

Nonsocial Transient Behavior: Social Disengagement on the Greyhound Bus

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Based on two years of observations and engaging in informal conversations with passengers on Greyhound Line buses, this article describes the long-distance bus journey and the ways in which people actively disengage from others over the course of the ride. Using the Greyhound buses and stations as a microcosm of other such public spaces, I examine its unspoken rules and behavior. I paint a picture of the buses and stations, the patrons, the employees, and the transactions that take place between them. Using ideas from Goffman's civil inattention theory, Lofland's thoughts on strangers, and symbolic interactionism, I explain what I call "nonsocial transient behavior" and "nonsocial transient space." The reasons nonsocial transient behavior emerges and thus encourages disengagement are identified as follows: uncertainty about strangers, lack of privacy or absence of a personal space, and exhaustion.

Keywords: social disengagement, Goffman, Greyhound bus, nonsocial behavior, public space

In his classic essay on urbanism as a way of life, Louis Wirth (1938) descriptively wrote about the blasé attitude of people in public spaces. Decades later, Lyn Lofland (1973) noted that in cities, more people are increasingly anonymous. Today, at places such as coffee shops, shopping malls, parks, and other public spaces, one could examine how people conduct activities alone and avoid interaction with others. People not only keep to themselves, but in some spaces they take extra measure to actively avoid others. What causes this social isolation? And what kinds of situational norms emerge due to the lack of social interaction? In this article, I examine the cause of social avoidance and what people do to reduce the complexities of living in what Lofland calls a "world of strangers."

Since Wirth's observations, the lack of interaction among strangers in certain settings has not changed. People act as if they are alone and privatize the public space. However, while individuals may go about their business without interacting

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with others in public spaces, avoidance and being anonymous requires a lot more action than simply dodging contact from others. This seemingly stagnant stage is replete with social interactions and this article will illustrate how people go about organizing this type of behavior. To illuminate on this social situation, I add to the discussion of social isolation and disengagement using a nuanced framework of social symbolic interaction. Drawing on ethnographic research on Greyhound¹ buses and at terminals, this article examines why some people choose to avoid interacting with others and the ways in which they do so. To capture the active effort undertaken by individuals in these settings to disengage, I introduce the concept of *nonsocial transient behavior* and the spaces that produce this behavior *nonsocial transient space*. Using these terminologies, I argue that active disengagement is a calculated social performance that individuals reserve for a specific kind of space.

SOCIAL DISENGAGEMENT AND ISOLATION

The concept of “civil inattention” coined by Erving Goffman (1963), in part, explains the phenomenon of social disengagement. Civil inattention describes strangers who may pass in close proximity, but respectfully act as if they do not see each other. It is explained as both a “willingness to be seen” (Manning 1992:13) and as an acknowledgment of the passerby. Lofland (1989:462) elaborates that civil inattention “makes possible co-presence without co-mingling, awareness without engrossment, courtesy without conversation.” Civil inattention occurs out of respect for other people’s privacy. For example, at some places such as public swimming pools, Susie Scott (2009) observes that people act like “disinterested strangers” in order to respect people’s private space. Using the swimming pool setting as an example, she concludes that people are surprisingly “orderly and civilized” (p. 126) because the social norm for pool users is to respect other people’s personal space and disciplinary regimes. In Scott’s case, the practice of disinterested strangers is functional; that is, interactions with others are limited so that swimmers can go about their business at the pool to exercise.

Nonsocial transient behavior is different in that individuals are more deliberate and active to remain unnoticed—they do not want to acknowledge the presence of others and they do not want others to acknowledge them. Where nonsocial transient behavior takes place, respect is not a concern. People do not disengage to respect other people’s space, but rather because they prefer to be invisible. While civil inattention is a cordial respect of another’s space, nonsocial transient behavior communicates to surrounding others more overtly not to step into their territory. Action, or lack of interaction, in nonsocial transient behavior is a form of social interaction; that is, their nonsocial behavior is a performance for others to take notice that they do not want to be bothered. Here, actors submerge and withdraw into a personal space of the self. Moreover, Goffman and other scholars who discuss civil inattention examine short fleeting interactions. We lack understanding of

what happens when strangers are together in a public setting for longer periods of time.

