in particular expanded on such challenges of practicing avoidance in public transport highlighting the added tension between norms of accepting someone else's presence next to you and unwanted proximity during COVID-19, in the following:

You're not pressed to go sit across someone else or you don't have those awkward moments where you actually don't wanna sit next to someone. (...) You don't have to be stressed about things that are maybe going to happen without them actually having to happen"

(Sabine, passenger)

"That's a double-edged sword, if you're seated and someone comes too close. I would want to stand, but I am aware of how that can come across. It is a bit of a barrier for me."

(Femke, passenger)

The barrier that Femke articulates points to an awareness of entangled existing norms with new norms of avoidance that might still be read as prejudice or other negative associations that can shape passenger interactions. In some cases, avoidance tactics can be embedded in discriminatory practices that enforce othering, racialization and other kinds of social differentiation through embodied mobile encounters in public transport (Koefoed et al., 2017; Shaker, 2021; Wilson, 2011). As Femke's comment shows, distancing practices, while now also markers of a certain respect for the safety of others informing the spatial arrangements inside vehicles, are still undeniably connected to existing negative othering practices enacted through avoidance tactics on public transport which she expresses as a 'double-edged sword' of evading closeness. As Femke continues: 'It's not like I feel warm feelings for my fellow passengers right now, however rude that may sound' (Femke, passenger).

For a few others, on the other hand, avoidance and maintaining distance had more positive associations that they recognised as 'taking care' of one another:

People are acting different. They are taking distance and wearing the mask and using the gel. People are taking care of each other. They stay away from other people now.

(Whitney, passenger)

You take care of each other more than before. Before it was like, 'I'm an individual I need to get to this place and this is my metro, so I'm gonna get in'. And now people are (...) more aware of each other.

(Sabine, passenger)

These passages highlight differing interpretations of avoidance in public transport that one interviewee in particular described as 'a more social' experience:

Researcher: How do you think the experience of public transport has changed during COVID-19?

Geert: It's more social.

Researcher: More social?

Geert: Yeah. People are staying away from other people and not running [to catch a metro] in together. They are being more social to other people.

Researcher: More considerate of others?

Geert: Yeah.

As a result of the pandemic, avoidance was seen by many as an overall sign of respect for the safety of others, and even as a sign of ‘more social’ public transport practices. How individuals expressed navigating space and close proximity during COVID-19 revealed new patterns of seating and tactics of avoidance underpinned by new norms of distancing and avoidance, and communicated varied interpretations of how placement strategies and spatial negotiation were acknowledged. The differences between how distancing, seating and spatial alertness was interpreted by passengers imparts a nuanced glance into how COVID-19 has ascribed new meaning to existing norms of co-presence on the move that transpire in complex terms. Further, these embodied performances of ‘respect’ or ‘care’ offer thought-provoking signs for the possibility of conducts of care and mutual respect towards others in spaces of public transport that could give shape to a more convivial participation and experience of daily mobility practices.

4.2. *Changed atmospheres*

On metro 54, two young teenagers enter. Their eyes widen above their masks as they gasp aloud, looking at all the empty seats. They look at each other and walk through the carriage, repeatedly whispering “Dit is raar! Dit is raar!” (“This is weird! This is weird!”).

(Field note, 7.4.2021)

When describing the general feeling of spaces of public transport, respondents repeatedly communicated feeling ‘weird’ or ‘strange’ about the overall lack of typical crowds. For many, the emptiness of public transport spaces made for an uneasy experience, or overall ‘eeriness’ (Robin, public transport office employee) that coloured in the experience of public transport spaces. One passenger noted that the empty stations and metros was one of the most prominent changes they experienced during COVID-19, intensified further by the curfew mandate:

Curfew makes me feel anxious because at night when I take the metro to go home from work it is like a ghost land it’s so empty and usually in Amsterdam there would be at least some other people, but now there isn’t and this is kind of strange. This makes me more afraid because I am also then walking alone at night, too.

(Sanne, passenger)

The strangeness that Sanne expresses points to a knowledge about a certain state of exception, an unfamiliar state she describes as a ‘ghost land’. For her, and many others, the materialization of the emptiness in space of public transit was perceptible through the affect of eeriness, strangeness or fear. ‘It’s like something is not right’, Don, a Service and Safety employee remarked, voicing how the general emptiness of public transport caused its spaces to feel eerie and strange. At the same time, others articulated how the overall crowd-lessness gave transit spaces a lifeless feeling:

Having more people talking and walking inside the trains gave it a different feeling, like the city was more alive and nowadays that really doesn't happen. So it feels empty, and (...) a little bit sad.

