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The Anthropologist as a City Bus Driver: Researching Urban Transport Using Autoethnography

Antropolog řidičem městského autobusu: Výzkum urbánní dopravy pomocí autoetnografie

Abstract

This article examines city bus drivers' behaviour, culture, and daily life in their work environment – particularly their mutual communication, relationships between drivers and passengers, issues faced, and feelings experienced by city bus drivers when performing their job. I present data through autoethnographic testimony depicting my personal experience as an anthropologist-bus driver in Prague. The terrain showed that autoethnography is a crucial research tool for obtaining otherwise difficult-to-access data in the urban environment of occupational culture. I argue that to obtain valid information, it is possible to become members of the researched community and try to think like them. To avoid excessive subjectivity, rather than engaging in collaborative autoethnography, I rather propose contextualizing personal testimony within scholarly literature as well as the experiences of co-workers gained through interviews conducted from the position of a non-researcher.

Key words: city bus drivers, urban transport research, autoethnography, mobilities, occupational culture, Prague

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Tento článek se zabývá chováním, kulturou a každodenním životem řidičů městského autobusu v jejich pracovním prostředí – zejména jejich vzájemnou komunikací, vztahy mezi řidiči a cestujícími, problémy, kterým řidiči městského autobusu čelí při výkonu své práce. Data předkládám prostřednictvím autoetnografické zpovědi zachycující mou osobní zkušenost antropologa-řidiče autobusu v Praze. Terén ukázal, že autoetnografie je zásadním výzkumným nástrojem pro získávání jinak těžko dostupných dat v městském

prostředí pracovní kultury. Tvrdím, že pro získání validních informací je možné stát se členy zkoumané komunity a snažit se myslet jako oni. Abychom se vyhnuli přílišné subjektivitě, spíše než zapojením se do kolaborativní autoetnografie navrhuji uvést osobní svědectví do kontextu s odbornou literaturou i zkušenostmi spolupracovníků získanými rozhovory, jež jsou vedené z pozice nevýzkumníka.

Introduction

Bus drivers are a culturally interesting professional group whom many people meet on daily basis. In addition to automobilities research (Dawson 2017) or cultures of motorways research (Kuligowski and Stanisz 2016), this professional group, not surprisingly, is of considerable interest to many academic disciplines worldwide (see Tse et al. 2006). Despite the considerable amount of literature, there is an absence of work focused on the culture of city bus drivers when compared to the literature on bikers (Schmid 2021), truckers (Lamut 2009), or taxi and autorickshaw drivers (Chowdhury 2021; Peters 2020), although urban transport and mobility can certainly be studied from the perspective of social and cultural anthropology. Anthropology has the potential to offer rich research findings from daily life, as in the study examining actors on urban public transport in Zagreb and Split that categorizes individual groups of passengers (Tomić et al. 2015), or the study documenting the environment of bus transport not only as a means of relocation, but also as a cross-cultural meeting place (Koefoed et al. 2017).

These scientific contributions certainly do convey some interesting aspects from the transport environment. However, is there any better way to take notice of problems in the daily work of city bus drivers, their mutual communication, folklore, feelings, and emotions, or to empathize with their profession, than to become one of them? I had the opportunity to do so during my studies, when I was looking for a part-time job, and I recalled my childhood dream of driving a bus. Since 2013 I have been working as a city bus driver in Prague on a part-time basis. The opportunity to become a part of this community and obtain ethnographic data, mapping the everyday life of bus drivers, resulted in this article.