Lofland (1973:176) further explores the lack of human interactions. She grimly writes, “The situation of living as a stranger in the midst of strangers has within it the logical potential for a chaotic unpredictability that no human would find tolerable.” As such, Lofland finds that eventually, individuals reduce some of the “strangeness.” Indeed, familiarizing oneself with strangers and foreign situations has the potential to make the unknown familiar. However, it does not account for situations and places where people choose to eliminate interactions with others altogether and remain invisible. In certain spaces, people are nonsocial and simply do not attempt to acquaint themselves.

In many ways, nonsocial transient behavior is antithetical to Elijah Anderson’s “cosmopolitan canopy.” Anderson (2004:15) refers to this canopy as a public space where a diversity of people set aside their wariness and feel comfortable around one another. In this public space, welcoming to a multiplicity of people, individuals feel encouraged to treat others from different backgrounds “with a certain level of civility” and even perform their efforts to do so. Under the cosmopolitan canopy, people do not necessarily go out of their way to be courteous, but there is a mutual understanding—a feeling that people can “relax their guard.”

Anderson critiques, however, that under the cosmopolitan canopy, the easiness that people feel can connote a “gloss,” or superficiality. People are polite and civil, but their actions can be disingenuous—an act. In a way, this behavior can be viewed as a performance on the “front stage,” (Goffman 1959) where people act according to the situation and what they want their audience to see. Anderson shrewdly observes that the politeness under the cosmopolitan canopy breaks down in other spaces depending on the characters involved. For example, he writes that the presence of “anonymous young black males” can test the “code of civility” (2004:27) because the stigma associated with these characteristics can disturb the setting’s cosmopolitanism.

While I argue that nonsocial transient behavior is a performance, such politeness does not exist. People withdraw from others and there is no breakdown of such performance because the goals of invisibility and disengagement are steadfast. Furthermore, during long travels on the Greyhound, race, class, gender, and other such background characteristics are not prominent concerns. While there may be some reservations at the beginning, it quickly fades when the umpteenth hour on the bus strikes. This is not to assume that these characteristics do not hold value; rather, in this space, everyone is on edge and every person is suspect. While some social interaction may occur, the interaction is kept short. Whenever possible, passengers avoid others—the competitive game being to keep one’s adjacent seat unoccupied and to keep a vigilant watch on one’s own belongings.

As strangers on the bus, individuals have no incentive to invest their time or energy in others. In nonsocial transient spaces, people pretend to be busy, distracted, or apathetic; they check cell phones, rummage through bags, clean out their wallets

and purses, look past people, or sleep. At times, people put on a “don’t bother me” face or give the “hate stare” as Goffman (1963) describes. Indeed, people are not forced to utilize public spaces, but certain places such as airports or the line at a checkout stand cannot be avoided for various reasons. Nonsocial transient behavior is also prominent in settings deemed potentially dangerous, where people are more cautious and alert. Examples include crime-concentrated neighborhoods and places where there are high volumes of people like at concerts, nightclubs, and sport stadiums. Typically, however, nonsocial transient behavior occurs in tight spaces where strangers spend an extended period of time together and have little privacy.

Inside the Greyhound buses and terminals, there is an ambiguous line between what Goffman calls the front and back regions. When the customer first arrives at the station, “front” or public performance is underway as both the customer and the Greyhound employees act out their roles. However, as the day progresses, the front and back regions are no longer distinctly segregated. In fact, for the distant voyager, somewhere between first getting to the bus terminal and arriving at her final destination eight to seventy-two hours later, the entire social space becomes a vague blend of the two spaces.

