Why Travel?

Sociological Insights

Introduction

Sometimes travel confers status (the type of car you drive or travelling First Class) and at other times travel is a consequence of social status (travelling further and more often).

The latter has been the main topic of study by researchers and transport professionals. We now have a wealth of material illustrating the extent to which the factors by which we measure social class like personal and family income and employment opportunities influence travel patterns. Thus people have always wanted sunshine but this was only made possible by the appearance of budget airlines.

But we know less about the role of status in influencing travel choices — a problem well known to operators who struggle to persuade higher income groups to travel on bus and coach even when this is a sensible choice.

Of course there are other factors which can explain travel patterns such as age, gender and race but social class is still a powerful influence.

> *While the rich may have always set the standards, the actual social competition used to be played out largely at the neighbourhood level, among people in roughly the same class. In recent years as people have become increasingly isolated from their neighbours, a media barrage celebrating the toys and totems of the rich has fostered a whole new level of desire across class groups. The old system was keeping up with the Joneses, the new system is keeping up with the Beckhams*

(Professor Juliet B Shor, Chair of Sociology, Boston College)

In the film of Billy Liar based on the book by Keith Waterhouse (1959), Billy realizes that his status will be enhanced by leaving Leeds and travelling to London. Indeed it could be argued that transport policy in UK is dominated by the pull of London. In the end his more ambitious girlfriend makes it and the final scene of the film shows Julie Christie catching the train and Billy (the loser) played by Tom Courtney left behind.

Key Aspects

Travel choice and social status

Travel choice as effect is less well explored in the literature. We know the social status benefits of gap year and tourist travel with kudos stemming from second homes and distant and exotic destinations. Even at a more prosaic level social mobility can be affected by modes of travel and the ability to ignore the constraints of time, distance and cost. First class travel by train, internal flights in the UK or the casual use of taxis rather than public transport all involve social status rather than solely instrumental benefits. In which case travel in itself becomes an indicator of social status and enhanced social mobility. An interesting debate is currently taking place about the traditional role of the car as an indicator of status. As cities change driving becomes less attractive and even rather passé while consumers look of new symbols of status equally indicative of social class such as the type of smart phone, bicycle or trainers.

The interrelationship between transport and neighbourhood status

Travel opportunity is not just an indicator of individual social status. The social complexion of a local area can be directly enhanced by the quality of transport provision. The proximity of underground stations and rail terminals can increase the social capital of groups who might not necessarily qualify at the individual level. The interaction between the social status of a neighbourhood and travel provision can be seen in parallel with developments in schools, housing and job creation. Advances in area social mobility can produce a 'gentrification process' and certainly increase house prices. This in turn can squeeze out the original residents and undermine social cohesion. This aspect of the social equity impact of transport development is difficult to take into account when assessing the impact of new transport infrastructure as against the overarching need for capacity and regeneration. An example is the strong increase in house prices around the Jubilee Line extension.

Practical Implications

Travel choice

Research has shown that when people plan journeys, there are different 'styles' of travel choice ranging from very rational to habitual. These choice styles are closely related to social class with the more affluent groups generally making better informed decisions researching the best options and deals. As these choices become more complex it is likely that poorer people will miss out on travel opportunities and pay more pro rata.

Fair Transport Policies

Social scientists answer the question of 'why travel' in terms of lifestyle and social status. Understanding these issues is a prerequisite to developing fair transport policies and achieving behavioural change towards more sustainable transport.

Further Reading/Resources

Gary Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: a study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century Britain* (1966).
    The key text raising the importance of reference groups in defining social class and status.

Billy Liar (1959) Keith Waterhouse

DfT: Assessing Social and Distributional Aspects of Transport Appraisal (2009) http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/2009050515223C

Stephen Bayley, *Sex, Drink and Fast Cars* (1986)
    Raises the influence of design and status in transport choice.

Key Questions

Do new transport links always result in local housing becoming unaffordable and traditional jobs disappearing?

Does the ability to make rational transport choices vary by socio-economic factors?

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