1956

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Recommended Citation

Grossack, Martin M. (1956) "Psychological Effects of Segregation on Buses," *Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science*: Vol. 9 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas/vol9/iss1/14>

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PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SEGREGATION IN BUSES

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At first glance it might appear that a psychologist should find a more significant topic to discuss than segregation in buses. Analysis reveals, however, that it has practical importance worthy of scientific attention.

During the past two years I have been part of a Negro community in the roles of teacher, participant observer, counselor, and researcher. Whenever segregations or race relations are discussed in classes, small freshman orientation groups, or in research interviews, the problem of bus segregation is spontaneously, intensely, and repeatedly brought to my attention. Certainly, for the Negroes, it has strong saliency and is evoked time and time again. As scientists aware of the importance of people's perceptions, the problem is quite real for the psychologists.

The Social Setting of Bus Segregation

Segregation in intra-state public transportation occurs within a social framework that legally condones racist ideology and discrimination. Segregation is socially normative, and deviating individuals -- especially Negroes -- soon experience the effects of social sanctions from Southern power figures.

The problem, then, must be considered in relation to the total social system. Through experiences in buses, children learn the role behavior demanded by Southern law. Were buses integrated, role conflicts would ensue, especially for those white children and adults not accustomed to contact of this type. Negroes

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ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

would probably adapt to integration in buses more quickly since their overt conformity is less often internalized. (4)

Segregated busses teach segregation as a way of life. Scientific and clinical evidence exists showing that segregation has unhealthy consequences for majority and minority. (1)(12) We can apply similar arguments to the bus situation.

Let us briefly consider the contention that equal facilities on a bus are not possible under the system of segregation. Any segregated behavior which is enforced by law cannot lead to equality in its psychological consequences. We find that whites can sit in the back in the bus without punishment, but Negroes cannot sit in the front. Often the back of the bus is less convenient and less comfortable.

Using the terminology of Lewin (7)(8), we can consider segregation as imposing a barrier to locomotion for the Negro on the bus. His child cannot sit near the driver and "be one, too." He must stand in the rear when there are empty seats in front. Psychologists know that barriers to locomotion are highly correlated with experiences of deprivation, goal blockage, and frustration. Further, responses to frustration are often unhealthy. So we have evidence that the practice we are discussing can have important consequences on Negro mental health.

The bus situation for the Negro, in Lewin's terminology, is one of conflicting forces, with the existence of a strong driving force (the bus takes him towards his goal in physical space), and weaker restraining forces (experiences of frustration when conforming), which contribute to the already existing Negro hostility.

We can also consider situations of overt discrimination psychologically different from those of subtle discrimination. Whenever the Negro performs his obligatory role behavior, a reminder of the caste system greets his consciousness. His rejection is

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SEGREGATION IN BUSES

constant. For Jews and Catholics discrimination cannot easily be predicted or verified. One might, therefore, predict more uncertainty in some situations for Jews and Catholics than for Negroes.

Some Psychological Effects of Segregated Buses on the Negro

As a frustrating situation, the segregates bus evokes responses from the minority that include:

1. Considerable passing by lighter-skinned individuals who seat themselves in the white section thereby impressing Negroes and deceiving whites.

2. Walking, as an expression of passive resistance.

3. Hostile feelings that quickly are suppressed, but function to increase inferiority feelings and a reaction-formation of deference.

4. Overt conformity, without internal compliance, which is related to Negro cynicism.

5. Feelings of anomie, apathy, defensiveness in interpersonal behavior with whites.

6. Self-disregard, usually at a non-conscious level.

7. Compensation by the acquisition of attention-getting automobiles at a cost above the individual's means.

8. Overt rebellion by sitting in the white section. This, though rare, has been occurring with increasing frequency, since bus drivers do not uniformly stop the bus or call a law enforcement officer. This last reaction seems somewhat more frequent in West Indian Negroes whose cultural background and self-evaluations differ markedly from native Southern Negroes.