Nonsocial transient spaces have their own set of norms, routines, and unspoken rules of conduct. They are not completely like Goffman’s backstage, where “suppressed facts make an appearance” (Goffman 1959:112). While Goffman saw the backstage as a safe region where an audience is not present, people do not stop performing on the Greyhound because they feel at ease, but rather because various circumstances *push* them to dispose of their gloss. In fact, performing nonsocial transient behavior becomes more pronounced. For long-distance bus travelers, for example, as time passes such actions or behaviors intensify or increase to keep strangers at bay.

As such, neither the “front” nor the “back,” nonsocial transient spaces are a privatized public space—a public zone where people prefer to be left alone (Lofland 1973). In this space, each actor understands the social norms of the nonsocial space and acts as if she is invisible to others and others are invisible to her. These long rides force passengers, most of whom are complete strangers, to share a public space where private events occur such as eating, sleeping, lounging, and using the onboard bathroom. The riders are strangers, but on longer bus rides, they are not merely brushing by one another—they share the same enclosed space for many back-to-back hours, sometimes even days, depending on the traveler’s destination. The disrupted sleep and hours of traveling in the small seating space of the Greyhound bus causes exhaustion, moodiness, and frustration. By the end of a long ride, most people are ready to get off the bus, get to their final destination, and take a shower.

The frustrations of sharing a small space together are not only limited to the inside of the bus. These feelings trickle into the bus stops and terminals, where the wait between one ride and the next could be from fifteen minutes to several hours. If a bus happens to break down, travelers can be stranded at a station overnight. Due to these tense conditions, people tend to be quiet, reserved, and disengaged.

Yet, not everyone engages in nonsocial behavior at all times. The process, or the behavioral characteristics, of nonsocial transient behavior dynamically shift over time. While the number of hours of travel is a good indicator, there is no set moment that triggers nonsocial behavior. Rather, the onset is more of an indicator of how a traveler responds to the space and social surroundings. The nonsocial transient space is a symbolic boundary privatized by virtue of the disengagement of the occupant from others who share the space. People in nonsocial transient spaces are nonsocial, inhibitive, and declare to others to keep away with their actions and behavior.

METHODS AND DATA

Between 2009 and 2011, I took numerous trips on the Greyhound and subsidiary buses throughout the United States. This project arose from an effort to follow-up on an informant from another research study. That project, a study of undocumented restaurant workers in a city in the northeast, led me to think about the modes of transportation used by people without valid state identification cards. The research informant I followed was an undocumented immigrant who was moving from the northeast region of the United States to the southwest region for a job. When I asked him about his travel plans, he explained that the only way he could get to his new job location was by bus or private car. Since he did not own a car, he purchased a \$120 one-way Greyhound ticket to his destination.

I grew curious about the idea of taking the bus cross-country because I could not imagine what it would be like. Although the idea of traveling on a bus for hours seemed inconceivable to me, thousands of people travel between cities and states daily by bus. Before owning a private vehicle became affordable, and commonplace, intercity travel on a Greyhound bus or on one of its competitors was an obvious choice (Young and Young 2007).² Today, Greyhound buses are commonly depicted as a dangerous and uncomfortable mode of transportation. They are no longer the optimal choice for most travelers, especially since traveling by private car or airplane has become more convenient and affordable. Yet, traveling by Greyhound is often the best or only option for some people. For people who dislike air travel, who are traveling between places with no local airports, who are traveling with large families and many suitcases, or who are looking for a cheaper option, the Greyhound is an apparent choice.³ And as I discovered through my previous study, undocumented immigrants and people who lack the documentation needed to travel by air use the Greyhound transit to travel. While taking the train is another option, it is more expensive and has fewer transit stops.

I acted as a participant observer and took on the method of the classic Chicago School's naturalistic approach to fieldwork (Becker 1958; Emerson 2001). I aimed to blend with others and did not use any recording devices. I engaged in the sort of "casual conversation" Howard Becker (1958) suggested, letting talk arise naturally from its setting and responding to other people's attempts to chat. For example, while waiting in line, I responded to people's sighs or when they made subtle comments

underneath their breath. On the bus, I spoke with people who were sitting near me and I jotted down their responses to my informal questions. Less frequently, I made attempts to speak with the bus driver. Since it is uncommon for passengers to engage in a dialogue with drivers while they are driving, I only initiated conversations with them whenever I could at the bus terminals.