(Leo, passenger)

What stands out in these quotes is the subtle, nonrepresentational registers of experience, and the exceptional, short-lived feelings that cause added tension, anxiety or fear as a result of a disrupted normality that become experienced collectively through affective atmospheres. Participants clearly associated these changes of the overall feeling of public transport to the pandemic. Within these spaces, the absence of typical crowds contributed to the presence of eerie and even fearful affects. For many, the emptiness caused public transport to feel lifeless or 'dead' (Manuela, tram conductor).

Still, there were some who voiced more positive qualities of the emptiness, making their experiences of public transport more pleasant or favourable:

It's more comfortable. There's less noise, and you can always find a seat or read in peace. It's more pleasant now.

(Johann, passenger)

I have to admit, I like that it's quiet. I'm an introverted person and I like that it's more relaxed and quiet now. I can sit back or read my book and just be by myself.

(Steve, tram driver and conductor)

Here, the feeling of calmness and peacefulness are directly attributed to lesser crowds and the comfort it affords in terms of overall quietness and solitude. The distant feel in public transport, for many, made for more positive experiences of passengering and a different level of affective experience through the sense of calmness. Conversely, the experience of emptier vehicles and stations, especially for public transport employees, made working days more wearisome. A recurring theme in interviews and discussions with transport employees was boredom, tiredness and loneliness experienced as a direct result of the overall emptiness in spaces of public transport, but also in relation to diminished positive interactions with passengers. As conveyed by tram drivers and conductors here:

People are tired of this and they are not so friendly. Maybe you saw, when I greet them, they don't say hello, they don't greet me back. (...) At the beginning it was different. There was more of a sense of togetherness.

(Rob, tram conductor)

They don't greet you anymore or greet you with any positivity at least. People look down and just click their card and go in and don't say anything. And I have to say, I do miss that social interaction with people sometimes. Even though I am introverted.

(Steve, tram driver and conductor)

It turned out that many of the public transport employees interviewed faced a range of negative experiences at work due to the effects of COVID-19 within public transport. Most notably, feelings of boredom, fatigue and fear; violence or harassment in the form of verbal abuse, coughing or spitting, provoking (un-masked individuals teasing employees

or moving too close around them), and inadequate safety protocol or equipment provision particularly at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak. As two metro station security workers at Bijlmer ArenA recall:

Researcher: How have you experienced working during the pandemic?

Security worker 1: [At the beginning] It was crazy. It was completely empty, and there were no people. Some people were teasing us and coughing near us and other colleagues, and saying they have the virus.

Security worker 2: And spitting around you!

Researcher: Really, spitting?

Security worker 2: Yes!

Erik, a bus driver temporarily repositioned as metro Security and Information personnel due to bus schedule cuts, relayed a similar story:

They tease us by walking around and not wearing the mask, like 'oh look at me, I'm not wearing a mask, what are you gonna do?'. I don't like this.

(Erik, bus driver)

These comments echo the idea expressed by many participants who viewed public transport as a less convivial space due to the pandemic, related to the loss of (positive) ephemeral connections with others and changed cultures of interaction as result of COVID-19. What the above passages reveal is both a sense that the overall atmosphere of public transport spaces is divergent as a result of an exceptional context, but also how COVID-19 has shaped new affective feelings and experiences of riding and working in public transport – and more centrally – how they are experienced and felt collectively.

4.3. 'Mind your own business and mind yourself': changing modes of mobile engagement

James (2020) returns to classical behavioural geography to illustrate changing bodily presences and social interactions in public during the COVID-19 crisis. This study shows that indoor interactions in particular where avoidance is challenged, conversations, eye-contact and exchanging pleasantries largely disappeared, and many people 'kept to themselves' (James, 2020, p. 189). 'Keeping to one's self' was a key theme we observed during fieldwork and one that was often addressed by participants as one of the biggest changes observed in the behaviour of other passengers due to the pandemic.

You see people talk less because you're not cosy together on the tram anymore. You see people maybe traveling solo more. (...) everybody's more turned inward. And like I said, you also don't travel *with* people anymore. Everybody's alone more.

(Anneke, passenger)

New distancing practices and limitations on non-essential travel meant losing the 'cosiness' of public transport, as Anneke illustrates, and resulted also in a more solitary experience of travel. This excerpt gives prominence to how the physical avoidance of

others as a result of COVID-19 also bled into the avoidance of social engagements on the move. Other interviewees also commented on the 'inward turn' and the absence of small, fleeting interactions, gestures or looks, making public transport travel a more 'individualized' experience, as articulated in the following:

Public transport has become less of a social place. (...) I think it has become more individualized, where you would smile to someone, for instance, a mother and a child, something like that. You don't see that, or you do that less easily. (...) It is less social, in that regard.

(Femke, passenger)

Public transport has not remained the social space it was before. Before the pandemic, I didn't mind to address someone to ask them something, but the pandemic has created a culture of 'mind your own business and mind yourself.'