In this article, through my autoethnographic personal testimony (see Adams and Hermann 2020: 2), I acquaint readers with selected aspects of the bus drivers' daily work routine using the example of a large urban transport company operating in Prague. I focus particularly on mutual communication and relationships within the group and between its members and the outside environment, especially passengers, as well as issues

faced and feelings experienced by city bus drivers when performing their job. Through the reconstruction of ethnographic situations in my autoethnographic testimony, I want to show the perspective of a city bus driver.[1]

Furthermore, I want to discuss the applicability of autoethnography in the environment of occupational culture, using the example of urban transport. I argue that to get the best possible understanding of the issue, a researcher should not just study the community from a distance; he or she should try to practice the profession for an extended period of time and then reflect and interpret situations even from their perspective as a member of the researched community. At the same time, I follow up on previous discussions in the social sciences regarding the validity of autoethnography. Some authors reject this method (e.g., Lynch 2000; Ploder and Stadlbauer 2016), while others prefer alternative forms such as collaborative autoethnography (Lapadat 2017). In the discussion and conclusion, I argue that, to avoid excessive subjectivity, personal testimony should be contextualized within scholarly literature as well as the experiences of co-workers gained through interviews conducted from the emic position as a member of the professional group. Therefore, I am inclined towards analytical autoetnography, and this text does not represent an evocative form (see Anderson 2006).

Research approach

In the period 2013–2016, I was working periodically as an assistant city bus driver for two private transport companies (Smrčka 2017). During this period I obtained data partially testifying to the way bus drivers work at small companies with only a few dozen employees. From 2017 to the present, in addition to my profession of anthropologist, I have worked on selected weekends in a part-time job as a bus driver for the major city transport company, which operates most of the city bus lines and all of the tram lines as well as the metro in Prague. I have been using the research approach of internal semi-covert participant observation, where I have gained data while driving a bus, at the workplace, in the garage area, at the dispatch station, and on the basis of informal conversations with my co-workers, especially bus drivers. I have recorded the information obtained in a field research diary. I have collected further information from several groups I belong to on Facebook, and I conducted anonymized interviews with bus drivers with whom I had established a closer personal relationship and who knew about my studies and later about my profession as an academic. However, the majority of employees at the city transport company did not know about my position as a researcher, mainly due to the extent of the company personnel.

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[1] Some authors argue that autoethnography changes the rule that is common for ethnographic texts – reflexivity in significant detail has most often been reserved for confessional tales published separately from more substantive analyses (Anderson 2006: 382; Atkinson et al. 2003: 62). Although I include personal reflexivity in the analytical part, I bracket off the more emotional personal confession.

This brings us to the issue of research ethics. My actions may be perceived as deception (Bryman 2012: 130). However, my approach cannot be understood as deliberate espionage. Main motives for becoming a city bus driver were to fulfil my childhood dream, as well as the financial aspect of the job. Only secondarily did the experience I gained in the environment of urban bus transport, and partly the questionnaire surveys I carried out before I became a part-time city bus driver, motivate me to conduct a deliberate study. Besides that, even Kai Theodor Erikson (1967: 372) – a universalist proponent of ethics – acknowledges that it would be absurd for sociologists to present themselves as researchers at all times and to inform everyone whom they address about their research.

Autoethnographic testimony

Beginnings

After getting my bus driver's license and gaining the required qualification, I initially thought that nothing would surprise me – after all, I had already 'learned' everything about driving a bus. I couldn't have been more wrong – the opposite was true. I had to adapt rapidly to the new cultural environment and to a completely different style of work. On the first day I provided the necessary qualifications, and the operations manager checked my driving skills. The next day I was accompanied by a more experienced driver, and on the third day I had to drive around the city on my own. Everything was new to me. Unlike the academic world, I didn't have to deal with e-mails in the evening. On the other hand, especially at the beginning of my career as a bus driver, I had to learn to be fully focused, to be mentally resilient, and to endure getting up at 1:30 in the morning. It took me a long time to get used to the larger dimensions of the vehicle, to deal with sudden vehicle breakdowns, and to cope with heavy road traffic.

Joining the city's public transport company four years later involved quite a different admission procedure. I had to take a new psychological examination and an introductory course followed by several exams. However, my initial days in the job were much easier, thanks to my previous experience as an urban bus driver with private companies. In addition to the formal knowledge gained from the course, I learned new things through the unwritten knowledge transmitted by experienced drivers – how to drive and reverse an articulated bus, how to wake up the drunks and homeless persons at terminals of the night bus lines, or where can one eat well during a short break (see Photo 1). The informal acquisition of knowledge among blue-collar workers is very important (Decius et al. 2019). As one older driver pointed out, 'you won't learn that in the course'. Other things I got to know came through gradual practice and observation.