I took notes on the behavior of the passengers and bus drivers. I jotted down what people were doing and talking about both on and off the bus. On the bus, I did not have to be discreet about my note taking since people commonly write in journals or on postcards. I also used my mobile phone to text notes to myself. At the end of each voyage, I wrote a memo that reviewed important events (Emerson et al. 1995) and summarized the trip with analytical notes. To analyze my data, I used a from-the-ground-up theoretical approach—as Robert Emerson puts it, “prioritizing description, minimizing a priori theorizing, and remaining loyal to the phenomena under study” (2004:427).

My first trip began in Connecticut and ended in a small town in New Mexico. It took approximately two days and seventeen hours. Subsequent long-distance travels included journeys from California to Illinois, Colorado to New York, and Texas to California. Shorter trips included rides from California to Nevada, from Illinois to Texas, and from New York to Maryland. Gradually, I became what passengers on the Greyhound call an “experienced rider.”⁴

SETTING

In the last few years, Greyhound has renovated some of its terminals. Some stations are now equipped with bright lighting, electronic charging stations, a cafeteria, additional seating, wide-screen televisions, and air conditioning. Still, many others continue to lag behind on renovations. For example, in some bathrooms, there are stalls falling apart with crusty door handles and sink knobs. There are large, old game machines that “have not worked for decades,” according to some employees, and dusty, broken vending machines. At some stations, seating is so limited that tired passengers waiting to reboard sit on the floor or lean against the wall to rest.

The layover at a station is also a time when people engage in various activities. Passengers may wash-up, walk around the station to stretch their legs, take a quick nap, smoke a cigarette, or eat. Unlike airports where people cannot enter and exit the terminal, bus terminals are open spaces where people can easily walk in and out. Some riders may step outside the station and drink alcohol or smoke a joint. Among riders, drinkers and smokers do not necessarily fall under a deviant social category. Passengers who rarely consume alcohol or use drugs may do so to relax before a long ride. As such, the Greyhound station can serve as a good spot for drug dealers to sell drugs.

In the bathroom, it is common to see people with a bag of toiletries brushing their teeth, washing their face, and getting “ready for bed.” Some passengers slip

into a matching top and bottom pair of pajamas, while others wear their pajamas from the start of their journey. On occasion, a desperate person who feels dirty from not bathing may lean over the sink and wash her hair with soap and water. Some travel with a small bottle of shampoo, seeking the perfect opportunity to wash their hair. The hand air dryer serves as a handy blow dryer. I also commonly observed people wiping their neck and armpits with a wet paper towel or baby wipe. People do not like to do private things in public, but here, they cannot groom themselves in absolute privacy.

When the bus has to be refueled or cleaned, all passengers must get off for twenty to thirty minutes and wait at the terminal or gas station. When a passenger needs to transfer to another bus, she must get off the bus, retrieve her bags from the luggage cabin underneath, and wait for her next bus. Usually, the transferring passenger is dropped off at a regular bus terminal. But the parking lots of a fast-food restaurant or a shopping center are also common bus stops.

METHODS OF AVOIDING OTHERS

There are various methods people use to avoid others on the bus and in the terminals. They use their bodies and belongings to form a barrier around their “territory of the self” (Goffman 1971:51). The objective is to ward off others from intruding not only their physical space but also their mental space. On the bus, passengers typically aim to sit alone and occupy two adjacent seats. Even when traveling with a partner, many people prefer to sit in their own row whenever possible. When it is announced that the bus will be full and that all seats must be made available, the objective changes. The new goal becomes sitting next to a “normal” person, or what Goffman (1967) may describe as an individual who abides by “situational propriety.” The following from my field notes explains this scenario:

I get on the bus and begin to look around for an empty row. The unspoken rule is that every row should be occupied before you sit next to someone. All the rows are occupied so I quickly scan to decide with whom I will sit. I finally choose a seat toward the front middle next to a young black man wearing a white-hooded sweater and a pair of baggy jeans. I quickly fall asleep and wake up when the driver announces that everyone must get off for the bus to refuel. Another young black man sitting behind me leans over to me and says, “You sleep like a baby! Sleeping baby! Damn, you sleep like a baby!”⁵ As we get off the bus, I explain how I can fall asleep anywhere. We begin to chat: Ty is from Alabama and he is traveling to Los Angeles with his cousin, Robert, whom I am sitting next to.

