

# To crash on the bus (or sit on needles and pins)? – buses and subways in teenage everyday geographies

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When young people travel, they are often very dependent on public transport or parents. This study uses interviews with 16–19 years old teenagers in Stockholm to investigate their everyday experiences of public transit. The paper explores the experiences of buses and subways, here conceptualized as *mobile places*, to understand how they shape teenagers' daily life. Understanding teenagers' experiences of public transportation is part of understanding their everyday life, struggles, and possibilities to be mobile and participate in society. It is also a step towards ensuring that they find public transportation inclusive, safe, and worth traveling with today and in the future. Conceptually, the analysis focuses on how these mobile places are experienced as providing *weights* or *reliefs* to the everyday and if, how and when they may be *places of interaction* or *retreat*, addressing two needs in teenagers' personal being and development. The study shows how various experiences of traveling with buses and subways shape how the teenagers feel, and how they make strategic choices in relation to this. A quite manifold, varying, and complex picture of public transportation arises, with stories of wellbeing, comfort, discomfort, and exclusion, and with sharp differences between girls and boys, and between buses and subways. These nuances are essential in planning and evaluation of transport systems in regard to how, when, where, or for whom public transport can be a part of social sustainability, as public policies often assume.

Keywords: teenagers, public transportation, experiences, Stockholm, mobile places

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## Introduction

I enjoy the bus because I like to sit for a while. And it's just quiet. [...] After school, when I am tired, I just want to sit for a quarter and rest. (Girl, 17 years old)<sup>1</sup>

Eh well, it has happened a few times that men have groped me. Since then there is a discomfort to travel by subway. I don't dare. (Girl, 16 years old)

Most of us spend time on travels each day, on getting from one place to another. It is often said that traveling is part of the fabric of everyday life and of being able to take part in society (Jarvis *et al.* 2001). If traveling is all of that, it is crucial to understand how various people and groups in society, with different backgrounds, conditions, and needs and in different contexts, can and do travel, and how they experience it. Young people are largely dependent on parents and well-functioning public transport for their everyday travel and participation in society (Barker *et al.* 2009). They may, therefore, be severely affected by public transportation and how it works (or does not work) for them. Nevertheless, what well-functioning public transport is may vary between people, and the experiences of traveling can be very different and shifting.

This paper focuses on public transportation and the various experiences of it for young people, or, more specifically, teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19. It uses Stockholm, Sweden, as a case. Official travel surveys show that young people (in the ages of 16–24 years) travel more by public transportation, and less by car than any other age group in Stockholm. 59% of their travels are done by public transportation, compared to 36% for 25–39-year-olds and 28% for 40 to 64 year-olds (Stockholm county administration 2016). How teenagers experience public transportation, and the differences in this is, therefore, a crucial part of understanding their everyday life, struggles, and possibilities to participate in society. To explore this, the paper asks the following questions: in what various ways are buses and subways experienced by teenagers? How do they, as places, shape how teenagers move and feel? What reliefs and weights do these places present to the everyday life? What may they be and mean to teenagers, and importantly, what differences are there, in terms of various users, vehicles, and contexts?

The paper lies at the nexus of mobility and place, as it explores places of mobility. Travel is a way of inhabiting space and constructing places. Mobility, Adey (2010, 73) argues, "does not necessarily serve to threaten an attachment to place. For a route well-traveled may over time turn into a meaningful place, just like the places or the nodes at either end of the route". In the last decades, the need to go beyond perceiving traveling time as dead time, and instead engaging in the corporeal and social experiences of mobility and to conceptualize buses and trains as places than only modes of traveling, has been emphasized in some literature dealing with mobility (see for example Symes 2007; Jiron 2009; Jensen 2009; Bissell 2016; Holton & Finn 2018). This article follows and adds to these thoughts by exploring and showing various experiences of *mobile places* and how they shape how teenagers move and feel. It is an engagement with buses and subways as places to uncover the diversity of what they can be and do. This includes exploring variations in terms of different users, modes of transportation, and various social, temporal and spatial contexts, and how that shapes mobile places, and what they may provide to their users.

The analysis focuses mainly on how mobile places, such as buses and subways, and situations in the public transportation system are experienced, in terms of putting *weights* or *reliefs* on everyday life (Friberg *et al.* 2004). This is studied to understand how mobile places influence and are influenced by everyday experiences, which may range from wellbeing, comfort, and inclusion to malaise, discomfort, and exclusion. Moreover, the paper analyzes this to explore if, when, and how the public transportation system provides its users with places for *social interaction* and *retreat*, two vital needs in teenagers' personal development and wellbeing (Lieberg 1995). In being such everyday places, the characteristics and functioning of public transportation modes can both help and hinder daily life. Studying this, and the places of public transportation as part of that, is particularly important in regard to young people. As a group, they are not only more dependent on this mode of transport compared to grown-ups. They also rarely own or have power over places to socialize in or withdraw to and are less free and uncontrolled in both private and public spaces (Lieberg 1995; Childress 2004).