Description of daily routine

At the city transport company, drivers might work on a day shift, a night shift, or a split shift. Each driver has a specific schedule, but the shifts can sometimes be

Photo 1: A short break at the final bus stop, Photo by author 2021.

combined, and the starting time varies. So the work of the bus driver is irregular. And what does the daily routine of a city bus driver look like? Sometimes the work shift goes smoothly, other times it doesn't. For example:

> I get up at two o'clock in the morning and come to work before four o'clock am. I go through the gatehouse and then open the door to the dispatch station, where the drivers sit. Greetings "hello"; there is a cheerful mood in the room and colleagues share traffic experiences. "Hello Paul", I greet the dispatcher, and at the same time I attach the employee card to the computer reader and log in. I see the number of my assigned bus on the screen. At the same time, I go to the second window to take over the operating documents. I fill them in and join conversations with other drivers. But time is running out. That's why I'm going out to find my bus. I'm trying to start it when the alternator fault light comes on. I run to the garage master to have another bus assigned to me. Fortunately, I leave on time and there is no downtime… The first round of the bus line seems to be going well, when I suddenly find out that there is a detour on the route and I drove the wrong way. Shit, what now? Why didn't I really read the change of route in the documents? Where should I turn with the articulated bus? I'm calling the dispatch center… They advise me. I'm merely late and I didn't miss any stops. I feel relieved… I finish at two o'clock pm and I am replaced by a colleague at the final stop. I never know in advance whether the shift will go smoothly and I will be happy with it or, on the contrary, I will have to deal with unpleasant events.

Communication and relationships inside the group of city bus drivers

Clover Williams (1996) mentions transmission of folklore, such as fantastic stories, legends, and urban legends amongst truck drivers. Folklore also includes practices and customs (Watts 2007: 152). I had the opportunity to see for myself at the beginning of my job that folklore is a living element existing within professional groups, including the staff of the Prague transport services, in various forms, such as jargon. Specifically, passengers are commonly referred to as 'chestnuts' (*kaštani*), a vehicle in poor technical condition as a 'dustbin' (*popelnice*), tram drivers as 'shoemakers' (ševci), etc. Some slang terms are used across all forms of urban transport in Prague and are reflected in publications (see Adámek and Prošek 2001). However, there are also slang terms used only by garage staff. For example, the book in which drivers enter a request for special leave is called by some a 'lamentation book' (*kniha nářků*):

> I ask the dispatcher, where do drivers make a request when they need extra time off or want to take on extra work? You have to write the request in the 'lamentation book'. The what? This is a book of requests for service changes. We call it the 'lamentation book', but don't say that out loud. The boss doesn't like to hear it.

There are other slang terms as well. At the same time, drivers give each other nicknames according to appearance, previous work, or surname. One bald dispatcher is called 'Kojak'. Other drivers are called 'Badger', 'Mosquito', and 'Colombo'. I am called 'Doctor'.

Another habit of the bus drivers is to use familiar forms of address when speaking to one another, which is normal in the Czech Republic only if people know each other quite well and mutually agree to address each other that way. At first I thought drivers greeted each other with an informal 'hi' (instead of a more formal greeting) because they knew each other well, but I soon realized that this was not the case. That became clear to me on my third day in the job. A driver approached me that day and leaned against the front door's handgrip; I said 'good morning' to him, using a formal grammatical form. He was taken aback, and then replied: 'We drivers are okay with each other, aren't we?!' Ever since then, I have known that I should greet all the fellow drivers, regardless of their age or seniority, as if he or she were a friend of mine.