(Lies, passenger)

Many public transport employees in particular, frequently voiced missing social interactions and the liveliness that the typical number of crowds would bring to their work day. Public transport employees who typically expressed enjoying engaging with passengers as a result of their job repeatedly commented on missing out on the everyday, small interactions and connections with people riding along their line.

In the middle of my conversation with Erik (a re-stationed bus driver turned Security and Information employee), a passenger comes up to us and asks for directions. As Erik shows directions, they both smile and laugh, making jokes about the misunderstanding of the correct metro route. They part, laughing, and Erik turns back to me and says: "that's what I love." I ask: "The interaction?", and he nods, still smiling.

(Field notes, 19.3.2021)

While this interaction between Erik and the passenger asking for directions amounts to a more animated interaction, many interviewees repeatedly reflected on the loss of the smaller, more overlooked forms of interaction that gave meaning to their experiences of traveling with others on public transport. For example:

I usually don't interact a lot with people in general, because I'm usually listening to music or reading a book or whatever. But I think that even if you would walk into a tram or the metro and you would see people just smiling at you or see facial expressions and I think that that's a part of life that is lost.

(Natalia, passenger)

You used to maybe have a quick little chat with somebody on the tram or something but now you're just all alone. Closed off. You can maybe try to smile with your eyes, but like I said, that whole layer of contact is lost.

(Anneke, passenger)

These examples express the more temporary, modest ways in which connections can take shape in meaningful ways between fellow passengers, while also highlighting the changes of distancing and masking requirements in public transport that impede connections through facial expressions, in this instance. These slight, often unnoticed or overlooked gestures, utterances and glances, extended hands and smiles inform the

'wholly active and co-managed' (Bissell, 2007, p. 285) sequences of social exchange and mobile interactions between people traveling together. While indifference often shapes mobile sociability and enables the 'getting along' of intense spaces of close proximity (Koefoed et al., 2017), temporary connections and slight everyday actions are significant processes through which meaningful contact with others transpire on the move. These 'micro-cues' (Tonnelat & Kornblum, 2017) not only construct a changed social order experienced under COVID-19 conditions, but make up the essential features of what underpins the formation of transient communities along our way. As these passages demonstrate, COVID-19 has altered the conditions of mobile socialities between passengers and employees, thus revealing a degree of sociability that is possible in spaces of public transport. It highlights that COVID-19 has changed this quality of public transport travel that many participants (passengers and public transport employees alike) repeatedly voice as a key characteristic of their daily mobility and work experience that is 'lost' or missed.

While some people admit to enjoying the calmness and peacefulness that the COVID-19 crisis has brought to spaces of public transport – an important social quality remains lost in the absence: a general sense of liveliness, mobile interactions, slight gestures and looks, and the ability to socialize, even in small, ephemeral ways with others on the move. From this we can draw that COVID-19 has produced different social experiences of public transport that are demonstrably less convivial in nature as expressed through the passages of this paper. What we therefore argue, is that in this exceptional state, the sociability of public transport is contested in a myriad of new ways that underscores the significance of public transport as a social space while also speaking to the value of public transport as 'social infrastructure' in cities (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017; Tonnelat & Kornblum, 2017).

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

For our interviewees, COVID-19 significantly impacted the social conditions of public transport use that many individuals voiced as a key aspect of their everyday mobility experience that was missed. Pandemic related restrictions impacted a range of physical, emotional, affective and social aspects of public transport that changed people's experience along both positive and negative lines. Some felt isolated or more lonely due to changes brought on by COVID-19 while also enjoying the comfort and additional spatial allowance that pandemic conditions created. A majority of interviewees felt that new norms and changes in the overall environment of public transport altered the social experience of daily travel making it less convivial. These findings suggest that beyond the function of public transport as vital physical infrastructure in cities, important social and emotional needs are supported and satisfied within its spaces, shedding light on the complex and vacillating connections people have with daily mobilities.

5.1. New social sensibilities: avoidance and care

Many interviewees described new relational embodied and spatial practices as a result of COVID-19 that changed their awareness for others and how to navigate spatial proximity and co-presence inside the spatially limited vehicles of public transport. This also

influenced many of our encounters with participants during fieldwork who reacted to being approached even at a distance with surprise and hesitation to engage in conversations. As many respondents remarked, maintaining distance and avoiding others revealed new undercurrents of respect and 'taking care' of each other by way of practicing responsibility for other people's safety. Our study supports that the physical avoidance of people also led to the avoidance of social interactions catalysed by new public practices resulting in more isolated and closed-off experiences of daily travel. As such, many of our initial encounters with participants in-field felt uncomfortable, as even the idea to speak to others and verbally approach people at a distance felt like subverting new social avoidance norms.