Showing how teenagers experience mobile places, and the consequences of that, tap into two important matters that Nairn and Kraftl (2016, 20) argue need more recognition, namely young peoples' right to space and to mobility. It is also about the present and the future. Understanding teenagers' experiences of traveling is a way to engage in their wellbeing and needs in the here and now. There are several benefits of public transportation for teenagers, and society. Besides enabling travel and participation in school and activities, public transportation, if working, can support socialization, identity formation, encounters of difference, more equal opportunities, independence,

and wellbeing (Barker *et al.* 2009; Devaux & Oppenchain 2013; Skelton 2013; Goodman *et al.* 2014). However, understanding teenagers' experiences of public transportation may also create insights regarding how to work towards increased use of collective modes of mobility, instead of the use of individual and space consuming cars, today and in the future. The teenagers of today are the adults of tomorrow. As Grimsrud and El-Genedy (2014) argue, people who use public transportation early in life seem to be more inclined to keep doing it as adults.

### **Public transport and the mobility of teenagers**

Research shows a growing interest in *young people*, up to around 25 years old, and in their geographies (Skelton & Valentine 1998; Evans 2008; Hopkins 2013) and mobilities (Barker *et al.* 2009; Skelton 2013; Hurni 2015; Ni Laoire *et al.* 2017). Literature that specifies in teenagers, often defined as those who fall within the ages of 13 and 19, is only a smaller part of this growing interest (Weller 2006). I will therefore take a somewhat larger grip in this literature section. Like much work on mobility, studies on mobility of young people are often based on quantitative methods focusing on mobility patterns. Moreover, many studies have shown barriers for travelling, and variations in terms of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, urban/rural location, corporal ability *et cetera* (van Vliet 1983; Tyrrell & Harmer 2015; Cope & Lee 2016; Pyer & Tucker 2017). Overall, the literature has made apparent that young people tend to be dependent on the resources of the parents and a functioning public transportation system to travel to and take part in essential spheres of society, from school to social activities.

Studies have put less focus on teenagers' own traveling experiences and to dig deeper, with more qualitative approaches, into why they travel as they do. However, some studies have analyzed young peoples' experiences of safety, risk, and other obstacles in traveling (Cops 2013; Currie *et al.* 2013; Ocejo & Tonnelat 2014). This research reflects investigations into how young people experience risk in public space in general, showing young women experiencing (or at least expressing) more risk and fear in public space compared to young men (Watt & Stenson 1998; Johansson *et al.* 2012). Studies on public transport and women (but not specifically teenagers) show that women experience more fear and risk compared to men and that they tend to change their behavior more because of that (Koskela 1999; Yavuz & Welch 2010; Gardner *et al.* 2017).

Fewer studies have analyzed more positive or constructive experiences of public transportation for young people, but some studies have shown or pointed towards the importance of public transit for socializing, freedom and development of identity and independence (Symes 2007; Jones *et al.* 2012; Skelton 2013; Goodman *et al.* 2014; Holton & Finn 2018). For example, young people may experience mobility as providing opportunities and freedom, as "a means of opening up interstitial spaces beyond surveillance and possibly outside conventional norms of behavior (as perceived by parents and authority)" (Porter *et al.* 2010, 803). The journey to and from school can be a breathing space and somewhere where young people can try out identities and their autonomy beyond parents or teachers watchful gaze (Symes 2007; Valentine 2000). Devaux and Oppenchain (2013) write about mobility as an essential part of teenagers' encounters with the public domain and of the socialization of teenagers where they as individuals test and learn behaviors and ways of being (also Cops 2013). This paper follows that line of research and extends it as it also takes experiences like stress, fear, and other barriers into account. It does this to grasp the complexities of what public transportation places may be in everyday life of teenagers. What these works open up for, although rarely focus on or mainly analyze, is the possible crucial functions of mobile places for teenagers in terms of being places of interaction and retreat.

### **Places of interaction and retreat**

In an exploration of teenagers' appropriation of space, Lieberg (1995) analyzes this in regard to their needs for places of interaction and retreat. Social interaction and retreat are often considered two primary needs in the personal being and development of adolescents. In enabling *social interaction*, specific environments can support identity formation and well-being and provide essential learning experiences for adolescents' social competence and how to interact with people and the surrounding

(Spencer & Woolley 2000; L'Aoustet & Griffet 2004; Pyry & Tani 2015). Furthermore, studies have shown the importance of using specific environments as a *retreat*. Such restorative places may enable individuals to be alone, get away from the overwhelm of everyday life, organize thoughts and feelings, and reduce stress (Korpela 1992; Clark & Uzzell 2005). Lieberg (1995) pinpoints two purposes for *places of interaction*; they enable the teenager to withdraw from the adult world and to be with peers, and they allow the teenager to encounter the adult world through social involvement. In contrast, *places of retreat* are used for avoiding other people, adults but sometimes also other teenagers, to unwind. Furthermore, he explains places of interaction by Goffman's (1963) concept of the *front stage*, where teenagers can show themselves off to a passing audience and also try out different behaviors. Places of retreat relate to more of a *backstage* where teenagers can withdraw when they have had enough of being on show.