Another custom amongst bus drivers is their mutual non-verbal greeting – a wave of the hand to the driver of an oncoming bus (see Photo 2). In the evening, a short flashing of headlights or blinkers substitutes for the hand wave. Although greeting within the professional group of bus drivers is not an obligation, it is a sign of good manners rather than an earnest greeting; I have seen an oncoming colleague wave a hand without really looking at me at all. Since I work in the city-owned company that also operates trams and metro transport services, I am greeted by tram and metro drivers, and even ticket inspectors. What most likely joins us is our common affiliation with the same organization, identifiable through our identical uniforms. Let me describe briefly one of my journeys in the metro, which perfectly captures the situation:

Photo 2: Greeting an oncoming driver, Photo by author 2018.

I'm going to work by metro, wearing the uniform. Once in the metro car, I hear someone say, 'travel cards check', and I can see a ticket inspector approaching. I am slowly preparing my charged employee card. The ticket inspector is coming closer. I'm waiting for him to show me his badge, but he's saying 'hi' instead, and is going on to check other passengers.

This shows that the professional uniform does not only have a protective and identification function; it also has a symbolic and communicative level of values. As Kurt Dauer Keller (2005: 199) notes, style also communicates with sensibility and expressiveness. At present, in Prague transport, employees wear uniforms of a simple style without significant aesthetically pleasing elements – for example, in the form of decorated buttons, as on uniforms previously used in the transport sector (Hrušková 2020: 17). The uniforms of individual transportation companies are usually distinguished only by the colour and logo of the employer. Nevertheless, one cannot completely agree with the claim that uniforms are lacking any symbolic personal touch, sign, or communication (Todorović et al. 2014: 327). There are drivers who wear only a polo shirt with the logo of the employer, while others wear a shirt with a tie or a company jacket, with the conscious intent to be better perceived by passengers.

Another example of the nonverbal folklore of city bus drivers, and also an important organizational rule that allows for smooth interaction, is giving way to each other

Photo 3: Bus drivers debating at a terminal, Photo by author 2020.

at a roundabout, as well as giving various signals. For example, if I am 'ahead of the timetable'[2] and have to wait at a bus stop, I turn on the warning lights so that a fellow driver coming to the stop behind me keeps enough distance and does not have to reverse. This is not taught in courses; it is a habit I learned through observation from my colleagues while practicing the job of bus driver (Decius et al. 2019). This folklore, as well as common communication, occur not only while driving or interacting at terminals (see Photo 3) or at the dispatch station, but also in private Facebook groups, where the drivers share observations about traffic, news about bus accidents, or interesting photos concerning public transport. Some colleagues even post photos of the meals they eat or humorous drawings and collages of the faces of their colleagues, making fun of each other. Using Facebook in this manner can also be seen as a form of relaxation, job satisfaction, and at the same time a blurring of the boundary between social and professional life (Robertson and Kee 2017).

In spite of that, I cannot say that we form together some kind of a notional large family. Some private Facebook groups also include complaints about fellow drivers, such as not maintaining order and cleanliness in the vehicle. I have also noticed an aversion

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[2] In the emic environment, the term 'ahead of the timetable' means an earlier departure from a stop than stipulated in the timetable.

from some drivers towards part-time workers 'coming off the street' when their main job is associated with another employer. Some bus drivers do not even like tram drivers, believing that tram drivers are given preference by the employer (because, for example, they get more coverage in the corporate magazine, and better toilets). The driver community also does not accept perpetual complainants and especially whistleblowers. Bus drivers warn against these people, for example, by writing latrinalia in the toilets.

Communication and relationships beyond the group of city bus drivers

During my whole time in the job, I noticed frequent complaints by city bus drivers about the behaviour of passengers and car drivers. In fact, the topic of undisciplined road users was present in nearly every conversation with my colleagues during breaks at the terminals. It is certainly no exception for a colleague to come up to me at a terminal, saying: 'Imagine what happened to me today…' They want to tell their story and calm down at the same time. In most cases, they complain about undisciplined passengers, car drivers, or cyclists. The same thing happens in the dispatch station – at the end of their shifts, drivers often share their negative (and sometimes humorous) experiences about navigating traffic with other drivers, often jovially imitating the situation. I sometimes experience the same feeling – the need to confide in other colleagues about my experiences.