Nevertheless, these changes unveil new sensibilities of respect and care as part of ever-oscillating seat dramas and various placement tactics that in some instances became entangled with new distancing norms and pre-existing biases, hostilities and prejudices towards other passengers. Research has extensively engaged aspects of race and other visual markers of identity (Fleetwood, 2004; Koefoed et al., 2017; Shaker, 2021) and how experiences with 'Othered' bodies materialize through everyday, seemingly trivial public transport practices (Rokem & Vaughan, 2019). Perceived threats of raced bodies and otherwise marginalized individuals are inextricably embedded in mobile encounters that shape the affective atmospheres under COVID-19 and have become variously abused and policed.

It beckons the question for future research whether new norms of avoidance under COVID-19 might work to conceal racist undercurrents or other differentiative practices on the move under the guise of respect for other's safety. Certainly, the negative impacts of avoidance tactics remain pertinent in any context, including a global health crisis, where avoidance may be enacted to pathologize populations profiled as 'Other' hence shifting the vague yet powerful basis of rationale for social differentiation to a rationale for 'surveillance, control, and exclusion' (Craddock, 2000, p. 4). We emphasise that despite changed responsiveness towards 'care' during COVID-19, mobile interactions continue to carry historical embeddings and a myriad of fearful, violent, exclusionary, negative imaginaries that have undeniable material impact, even in passing.

5.2. Public transport as a space of connection

Many participants experienced different social experiences in public transport due to a loss of small, ephemeral connections, and a general inward turn and culture of 'keeping to one's self' that a majority of participants interpreted as being less convivial. These changes were expressed by many as contributors to a less collective and more individualized experience of daily mobility. In particular, a majority of public transport employees longed for several aspects of pre-COVID-19 working practices highlighting the boredom that the lack of crowds created, new norms of inattention and negative encounters with passengers. Not only does this indicate that several social needs are met and facilitated in public transport spaces, but it also destabilizes anti-social narratives of public transport and reductionist understandings of mobility as disutility or 'dead' time more widely (Aoustin & Levinson, 2021; Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2021, 2017).

Our findings also confirm the idea that distant, even 'rushed' social connections with others contributes to a greater sense of happiness, social wellbeing, and positive affects throughout journeys and seemingly meaningless interactions (Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). For many, it was the seemingly unremarkable and ordinary interactions – the smiles, extended hands, conversations and remarks which were missed the most. Like our findings show, people do not miss the overcrowding, or the anxieties relating to finding seating or available space along journeys, but they long for what the crowds mean for public transport: the dynamicity and aliveness, being in the general company of others, as well as the passing encounters and small interactions with different people that feed into feelings of togetherness and connectedness in public transport. This not only has broad implications for transport research to attend to how daily mobilities support the social needs of people, but also for transport planning and policy initiatives to leverage the function of transport spaces as social infrastructure in cities.

We contend that these changes to the social dynamics of public transport travel during COVID-19 produced less convivial experiences and formed different socialities on the move. Uncertain or reluctant encounters, unwanted corporeal proximity, hesitant manoeuvres and new sensibilities of avoidance and care, all point to a new variety of social interplay in public transport spaces that has stretched the ambit of what sociality looks like and means in the spaces that we share with others.

5.3. COVID-19, public space and mobile sociabilities? Beyond COVID-19

On the basis of our analysis, we argue that COVID-19 has raised the significance of public transport as public space by showing that in the absence of its normal rhythms, sensorial qualities and publics, public transport not only supports how we experience place, but its where we also, crucially, experience *people* and a sense of social connectedness. Public transport creates unique conditions of publicness and 'being with' (Bissell, 2010) others that extends far beyond mere co-presence in a defined space, but ones that are emotionally charged, lived and felt.

These changes also provoke reflection on how urban mobility will continue to look as the pandemic develops, and after. There are still valid concerns over the future of public transport in a post-COVID-19 world and how the sector can recover. These concerns touch important issues ranging from low carbon mobility transitions (Aloi et al., 2020; Nikolaeva et al., 2021; Sengupta et al., 2021) to transport justice and the changing composition of riders and widening gaps of transport injustice and inequality (Untokening, 2020).

For further research it might be interesting to follow the progress of public transport changes as cities re-open, and how sociabilities within spaces of urban transit will be encouraged or burdened through varying regimes of restriction. What social needs can public transport continue to support? How, if at all, can new embodied practices of 'care' and 'respect' generate more convivial and mutually inclusive experiences of public transport? Research that grants the opportunity to pursue and monitor these points, will certainly contribute helpfully to a far-reaching outlook on public transportation as a space where valued social connections unfold, vanish and impress upon us as we come and go.

Note

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