Most studies on young people and their considered crucial places focus on four types of spaces; the home, school, the neighborhood (with parks/green areas, sports facilities and other meeting-places) and the town (Korpela 1992; Matthews *et al.* 2000; Clark & Uzzell 2005; Pyry & Tani 2015). Although many of these studies have an urban population and setting, we should not forget rural youth who also use these kinds of spaces and out of necessity may create other meeting places (Haartsen & Strijker 2010; Leyshon 2011). However, several researchers point to the need to focus on young people's lives beyond the more 'taken-for-granted' places (Matthews *et al.* 1998; Nairn *et al.* 2003). Vanderstede (2011), for example, shows the importance of bus and railway stations for teenagers as supralocal meeting points that reach beyond their school. By focusing on places of teenagers' everyday mobility, I want to contribute to that going beyond the 'taken-for-granted'.

### Everyday mobile places

A bus or a train needs to be treated as "a place in and of itself" (Letherby & Reynolds 2005, 7). In grasping buses and subways as *mobile places*, as places on the move, the paper ties into the attention of the intertwinedness of mobility and immobility. More and more studies on mobility have turned the focus to places, mooring, stillness, and relative immobility (Adey 2010; Bissell & Fuller 2010; Hannam *et al.* 2006). Because mobility is a "situated event" taking place somewhere (Jarvis *et al.* 2001, 10). It is much more and does much more than only transportation. As we travel, we shape, inhabit, and are shaped by, the places we travel in. They become sites of work, interaction, relaxation, and shelter (Jensen 2009; Benediktsson *et al.* 2018). For example, a growing number of studies have argued for seeing public transportation as sites of public engagement in and of themselves, positioning them as crucial places for encounters with difference that can result in both conviviality and dialogue and in differentiation, intolerance and exclusion (Jiron 2009; Wilson 2011; Purifoye 2015, Bissell 2016; Koefoed *et al.* 2017).

A place can be regarded as a specific configuration of certain social practices, meanings, and material dimensions. Places are relational and contextual, situated in contexts and related to other places and times, and they are forever in processes of being (re)shaped by people and shaping people (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 2005; Simonsen 2008). Buses and subways are stimulating to think about as places. In some ways, they are quite static and similar, in some parts of their materiality. Nevertheless, they are also changing and dynamic in terms of their social interior and their spatial contexts. That movement is part of their function and characteristics. This, together with the dynamic setting of users and contexts and the continuous and tangible opening and shutting of outer boundaries (the doors), sets this kind of place a bit apart from other places. Benediktsson and colleagues (2018, 14) conceptualize the particular type of places that subways and other mobile places of public transportation are by sharing traits like "prolonged co-presence with a multitude of strangers; lengthy periods of unscripted and unstructured time; and a shared purpose that requires a degree of behavior coordination".

Whereas most studies that analyze placeness of mobility do this in regard to grown-ups or in general, less focus has been given to such places in younger peoples' everyday life (but see Symes 2007; Jackson 2012; Goodman *et al.* 2014; Oejo & Tonnelat 2014; Ponto 2017). This paper tries to bring more attention to this by exploring what such places actually can be and mean for teenagers.

Conceptualizing them as places is a way to move beyond seeing them as insignificant, meaningless points or empty vessels transporting human beings from A to B. It is a way to get further into how they may shape our experiences in the everyday. This means focusing on what they can provide, set up, and change, in terms of social and corporeal experiences of interaction and retreat, comfort and discomfort. And in terms of experiences of inclusion and exclusion, safety and fear, harassment and joy, independence and dependence. The paper focuses on the lived experiences of teenagers in the mobile places of public transportation. This points us to what Lefebvre (1991, 39, 42) in his emphasis on the importance of everyday termed "lived" spaces. The term captures the world as human beings in their everyday life experience it, a lived situation that embraces emotions, thoughts, and actions of a user of a place.

### **Weight and relief**

So, this paper deals with public transportation with a focus on the lived experiences of the places where the traveler is more or less still while traveling. It does so by investigating how teenagers experience these mobile places and if/when they provide *retreat* and *social interaction* (and not). However, social interaction may not always be experienced as something positive, and the experiences of these mobile places include more than these two dimensions. Thus, two other concepts have influenced my analysis. In a study of mobility practices and experiences from a gender perspective, Friberg, Brusman and Nilsson (2004) use the concepts of *weight* (Sw. *tyngd*) and *relief* (Sw. *avlastning*), instead of the more commonly used terminology of constraints and enablement, to analyze how built infrastructure influences everyday life.