On the other hand, many passengers perceive city bus drivers as hotheads. David Bissel offers an explanation that can account for this tension between city bus drivers and passengers; he points out (Bissel 2010: 270–271) that the relationships between infrequent passengers and people regularly commuting by the same bus might significantly differ, and the degree of acquaintance influences the type of communication. In her research on tram drivers, Jana Grycová found that the rational tension in urban transport is explained by the lack of direct contact between a driver and passengers and by the fact that most of them communicate only in tense situations (Grycová 1996: 86–87). City bus drivers are mostly separated from passengers in a booth, and from my own city bus driver experience, I can confirm that major interactions between the driver and the passengers are rather rare, in contrast to regional bus service, where it is possible to establish familiar relations with some regular commuters. Another reason is that the job of bus driver is physically and mentally demanding, as well as stressful (Davidović et al. 2018). As a bus driver, I frequently encounter detours and line changes in the city, or I become 'trapped' in a traffic jam. In addition, I have to deal with unexpected situations, such as when the bus breaks down. Therefore, as a driver, I expect appropriate passenger behaviour, what Helen F. Wilson (2011: 639) calls 'a collective morality'; but this is not followed by so-called 'deviant passengers'. This term has been used by Vicko Tomić, Renata Relja, and Toni Popović (2015: 53), who classify into this category those passengers who annoy other passengers and city bus drivers with their behaviour. Bus drivers also include foul-smelling people into the problem group – mostly homeless people

– and generally all those violating the company's terms of transportation. Here is how I experienced this as a city bus driver myself, from my emic perspective:

> Any moment when I have to warn, reprimand, or even exclude a deviant passenger from transportation is unpleasant and stressful for me. That is why I sometimes prefer to consciously ignore minor offenses. At the same time, I am afraid of complaints from passengers and being labelled a 'troublemaker' by my employer. A certain complication is that I have to evaluate when and whether it is appropriate to ignore improper conduct and where not to tolerate it and intervene. These situations often occur when my bus is significantly delayed, during the last scheduled journey of the day, or during night service. Intervening and then waiting for the arrival of police could prevent my departure and cause me to miss a night-time transfer, which would cause inconvenience to passengers.

Or another example:

> I hear screams, swearing, and the clinking of a bottle on the floor. I look in the mirror, and I see liquid flowing across the floor. Oh yeah, once again some 'cattle' has spilled something here. Great. I'm stuck with this one drunk who is yelling at the whole bus. I'm stopping at the bus stop. I stay in the closed cabin and say into the loudspeaker that the person in question must get out. He says: Shut up and go! I'm threatening to call the police. The guy prefers to get off, he curses me vulgarly. Of course, he has to kick the bus and hit the window. 'Cattle', I think. At the same time, I am relieved to be able to continue driving without further conflicts.

The bus driver's stress thus stems from ambivalent situations, where a driver should supervise the observance of formal rules and make an effort to minimize anti-social behaviour (Moore 2011: 59), even though enforcement could result in other precarious situations.

Most of the colleagues I communicate with attempt to prevent people who are drugged or drunk from boarding, as well as homeless people who use public transport as a dormitory, simply by opening only the front door of the bus. This practice is nevertheless largely informal. However, this is infeasible at bus stops where a large number of passengers are waiting for the bus and the driver has to open all the doors. The people without shelter realize this weakness. Laura Nichols and Fernando Cázares (2011: 339), who conducted research in Santa Clara in the USA, point out that homeless people do not leave the bus until the end of the line. In Prague, I have sometimes encountered the opposite phenomenon: some unhoused riders intentionally get off the bus in places where they can hide in the crowd and board another bus going back the way they came. The reason is simple, as is clear from my colleague's statement: 'Whoever comes to the final stop with me at night, I don't take him back'. With the exception of perceptibly

strong-smelling persons or aggressive passengers, the other drivers confirmed to me that they usually tolerate suspicious persons if they sit in the rear seats and if other passengers do not complain. A fellow driver, who regularly drives on night lines, told me that night-shift drivers already recognize homeless people by their appearance. They even nickname them and know who can be quietly tolerated on board and who cannot be allowed into the bus – even at the cost of not stopping at a scheduled stop when there are no other passengers.[3] The problem is that these passengers remember specific night drivers and try to disguise themselves with various clothing accessories.