We chat about the bus, where we are headed, where we are coming from, the dirtiest bus station bathrooms, and other various topics. Ty then says, “I thought you were going to sit next to me when you were getting on the bus.” I ask him why he thought that. Ty responds that he could tell by the way I was looking at the seat next to his. He said that I was eyeing it and he wanted me to sit next to him so he shifted his body slightly toward the window to signify that the seat next to his was

open. I laugh because I realize that most people seem to know the unspoken system of avoiding and inviting people to sit next to them. Alternatively, I ask him what he would have done to keep the seat next to him empty. He says, "Yea, there are some crazies. You don't wanna sit next to a crazy person, a fatty, a chitchatter, and especially not a smelly one." Robert chimes in, "Bro, you a chitchatter." Robert tells me that I made the right choice not to sit next to Ty because he will talk nonstop. Ty continues, "You also don't wanna sit next to someone who just charged up their phone because you know they're gonna be on it the whole time. The best thing to do is to sit next to a normal person."

Ty tells me that I look "normal," which is why he wanted me to sit next to him. He says that "normal" to him means someone who "doesn't look crazy," will not talk much, and probably would not smell bad. When I ask him what he would have done if he realized that I smelled, he said that he would have made sure that I sit somewhere else after the next rest stop.

Over the course of two years of taking the bus, I learned from observing and speaking with other riders how to take certain actions to avoid or invite people. Ty and Robert are experienced riders, having journeyed from Montgomery to Los Angeles and back numerous times to visit family since they were teenagers. Speaking with other passengers, Ty's analysis of whom to avoid was consistent with what others said. Another rider who also gave me advice on "getting through the ride" confirmed that riders should avoid "really fat people" because they "sweat more and so smell more." During these long cross-country rides, the main concern is one's own comfort level rather than one's racial or ethnic background. People here discriminate according to personal characteristics such as hygiene and personality. The assumption is that sitting next to a "normal" person who is not "crazy" helps to avoid discomfort.

On the bus, there are 23 rows with four seats in each row, two on each side of the aisle. If all rows are filled with at least one person and there are ten more people getting on the bus, the passenger who is already seated in her own row must act strategically to keep from having one of the ten people sit next to her. In these brief moments, the front stage performance ensues. People take appropriate action to signal to watchers that they must not sit next to them.

As Lofland notes, there are ways of managing the body to "create around himself a symbolic shield of privacy" (Lofland 1973:140). Lofland explains that the lone individual is unable to transform the character of public space. What can transform, however, is how the individual interacts with the space.

Loretta, who is an experienced rider, is a 19-year-old Indiana University student from Missouri. She says that she knows all the moves to keep her adjacent seat empty. Since she is petite, she could easily roll up into a ball and sleep if she had the row to herself. She lists off her strategies:

Avoid eye contact with people getting on the bus; lean against the window and stretch out your legs on the other seat; place a large bag or sleeping bag on the empty seat; sit on the aisle seat and blast your iPod, and if someone asks for the window

seat, pretend you don't hear them; place several small items on the empty seat so that its clearly difficult and not worth their time to wait for you to clear the seat; pretend to sleep; sit on the aisle seat and look out the window with a "blank stare" (makes you look crazy); put your coat there and make it look like the seat's already taken. Loretta adds, "If all else fails, you can lie and say that you are saving the seat for someone."