Childhood memories and self-evaluation concerning segregated bus situations are frequent for the Negro. When asked how he or she learned about being a Negro the segregated bus often plays a prominent role in

ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

the response. "Mother yanked me to the back away from the whites," "I was slapped for wanting to go up front," "I couldn't be near the driver I wanted to watch," are typical comments.

Awareness of differential treatment is most acute with the segregated bus. You can't usually see two separate schools, two waiting rooms, or other facilities at the same time and make comparisons. But social comparisons are easily made for the Negro in the bus. Festinger has theorized a relationship between self-evaluation and social comparison.(4) The Negro, I maintain, learns to think less of himself through social comparisons made in situations of segregation. The segregated bus is the ideal situation to promote inferiority feelings since an individual can compare himself with both groups at once, check his comparisons, and recheck them as he rides. This may help explain the frequency of conversations among Negroes concerning their experiences in buses.

Negroes often describe their group membership negatively. They show frequent signs of inferiority and lack of self-confidence. Certainly they feel powerless and resentful of the bus situation. One child said: "There is not much for being a Negro. I would rather be called anything but that, but since I am one, I have to take it... One thing about being a Negro is you can't ride anywhere you want on trains, buses, or anything."(5)

Segregated buses have their effects on Negro cohesion. Negroes are forced to have contact with Negroes. There is a commonality of fate -- they are all in the same part of the bus. Friendships among Negroes would, we suspect, be facilitated by this condition. Hypotheses of Homans(6) and a study of Festinger and Kelley(4) support this contact theory of friendship formation,

How does this contact situation affect Negro-white relations? Existing friendships cannot be strengthened on the bus. Whites and Negroes can't say much

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SEGREGATION IN BUSES

to one another, and can't easily become friends when they are physically separated. Communications that would correct distorted perceptions, challenge rumors, or create friendships are highly unlikely. This barrier against communication is conducive to social tension and promotes autistic hostility as described by Newcomb.(10) Thibaut and Coules(14) have indicated how autistic hostility may be reduced through inter-personal communication.

It would be difficult to claim that segregated busses help improve Negro-white relations. An integrated situation would to some extent, provide opportunities for communication, and contribute to greater Negro-white harmony.

Effects of Segregated Buses on Whites

As we have seen, the segregated bus situation promotes false beliefs and distorted perceptions for whites as well as Negroes since it imposes on all individuals within the bus barriers to locomotion toward one another. Such locomotion is necessary for realistic social perceptions. As a reinforcing situation for segregated practices, the bus encourages the continuation of white extra-punitiveness and unconscious guilt such as described in(13). The white must remain defensive about the Negro and irrationally conform to a cultural tradition that even he sometimes questions.

Another consequence for the white is the continuance of racist thinking, which may predispose the individual to accept totalitarian ideologies and authoritarian practices. Segregation also helps to decrease the social sensitivity of the white, make his perceptions of people less discriminating, and decreases the likelihood of realistic perceptions of reality, described by Maslow(9) as characteristic of psychological health. It should be added that segregation affords immediate gains to many Negroes(11)

ARKANSAS ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

and most whites, especially in the economic, sexual, and prestige areas for the latter group.(2) Segregation in buses would seem to have unsound consequences for both white and Negro, and for society at large.

A survey cited in the recent Supreme Court decision on school segregation reports that 82% of the psychologists answering believed that enforced segregation under "equal conditions" harm the majority group; 90.4% believed that they harm the minority group.(1) Only 3.3% of the 272 psychologists interviewed believed that it does not detrimentally affect the majority, and 2.2% that it does not have unfavorable consequences for the segregated group.

In conclusion it may be stated that segregation in buses is part of the larger social framework of segregation. An attempt was made to indicate how separate but equal facilities are impossible in segregated buses, and how such situations have frustrating consequences for Negroes and affect their personalities, self-evaluations, and social relations. Consequences of segregation for whites and for the relations of the two groups were also presented.

Depth interviews, projective pictures of segregated bus situations, and play techniques using white and Negro respondents can provide evidence concerning the assertions presented. Possibly the significance of experiences on segregated buses in the development and reinforcing of inter-group attitudes and role behavior for both Negro and white will be greater than might be imagined.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SEGREGATION IN BUSES

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