A complication that I have encountered as a part-time driver is being unable to completely determine whether a person is or is not under the influence of addictive substances. For example, a colleague of mine once drove away from an unkempt-looking person waiting for the bus. A complaint was filed against him and it turned out that the person was just passenger who needed to get to work by the night bus. This example clearly demonstrates the danger of social stereotyping and stigmatization: assuming that an unkempt person equals a smelly homeless person or a junkie. Moreover, the mobility of homeless people is severely limited due to their economic situation and social stigmatization (Jocoy and J. del Casino 2010). Vivian Hui and Khandker M. Nurul Habib (2017: 67), for instance, point out that fares make it impossible for homeless people to go visit their families or friends and to seek housing and employment. However, from my emic position, I must mention that, on the other hand, it is stressful for city bus drivers at the final stops to persuade homeless people to get up and leave the bus. From my point of view, the solution is to give homeless people the right to quality housing and income in the cities (Hennigan and Speer 2019: 918) so that they're not forced to use city buses as a mobile shelter.

Another group of 'problematic passengers' for city bus drivers are those who frequently complain. People of any age might express their dissatisfaction with the driver's performance. The most common complaints towards drivers, especially from the elderly, are that the bus is standing too far from the curb, or that the drive is too jerky and the passenger may fall down and get injured. Andrew Morris, Jo Barnes, and Brian Fildes (2017: 542) point to frequent serious injuries sustained by elderly people using bus transport in the United Kingdom. Some of the respondents of their study mentioned that their injuries were due to bus drivers leaving the bus stop without waiting for passengers with reduced mobility to sit down. From my emic perspective as a driver, I have to admit I often do not notice at all that a person with reduced mobility, hidden in the crowd of other passengers, is getting on the bus. It is also quite common that a person with reduced mobility sits down, I drive off, and the passenger only then decides to change to another seat or gets up too early and proceeds to the door with the intention to disembark before the bus stops:

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[3] I. S. (1973), bus driver, June 16, 2020, Prague.

I'm starting to slow down a little and I'm nervous to see an old lady trying to get to the door. Her whole body is shaking whenever I press the brake gently. She tries to keep her balance. So I go slightly past the stop pole in the attempt to brake as moderately as possible.

However, the complaints I have faced most often are those about non-observance of the timetable and failure to stop at a requested stop. This usually happens when a passenger presses the signal button too late and it is no longer possible to stop safely at the stop. The complaints about non-compliance with the timetable are due to a misunderstanding of the reasons for delays. For instance, some passengers are intolerant of a late departure from a bus stop, even though it is due to an accumulated delay caused by heavy traffic or a bus breakdown. Let me give an example:

I'm on my way, but I'm late because of a traffic jam due to a football match. A football fan is standing at the bus stop, tapping on his watch and gesturing. He is boarding through the front door and starts scolding me for being late, and threatening he'll complain. I tell him that if it wasn't for the stupid match he is going to, I would arrive on time. Then I wonder if I should have said anything at all. What if he really writes an official complaint against me?

Bus drivers who have to meet a daily timetable must be composed and altruistic persons, otherwise they can easily burn out (Shi and Zhang 2017). On the other hand, during my eight years of experience as a city bus driver, I also met passengers who thanked drivers, brought them newspapers, or treated them with sweets.