After hearing Loretta's advice, I observed that such practice of using the body as a "symbolic shield of privacy" was common.⁶ Passengers, indeed, made conscious effort not to have anyone sit next to them. As I tried using these moves myself, I found them quite effective. According to Loretta, if someone attempts to sit next to someone when there are ample seats available, he or she is considered a "weirdo" because they are not aware of the social rules; passengers should not sit next to another person when there are more than enough open rows. Most people are aware of the unspoken seat rule. To deter the "weirdo" from sitting next to him or her, the row occupant gives off a slight stare or sigh to signal that the "weirdo" is breaking the rules. And in this way, the rules are reinforced.

The rules at terminal waiting areas are similar. For example, I observed that if there are four empty seats, the first person often sits at the very last seat and the second comer sits at the other end. If the first person sits on the second seat, the second individual leaves one seat in between herself and the stranger. Similar practice can be observed in places where people want to avoid any kind of interaction with others. What causes such nonsocial behavior? And what makes this social space nonsocial? The following sections will illuminate these questions.

BECOMING NONSOCIAL

The way people avoid others through active effort is an example of social norms in nonsocial transient spaces. Here, people create an invisible boundary around themselves and contain themselves within it. As a result, confrontations are usually uncommon. When conflicts or outbursts occur, it functions to reinforce the norms of the space. But the question lingers, why do people in certain spaces make such effort to avoid others? In the sections below, I describe the various reasons passengers perform nonsocial transient behavior.

Uncertainty about Strangers

Safety concerns are one of the reasons people are antisocial. News about Greyhound Lines in the media are commonly about the "sketchy" terminals being relocated away from downtown districts, the bus being stranded in a remote location, shootings on or near the bus and in terminals, death, or theft. In 2008, the story of a passenger being decapitated by a fellow rider on the Greyhound spread throughout the media. One bystander reported, "While we were watching the door, (the perpetrator) calmly walks up to the front with the head in his hand and the

knife and just calmly stares at us and drops the head right in front of us.”⁷ This confirmed for some that riding the bus is frightening and that “crazies” travel on the Greyhound. In response, Greyhound Lines immediately increased security. However, security measures at most terminals remain low. One can easily store a weapon or drugs in a bag without being searched at most ticket stations. In a recent tragic incident, a twenty-five-year-old man shot a random passenger with a .22-caliber weapon at a Greyhound station. It was reported that among other items, the shooter was carrying a 9.5-inch sheath knife, a black ammunition magazine, and thirty-seven .22-caliber rifle rounds in his bag (Scoles 2011). These dangerous incidents play a role in shaping the atmosphere of Greyhound bus travels. Interaction on the bus and at the terminals may be limited and reserved because people want to avoid any potentially dangerous encounters. For every passenger, the *other* is the possible criminal. As a result, passengers are wary of one another.

Avoiding physical danger is not the only reason people socially disengage on the bus or at the terminals. Uncertainty about strangers causes passengers to suspect others of stealing. Passengers pay close attention to their belongings and avoid interacting with others altogether. Greyhound’s policy is that everyone is responsible for his or her own personal bags at the stations and on the bus. But the bags that the attendants place in the underneath cabin are also at risk of being stolen because anyone can grab a bag and walk out of the station without showing proof that it belongs to them. Many passengers shared stories with me about a stolen suitcase, backpack, and even unopened water bottles. This makes people vigilant about their belongings and suspicious of their neighbors. As such, it is common for people to keep a close watch on their bags that are placed in the luggage compartment (Wellington 2010). Some people do not board the bus until they see that their bag is securely stowed and locked away in the underneath compartment.

At other public places, such as a school library or a café, people may leave a few items on their table without feeling anxious that their belongings could be stolen. They may trust that no one would take their items and ask a neighbor to “watch their stuff.” Morrill and Snow’s (2005) concept, “restrained helpfulness,” explains this kind of cooperative interaction among strangers, where strangers politely interact with one another in a helpful way. This is uncommon on the Greyhound bus and terminals. People do not ask others if they can temporarily watch their belongings, or if they can take a seat where another person’s belongings are placed. In fact, many people sit on the floor rather than ask someone to remove their items from an unoccupied seat.