These concepts can be used to grasp how characteristics of mobile places (material as well as social and emotional) can be experienced as putting weight onto and limiting everyday life and as helping, freeing, and relieving it. They give openness and richness in nuances that are needed to understand the experiences. Compared to concepts of barriers and enablers, or something being negative or positive, weight and relief give a more open-ended, gradated, and diverse way of understanding experiences and situations. One can experience something as putting weight onto the everyday even though it does not make it uncrossable, which the term barrier points to. To experience something as a relief does not necessarily mean that it is fully enabled or possible, just that there is some ease to a situation. There is also a fluidity to the concepts. One can experience something (a person, a solitude) as both adding weight and relief, or as shifting between. Being in one place can be partly weight and partly relief at the same time. They are not automatically exclusive.

While Lieberg's (1995) notions of places of interaction and retreat is a way to analyze the mobile places in terms of what they may provide or be to their users, using weight and relief is a way to juggle and explore the experiences of these mobile places, which adds to the understanding of what these places are or can be. Thus, combining these concepts is, for me, a way to understand weights and reliefs as well as interaction and retreat in more ways. Together they open up possibilities to see nuances and ambiguities of mobile places and a way to cut the material in different ways, like lifting how one can experience a place of social interaction as providing weight as well as relief. The paper will contribute to how we think about teenagers' everyday mobilities. It does so by providing a qualitative analysis of experiences of public transportation where existences of weights as well as of reliefs are taken into account and analyzed through exploring buses and subways as multifaceted and varying places of retreat and social interaction. This has rarely been studied together before, and in particular not regarding teenagers.

### **Exploring teenage experiences of mobile places in Stockholm**

The analysis builds on 47 interviews with teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 from four upper secondary schools in Stockholm County. In 2016, I conducted 27 interviews with teenagers from two schools in the southern suburbs of Stockholm. They came mainly from residential areas that can be classified as more socio-economically vulnerable than average, with a high percentage of low-income families (Penje & Wimark 2017). In 2017, I conducted 20 interviews at two other schools with teenagers

living mainly in more average or affluent residential areas, around the city center and in nearby suburbs south and west of inner Stockholm. There was a relatively even gender distribution within the material. Of 47 individuals, nine were born abroad and 38 in Sweden. 24 of the respondents have at least one parent who is born abroad.

While I have discussed mobility patterns and variation in terms of geographical and socioeconomic factors based on this material elsewhere (Lagerqvist & Forsberg 2017; Lagerqvist in progress), this paper has another focus. It digs much more into understanding the experiences of buses and subways as mobile places and how they shape teenagers' lives. In this, mainly gender differences have stood out and will therefore be discussed. Therefore, ethnicity and socioeconomic position are not specific dimensions in the analysis, besides being part of constructing a diverse group of respondents. However, it should be noted here that ticket prices may affect teenagers' mobility (Goodman *et al.* 2014). The price never came up as an explanation to how the respondents were traveling. However, about half of the teenagers have more than six kilometers to school and receive a free ticket for the public transportation system. The rest have a reduced cost as non-adults. The cost of traveling is the same within the whole system.

All in all, the analysis covers teenagers living in a range of different residential areas with variations in terms of socioeconomics, location, and public transport structure. Teenagers are not a homogenous group, neither worldwide nor within Stockholm, but a group with various identities, interests, and experiences (Matthews *et al.* 2000; Weller 2006). However, some commonalities frame the lives of the teenagers in this study. All of them are still in school, live with a parent/parents in Stockholm and use the same public transportation system.

The semi-structured interviews focused on how they move in the everyday and the experiences of different modes of traveling. As part of this, the respondents constructed maps. These maps opened up the dialogue and gave it a stronger spatial dimension but were not used in the analysis for this paper. The analysis and knowledge production are grounded in how the respondents themselves describe and interpret their experiences. This is a way to give voice to individuals within an age group that often becomes hidden between what is seen as children and as adults (Weller 2006). It is a group "whose experiences, behaviors and attitudes are usually misrepresented, often demonised and frequently distorted." (Hopkins 2013, 2). Specifically, the paper tries to show the teenagers' own words and explanations through quotations.