Another interesting group is formed of people called train-spotters (or rather bus-spotters) (Caton and Santos 2007). They are fans of transport, in this case buses, who take photos of the vehicles, make audio-visual recordings of their rides, publish the obtained recordings on the Internet, and participate in online discussions about traffic.[4] As far as bus transport is concerned, I've mostly come across young boys of this sort. Bus drivers nevertheless treat 'bus-spotters' inconsistently. Some, especially older, drivers kick them off their buses; others sympathize with them and, on the contrary, publish their bus timetables on social networks and encourage Facebook friends to come and take pictures of the bus and the driver. However, these are mostly my young colleagues who are themselves from the 'bus-spotting family' and were already interested in bus transport during their childhood. There are also so-called 'evil bus-spotters' whose aim is to document drivers' transgressions and subsequently file complaints. Of course, drivers warn each other about such individuals, for example on Facebook. Although as an anthropologist I sympathize with the bus-spotters, who naturally represent a potential object of my future research, I once had to chase one away too, when he woke me up during the fifty-minute break I had at one o'clock in the morning:

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[4] Trainspotters Guide | UK Trains & Railways, July 12, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbHg_mvpfxw.

I was tired, I laid my head on the steering wheel, and I was dropping off. After a few minutes, I could hear a car coming. I got scared a little. Suddenly, the car put on its high beams, and a young boy emerged from the light with a camera in his hand and began taking pictures of the bus. I was relieved. I realized it was just a bus-spotter. I nevertheless got angry that I had been woken up at night and frightened by someone just for a few pictures. Anthropologist or not, I shouted at him: 'Stop it now! Otherwise I'm calling the police! I need to rest'.

That night I was acting purely from the perspective of a bus driver. Only later, at a distance and using my critical thinking as an anthropologist, did I realize that my reaction was exaggerated. However, my opinion on the linkage between a city bus driver's insensitivity to aberrant behaviour and his or her fatigue and exhaustion was confirmed (Chen and Kao 2013: 110). In most cases, these feelings and conduct are exacerbated by irregularity in one's life routine, changes in work shifts, shifts of different lengths, and unhealthy and irregular eating habits (Zhong et al. 2020).

Some authors attribute the lack of bus drivers to the demanding character of the job, as well as to the low social prestige of the job, which leads to low job satisfaction (Kwon et al. 2020). My interviews with older bus drivers in Prague, some of whom have been making living at bus driving since the socialist era, said that the profession is becoming more and more difficult – due to both the increased traffic and the more unruly behaviour of passengers and other drivers.[5]

Discussion and conclusion

Knowledge of city bus drivers' daily working life from an anthropological perspective is almost nonexistent, even though the environment of public transport is an important and inspiring cultural space for ethnographic research, as some academics have shown (e.g., Chowdhury 2021; Skupnik 2019; Tomić et al. 2015). By examining the cultural aspects of city bus drivers in Prague – their communication, folklore, habits, everyday life, and work issues – this article has aimed to show the culture of city bus drivers from the insider's perspective.

Participant observation research has shown that the work practices of bus drivers are often informal. A curiosity amongst public transport drivers in Prague is their manifestations of mutual solidarity. This takes the form, for example, of switching on one's warning lights at a bus stop when one needs to remain standing longer than expected, or by giving way at intersections if possible in order to avoid a colleague's delay. Their verbal communication mostly takes place at the beginning and the end of their shifts, at the dispatch station or at the bus terminals. In the majority of cases, drivers share a variety of information and their experiences out in traffic. Their

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[5] P. J. (1952), bus driver, October 1, 2019, Prague.

communication has also been moving to online spaces, such as Facebook. For example, they inform each other on Facebook about the current traffic situation and news about the transport company; they complain or warn against so-called 'deviant passengers' (Tomić et al. 2015: 53); and they make fun of each other, share jokes, and reveal their private lives. However, their communication also has a non-verbal form, such as drawings and messages left in the company's restrooms, or gesturing at each other while driving. City bus drivers also have their own folklore, whether it's telling stories and using specific traffic jargon or mutual greeting on a first-name basis and even in non-verbal form – the hand wave towards an oncoming bus driver, the short flashing of headlights or blinkers at night.

