

The effect of travel mode choice on social perceptions

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An urban road passes alongside a park. Three youths are in the park. Someone drives past in a car and sees 'a few lads who are up to no good'. A passenger on a bus that stops at the local stop notices them and wonders: 'What are they up to?' Someone walking past hears them making fun of each other.

This research examined the link between mode use and social perceptions in urban environments. It was hypothesised that in unfamiliar situations mode use can affect social perceptions through stereotype activation. In familiar places mode use is related to social perceptions by promoting (or reducing) intergroup contact.

Study 1. Stereotypes can be activated with very brief exposure but longer exposure can dissipate this effect (Kunda, Davies, Adams and Spencer, 2002). When people drive through an environment they usually have only very brief exposure to this environment, which is not the case when they walk. It is hypothesised therefore, that car use may result into more stereotypical views than walking. In an on-line experiment people ($n = 245$) were shown a brief video of a group of youths play-fighting in a park along an urban road. They saw this film from the perspective of a car passenger, a cyclist, a pedestrian or a bus user. Those who saw the video from a pedestrian perspective found the young people significantly less irritating ($F = 2.54$ (3,163), $p = .001$) and felt significantly more pleasant ($F = 5.10$ (3,165), $p = .002$) than those who were in a car. Car users also indicated that they felt more intimidated but this was not statistically significantly different.

Study 2. Intergroup contact can significantly improve intergroup relations (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). The amount of travel and mode use may therefore have a

significant impact on social perceptions. A survey ($n = 644$) in two very distinct neighbouring communities (low and high SES) examined social perceptions of the two areas. Regression analyses examined whether positive (e.g., I like the people, people like me live here) and negative views (e.g., people don't look after their property, there is loitering) of the two areas were related social contact (I talk to others, smile at others) and travel. In the low SES area positive views were significantly related to amount of walking and social contact and this was particularly strong for those who did not live in the area (adj $R^2 = .44$, $F = 28.12$ (11,438), $p < .001$). Similar, effects were found for negative views (adj $R^2 = .14$ ($F = 7.67$ (11,439), $p < .001$). For the high SES area travel and engagement was related to positive views only but this did not vary with residency (adj $R^2 = .33$ $F = 24.51$ (11,510), $p < .001$).

These findings have important practical implications for communities and society as a whole. Attempts to empower local people to take action and promote wellbeing and sustainability in their society are not going to be effective if such communities do not exist or are eroded by an increase in car use and a decrease in journeys on foot.

References

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