In the paper, the term experience refers to sensed events as well as to the accumulation of knowledge or wisdom gained from those events. By using interviews, I rely on the respondents' mediation of their experiences of mobile places. Another way of studying this would have been to use mobile methods, like traveling along, combined with interviews (e.g. Jiron *et al.* 2016). This would have provided ways into both aspects of the experiences. For practical reasons, only interviews at school were possible. The interviews were set up after contact with teachers. I got a chance to meet several classes and interview quite large sections of them during lecture time and many wanted to participate. The interviews were voluntary, anonymous, and the teenagers were allowed to terminate whenever they wanted, but no one did.<sup>2</sup>

The case of Stockholm provides an example of how urban teenagers relate to public transportation in a Nordic city, which is a less examined geographical context in the field of young people and public transport (but see Honkatukia & Svnarenkob 2019). It provides an example of a context where the social status and use of public transportation, and specifically the bus, is not being regarded as low social status. It is commonly used throughout larger parts of the social strata of society. This differs from the use and position portrayed in many of the internationally disseminated studies on public transportation, which often come from the US, UK, and Australia (e.g. Hutchinson 2000). The transportation service in Stockholm is accessible and developed compared to more rural public transportation services. A study on rural teenagers would possibly bring other weights and reliefs of public transportation.

### **“Watch the doors, doors are closing”: entering into the empirical material**

The following sections will show both relieving and weight burdening, and both pausing and interacting, experiences of travel and mobile places, and how this differs between different places, contexts, and travelers. Importantly, most of the respondents use public transportation on an everyday basis to get to school and to move about in the city. These mobile places are thus everyday places, and for many of the respondents also places difficult to avoid altogether, even if they sometimes can make some choices regarding the mode of transportation.

#### *To crash on the bus: Places of retreat and experiences of relief*

It's great to sit there [on the bus] and just be. It is much less stressful than the subway. You can sit and be on your own. I enjoy looking out the window. (Girl, 18 years old)

Ok, so, it depends. If I'm tired, then I'll take the bus. But if I just want to get everything over with quickly and I'm not tired but have energy, then I can take the train. (Boy, 17 years old)

In the narrative of the bus, the respondents clearly express the relieving nature of public transport in terms of providing places of retreat. They describe the relief of the bus as that it offers calm. Many talk about the bus being particularly preferred when they are tired. The bus is also deemed a place of retreat and as giving relief as or when it provides an opportunity for a less divided traveling, and therefore a lengthier period of calm. Fragmentation is one aspect of the experiences of how public transport can put weight on the everyday (Friberg *et al.* 2004). Respondents talk about choosing the bus or certain buses, even when the ride will be longer if it means fewer changes:

For me, it is easier to sit on the bus for a longer distance, like 50 minutes, than change and run between trains [...]. I can relax. (Boy, 18 years old)

The bus is also reinforced as a calmer place by how the teenagers choose to travel further by bus instead of a faster, but fragmented, travel by subway. Furthermore, almost all respondents listen to music on their phones while traveling. They describe it as a way of escaping the sounds of people and the city that surrounds them. The intensive use of phones, combined with headphones, can be understood as a way to maintain an integrity and bodily autonomy during the journey. It provides some relief, and retreat, from the rather stressed existence that young people may live in and travel in public transport can be.

Doing things with the phone, listening to music. I unplug the various sounds around, as well. People are yelling and screaming. Everything is so loud. (Boy, 18 years old)

It is so great to sit on a bus by a window and listen to music. (Girl, 19 years old)

The calmness of the bus seems to be created by the smaller number of people in and around buses, which, however, is time dependent. Several respondents emphasize that buses at times are overcrowded, and hence provide less or no relief. The respondents also say that the bus offers a small-scale environment that feels protected and cozy. It is easier to keep track of what is happening and the others traveling there. This gives a sense of security, a relief that is also enhanced by knowing that there is a present, contactable driver within the same place.

I feel safe on the bus. It's narrow, or kind of tight [...] and you can see everything. In the subway, it is difficult to see what's happening. It is wider and a lot of people. So the bus is nice. (Girl, 17 years old)

I like to go by bus, even though it is not at all the most efficient. You have to take into account queues and... well, the subway is the fastest. But the bus is much more comfortable, you can sit alone, and it is cozy. (Girl, 18 years old)

The bus is the mode of transport that is the most popular in general. Over half of the respondents prefer the bus, especially the girls. But this group is broad and diverse and includes boys and girls living centrally and far away and from socio-economically disadvantaged areas as well as more affluent ones.

The subway, on the other hand, is highlighted as relieving in totally different ways, mainly because of its speed, convenience, and reliability. It makes the traveler part of a more extensive interconnected system where many locations are accessible, and often and easily reached:

I think the subway is the best. It's the fastest way to go. And there is order, regular departures, and arrivals. (Boy, 18 years old)

With the bus, you can get stuck in traffic for hours. With the subway, there are fewer problems. It rolls all the time. And it is much faster. It just feels more harmonious. (Boy, 18 years old)

Thus, mobile places construct or enable immobility within their mobility, some more than others. Above all, the bus appears as a distinct place of retreat. It is a place where you can think and listen to music, read, or stare out the window. It is also a place for being on your own, to sit alone, and to be able to use your cell phone without anyone watching over you. These backstage aspects of the bus are often put in contrast to the subway or school, where the respondents find that they cannot relax or be in the same way.