On a global scale, one might perceive an image of the city bus driver as a neurotic person. Some researchers point to aberrant behaviour caused by bus drivers' fatigue (Chen and Kao 2013: 110) or the lack of direct contact between drivers and passengers (Bissell 2010: 270–271), or the fact that their communication occurs mostly in tense situations (Grycová 1996: 86–87). From the emic perspective of a city bus driver, this article has shown that city bus drivers need to deal with multiple conflicting or otherwise stressful situations in the course of a work day (undisciplined passengers, construction work on the road, detours, traffic jams, etc.). Other aspects that play a role include the monotony of the job and the drivers' fatigue (Davidović et al. 2018).

Although autoethnography is used in many fields (e.g., Ellis 2004; Wacquant 2003; Herrmann 2018), including urban transport research (e.g., Nåls and Hyde-Clarke 2017; Rink 2016), it is still not entirely entrenched within the scientific community and is not even accepted by many academics. Michel Lynch (2000: 26), for instance, argues that the meaning and epistemic virtue ascribed to reflexivity is relative to social reality. Many researchers criticize the non-objectivity of this method, its bias, narcissism, immediacy, and for being too subjective, lacking in argumentation (Ploder and Stadlbauer 2016). Caroline Pearce (2010: 2), on the other hand, mentions the inability to avoid the author's own emotions. However, this can also be perceived positively, because 'autoethnography moves us beyond our own taken-for-granted assumptions and sense-making of the social world, both professionally and personally' (Au-Yong-Oliveira 2020: 5). Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 2), for instance, emphasizes the need for an ethical position of an observer from outside. This is not unknown to proponents of autoethnography, who perceive this not as a sharp dualism, but as an intersection of the inside and outside perspectives (Reed-Danahay 2017: 145). However, this dichotomy may be easily lost if the researcher becomes immersed deeply in the life of the socio-professional group. When driving a bus, I am thinking more like a bus driver. By contrast, during the breaks, when I have the opportunity to observe my fellow drivers, I probably have a researcher's way of thinking. It is sometimes difficult for me to distinguish my positionality. This is due to the fact that I have been driving the bus for several years already. I also share

stories and experiences with the other city bus drivers on social networks and at work. I have made friends with some of them, and I experience both happy and painful moments with them – such as the death of a member of the bus driver community (Jakoubek: 2018).

On the other hand, behaving and thinking as a member of the study group also brings benefits. For example, there is no need to deal with reluctance to give an interview, or with deception, which anthropologists commonly encounter during interviews (Blum 2005; Van der Geest 2018). Another advantage is that it is possible to access valid and otherwise inaccessible data (Poerwandari 2021: 12).

This can be illustrated in a comparison of my positions as passenger, researcher, and city bus driver. As a passenger, I could not understand the rudeness of some city bus drivers, a late departure from a boarding stop, or why the drivers waved at each other. Only as a city bus driver in Prague did I learn about communication, slang, and passing on informal and unwritten experiences between city bus drivers, and more than anything else, the feelings and problems that can be encountered while driving a bus. From the position of a researcher, before I took on the job of bus driver myself, I was not able to obtain such data through interviews.

Some researchers draw attention to the issues of ethics and the validity of autoethnography. Judith C. Lapadat (2017) sees a solution in collaborative autoethnography between two or more researchers, which has also been used in the transport environment (e.g., Nåls and Hyde-Clarke 2017). This could work easily with researchers in the role of passengers, but it might be difficult for two or more researchers to pursue another profession together. Therefore, I see a solution to this problem in the contextualization of personal autoethnographic testimony within scholarly literature as well as the experiences of work colleagues gained through interviews conducted from the position of a member of professional group. The reason for this position is as follows: When I was trying to interview city bus drivers as a student of anthropology, I only learned rather formal, incomplete information. The other drivers did not want to talk to me. Then as a city bus driver, I learned that they do not want to be deprived of their breaks, and the physical demands of work in urban traffic (e.g., dealing with multiple conflicting or otherwise stressful situations during the day) make it impractical to talk while driving; moreover, there is an internal corporate standard not to provide interviews to journalists.

Funding and Acknowledgements

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