Just by being a place away from school and parents, mobile places can be places of retreat. Several also raise the relief in not depending on parents to travel within the city. The highlighting of mobile places as places for independence, solitude and being away from parents or others should not be read as a move or strive towards, or idealization of, total individual travelling or independence from everyone (see the critique of the idea of youth as a linear transition into adult independence, Evans 2008). The mode of traveling here is collective and frequently done in company with friends (as will be shown later).

So, the bus seems to be able to provide pauses in everyday life. However, this depends on the prevalence of crowding, stress, discomfort, and fear. Riding a bus or subway during peak hours is something different from doing it on a Monday evening. Riding it in the middle of the city is different from doing it on the outskirts of the system. In the stories of the respondents, the bus as a place of retreat and intense relief where one may actually rest, is tied to travels mainly outside the city center. Descriptions of the bus as a place of retreat with reliefs related to listening to music or just being alone, is less connected to a specific context and time, and something that can happen on subways as well.

### *Weights and the non-retreatness of mobile places*

However, others perceive the small-scaleness of the bus as a weight, and consequently, less of a place that provides a pause. They experience that the bus easily gets crowded and hot, a place where you feel trapped. Some perceive the bus as altogether slow, that it takes a lot of time and can get stuck in traffic. The quote below illustrates the subway as much more helping or relieving while the bus is considered putting weight onto the everyday travel.

The subway is the fastest. The bus travels by lots of buildings and streets where you don't need to go. The subway goes directly to the center. That's why it's better. Smoother. (Boy, 17 years old)

Here the bus induces feelings of limited freedom of movement. It takes time from you. It takes you on redundant paths and gets you caught. Delays are a heavy weight of buses. This affects the efficiency of transportation but also the experience of it. Moreover, it affects schoolwork. Several describe difficulties in getting to school in time and difficulties in planning the rest of their lives.

The bus is often late. Or, it always comes too late. It's odd when it arrives on time! And sometimes it does not come at all. (Girl, 17 years old)

However, the subway is the mode of travel that is most intensely described as unfavorable and avoided. This relates to experiences of bodily restraints and disturbances because many people use the subway. Therefore, it is often crowded, warm, dirty, and stressing.

Sometimes it is crowded. Sometimes it is smelly. Sometimes the seats are dirty. You just don't feel very good there. (Boy, 17 years old)

The overarching portrayal regarding the subway as weight is that (or when) it is a crowded place filled with stressed people, or with people you would like to avoid. Thus, it may be a place where one

barely can stand or breathe, but also a way too social place. I will get back to the latter soon. One thing to add here is that despite the negative experiences of the subway and the individual preference for the bus, it is still the mode of transport that many of the respondents pinpoint as the best to have to in neighborhood generally.

### *Places of social interaction*

None of the respondents portray the subway as a quiet retreat. However, they describe it as a social place, a place for friends to travel together, like an extended party, which also can provide relief and restoration in life. Subways, as well as buses, are experienced as places for social interaction. The respondents often refer to them as places where they socialize, virtually or physically, with friends.

I'm just sitting [on the subways] and thinking about stuff, or doing things on my phone, writing to friends. (Boy, 16 years old)

Sometimes I take the bus to the subway. Not because I need it, it is just one stop, but I do it to catch up with some friends that take that bus. (Girl, 18 years old)

While traveling with public transport, the surroundings may be encountered directly, like talking to the person next to you on the bus. It can also be encountered more indirectly or passively, like not talking but rather taking in what is happening on the bus or subway, or outside the window. This may offer different kinds of socializing, as well as various types of pauses or retreats. Similarly to how L'Aoustet and Griffet (2004) describe how teenagers are hanging out in a park in Marseille, the places of public transport seem to provide opportunities for meeting or gazing at new people as well as intense moments with friends. Mobile places can be, similar to Cele's (2013) interpretation of parks in young girls' lives, places of social life as well as solitude. It can range and oscillate between front and backstage. Here I am also reminded of Benediktsson and colleagues (2018, 14) conceptualization of subways as offering "a passive form of flânerie – a mild and reflective form of curiosity about fellow passengers". A public place like the subway or the bus may be a place where one can be alone together with others. In a way, riding on a bus or a subway might make one dispatched from the outside world, distanced by glass, metal, and movement. However, the interviews expose that being inside a mobile place makes the traveler very much part of other, more or less fleeting, social situations, for better or worse.

### *To sit on needles and pins: places of problematic social interaction*

So, the bus and the subway are described as social places where young people interact with friends and keep up with social life. Thus, these mobile places seem to be able to function as enabling places that can provide social interaction as well as a refuge, where the teenagers can exist in a relatively undisturbed and independent manner with themselves or others. Nevertheless, here we must dig a bit further into what has been hinted at earlier in the material. Because occasionally, sometimes and for some more than others, these are places lined with frictions. There is stress, disturbance, and anxiety coming from sounds, smells and dirt as well as from public flows and unpleasant and threatening people. But not only from the streams of people. Many respondents also speak of being edged by the emptiness or near emptiness of mobile places.

In particular, it becomes clear that the reliability of the subway, which stands out as a relief regarding geography and time, does not apply to the subway as a social place. The reliability and effectiveness of the subway open it for the use of the great mass, which also can turn it possibly more fearsome. Many of the respondents describe the subway as rowdy and unpleasant because of some of its users and how they behave, especially during nights and weekends.

The subway is just too loud. People are just shouting and making a lot of noise. Especially if you go during evenings and nights when everyone is drunk. (Girl, 17 years old)

A severe burden that emerges in the material is tied to men (sole or in groups) and alcohol, and to foremost sexual but also racist harassments. Several teenagers describe experiences that have

affected their sense of security, integrity, and willingness to travel during specific times or with particular parts of the system of public transport:

Sometimes there are like older guys who are drunk and they are like...you know, saying and doing things. So it is not the subway's fault, but in my position, it is kind of scary. And I do think a lot of people are feeling like that. (Girl, 17 years old)

The subway is the main place in the accounts of physical and social discomfort and harassment. It is also a place that is avoided, in particular at certain times and situations. As these experiences show, traveling becomes a heavy weight in the everyday of the teenagers. Here, places like the subway become a constraint in and to their mobility and being in space.

Mobile places are places that are sometimes open, sometimes shut, in the sense that actual doors are closing the place for a certain time. This makes the internal material setting of the place quite robust for a while, although the social atmosphere can change within seconds depending on events and tensions. One can be stuck with the seats, the air, and the neighbors, and one minute later one can be off and somewhere else. Moreover, just as the experiences of the bus as a place of retreat differ some in terms of when and where the trip is taken, there are variations regarding mobile places as places of interaction. The social composition of riders is unsurprisingly the most substantial component, although this often also is tied to the time of the day. Also, distance from home or known places were sometimes mentioned as shaping the experience of the mobile place and its crowd, or indeed emptiness, of travelers.

### *The continuation of something we already knew*

The interviews show gendered differences regarding how different mobile places are perceived. For example, most girls appreciate the bus more than the subway, while the benefits of the subway are almost only lifted by boys. When the boys talk about discomfort, it has to do with experiences of congestion, disgust, dirt, and smells. The girls express, over and over again, bodily vulnerability and discomfort from other travelers, especially in the subway. They say that they choose to travel by bus to a much greater extent, although it takes more time because it feels safer. Most of the girls I talked to, regardless of where they live and their socioeconomic position, feel uncomfortable and unsafe at public transport places occasionally and adopt their mobility practices because of that. This is not new. Women's fear and adaptations in public space and transportation are something that research and official reports have pointed out for several years and harassments are widely reported in the literature, particularly for women and members of marginalized groups (Yavuz & Welch 2010; Gardner *et al.* 2017; Söderström *et al.* 2019). It is important to acknowledge that it continues to be like that. However, it is also crucial to point out that the experiences do vary in terms of the type of mobile place, location, and time.

There is always that thought in the back of my mind, what if someone groped me? More specifically, it is in connection to soccer games...that's when I feel discomfort. I don't like being around then, after a game. Then I definitely avoid going with public transportation. (Girl, 17 years old)

Sometimes during the evenings, I feel uncomfortable with riding buses and the subway, as people are drunk and loud. Especially, I try to be careful about not riding the subway then (Girl, 16 years old)

Feelings of discomfort and insecurity may lead to what Church, Frost and Sullivan (2000) term *fear-based exclusion*, a type of exclusion that women and people of minorities in particular often are affected by. Experiences of fear affect how and where people travel and stay, as individuals tend to try, when possible, to avoid risks (Koskela 1999). In the end, this shapes what kind of public places we are left with. Also worth emphasizing here is that young people, as well as minorities and women, are groups that have been identified as more dependent on public transportation, making all forms and tendencies of exclusion, avoidance and discomfort even more problematic (Carter 2005; McCray & Brais 2007).

However, there is another aspect to raise here. Goodey (1997, 411) argues that men seem to be less likely to show weakness and to talk about being afraid or feeling insecure. A few of the respondents acknowledged at first that they felt unsafe. It was only girls who admitted it from the

start. However, as the interviews continued, it became apparent that both girls (to a large extent) and boys (to a somewhat lesser extent) had experienced discomfort and insecurity during their travels. So, while teenagers often are seen as unwanted and as one of the causes of fear and crime in public spaces (Matthews *et al.* 2000), this study shows a lot of experiences and feelings of insecurity and fear among teenagers, predominantly related to what they see as "older men". As Cresswell (2006, 199) puts it "The way people are enabled or constrained in terms of their mobile practices differs markedly according to their position in social hierarchies". Age, as well as gender and other positions play roles in these hierarchies.

However, I also want to highlight that the teenagers do make active and reflective choices regarding how to travel. Here we see their agency and ability to influence their movement through, and being in, space. How they travel can be understood in terms of that they developed what Kesselring (2006, 270) terms "mobility strategies", which shows how individuals "navigate through social, material, and virtual worlds". While several of the respondents state that they adjust their ways of traveling, like avoiding the subway during nighttime, others challenge their fears and travel anyway. As Hurni (2015, 22) has pointed out, "young people are negotiating their everyday mobilities in more complex ways and at multiple scales than is often attributed to them".

### Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to dig deeper into teenagers' experiences of public transport to understand how its places matter for this group of passengers. What can we learn from this study? The specificity of teenage mobile place-making does not so much lie in a very uniqueness of *how* they use or create places. What makes it significant to study specifically is that we need to acknowledge teenagers as worthy of attention instead of ignoring them or assuming that they are entirely different from, or the same as, adults. Also, there is the extra layer to the meanings and influences these everyday places can have for teenagers because they, in general, and compared to adults, have fewer other places of their own. And because they are more dependent on public transportation to be part of society. Insights of their experiences provide us with possibilities to work towards ensuring that teenagers find public transportation inclusive, safe and worth traveling, and keep on using it in the future. However, studies on young people should be not be seen as an isolated debate (Skelton & Valentine 1998; Weller 2006). This paper shows teenagers' experiences of public transportation places, but it can also offer broader insights. Insights that point to how or what these public mobile places may be for other groups in society, to those who have more access to places they can call their own and, more importantly, to those who lack that (like lacking a home, see Jackson 2012).

A contribution of the study is that it highlights the different values or meanings of public transport by showing when and how it enables and improves life, as in creating well-being, pauses, interaction and feelings of accessibility, flow and security. And when and how it turns into providing weight, discomfort, and barriers. Many research articles focus on one or the other (such as risk or social interaction), an either/or perspective that might be a result of a press and need of generating many publications. But I think there is a strength in showing the ambiguity, nuances, and variability that these places seem to hold. I have been intrigued to try to grasp a fuller complexity, a both/and perspective, in one paper, and the concepts of weight and relief, retreat and interaction, has helped me do that. Interviews, as a method, in contrast to more quantitative surveys, have the opportunity to capture that. It can show both positive and negative dimensions and social consequences of public transport and identify that, how, when, and where these places can comprise of diversities and inconsistencies in themselves. As in showing that the subway can be experienced as both the best and the worst, as enabling wanted and unwanted interaction; that the small-scaleness of the bus can be why it is valued, and why it is disliked; that people in these places can provide both security and discomfort; that experiences of limitations and freedoms can be accommodated, and shift, within the same place as it moves through space or when users change. This complexity is essential to the planning and evaluation of transport systems and in how, when, where or for whom public transport can be socially beneficial and a part of social sustainability, as often assumed and argued for in public

policies and reports (e.g. review in Wimark *et al.* 2017). This is, of course, dependent on how well the system actually work in, for example, providing safe and accessible transportation for all.

The participants of this study seem to like the bus the most. The bus appears almost like an extended living room, or perhaps from a youth perspective, an extension of one's own (bed)room (a significant place in teenagers' lives, see Lincoln 2015). The subway, on the other hand, appears more like an anonymous public space, a broader road to travel, with more unknown people and connections to the rest of the city. Above all, the bus is preferred overwhelmingly by the girls, lifting the bus as a relief and a place of retreat, safety, and less unwelcomed social interaction. The subway was more often talked about as a weight in everyday life because of its uninvited social interactions. In connection to this, it is important to acknowledge that young women are a group in Stockholm that is experiencing increasing insecurity in public spaces, such as their neighborhood (Söderström *et al.* 2019). This makes the result of the variations within the experiences of mobile places interesting. Because next to the discomfoting result that girls (still) experience harassment, fear, and unease in foremost the subway, they also tell stories of how buses are experienced as safe and calm, or at least safer and calmer than the subway. Furthermore, national and local politicians and planners of today mainly dream and invest in rail-based public transport in Sweden, as part of developing more ecologically sustainable mobilities, and such future visions often include driverless vehicles (Stjernborg & Mattisson 2016; Swedish government offices 2018). Thus, it is worth thinking about what conditions and places we are creating in future public transportation systems, and who the winners and losers are in this.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from respondents are translated from Swedish by the author.

<sup>2</sup> In Sweden, interviews with individuals from 15 years and older are permitted without parents' consent (<http://www.codex.vr.se/en/manniska1.shtml>).

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