Bus Delays and Aggravation

A passenger may avoid social interaction as a result of being jaded by the public transit system, or follow the lead of others who have had negative experiences with long-distance travel. When talking with people who have taken numerous trips on the

Greyhound, it is common to hear about extended delays. There are several reasons why passengers wait for a long time for their bus. Besides obvious reasons such as the passenger missing the bus or street traffic, the bus is sometimes already full, or priority is given to U.S. soldiers. There can also be a remarkable delay when a bus breaks down and there are no buses to substitute. Experienced riders often expect these delays. As a result, waiting hours for the bus does not always ignite angry emotions. The following is an example of my trip from Los Angeles (LA) to Las Vegas:

I purchased a ticket that departs at 11:15 am from the LA terminal and arrives in Las Vegas at 6:30 pm. At 1:15 pm, I check my watch and look outside through the glass doors. No bus to Las Vegas had arrived yet. Around 2 pm, I watch as people begin to grow weary because the 12:15 and the 1:45 departing passengers also lined up to wait for the bus heading to Las Vegas. The terminal is now filled with passengers headed to Las Vegas. At 2:20 pm, an attendant comes by to announce that the “bus will be arriving in fifteen minutes.” Around 2:40 pm, the attendant returns without further updates on the bus, but begins to pass out \$5.00 meal vouchers to the 11:15 am and 12:15 pm departure passengers. The 1:45 departure passengers grumble and complain because they were not offered the meal vouchers, but the attendant sharply barks back, “Well, you haven’t been waiting since the morning like these folks! The meal vouchers are a *privilege*. I can choose who to give them to, and who not to, and the 1:45 folks are not getting them.” At around 3:05 pm, a different attendant comes by to announce, “The bus will be arriving in fifteen minutes.” This attendant returns again to make the same announcement at 3:35, 3:50, and 4:00. Some people roll their eyes and others shake their heads. Finally, one bus arrives at 4:20 pm and departs at 4:35 pm. Since there are more than 60 passengers waiting for the bus to Las Vegas, the second group is told to wait another thirty minutes for the next bus. I arrive in Las Vegas around midnight.

Appalling about this scenario was that people were more upset about not receiving a meal voucher than waiting for several hours. When I made a comment about the delay to an older woman standing in front of me, she responded shaking her head, “Honey, don’t think about it or it’ll piss you off. Just don’t think about it.” While the woman in front of me was responsive to my comment, most people were waiting quietly in line, either standing or sitting on the floor. A few people who came as a group spoke to each other, but the norm of the space was to keep quiet.

As the woman in front of me said, it is pointless to complain or be upset with bus delays. Customers have an unspoken understanding, “You get what you pay for.” Although bus tickets are not always cheap, it is often cheaper than alternatives like train and plane tickets. But also, the cost of the ticket does not always dictate the quality of service. Most people who take the Greyhound understand that problems are likely to arise. Consequently, this creates a social system where people become reluctant to complain about factors they have no control over. To complain would only draw attention to them. In this situation, individuals seem to figure that the best way to deal with the frustration is to retract. Additionally, the aggravation caused by

the long wait prevents passengers from engaging in a friendly conversation. Waiting passengers are upset and in no mood to socialize.

At times, however, nonsocial transient behavior serves as a form of expressing sympathy. By remaining quiet, nearby strangers are, in a way, displaying their understanding of a tense situation. Take, for example, the following vignette:

While the bus is driving through the southern tip of Illinois on a gray and rainy evening, we get off the highway and turn into the parking lot of a mall. A blonde teenager wearing cut-off jean shorts and a fuchsia colored t-shirt gets on the bus and finds a seat diagonal from me. Her hair and clothes are wet due to the rain. She plops down on the seat with her navy blue Jansport backpack on her lap. She pulls out a cell phone from the front zip pocket and calls her dad. She angrily says, "Shit, Dad! I missed the first bus like hours ago and the second bus never came. I've been standing in the rain since this morning!" The conversations among other passengers that had been taking place cease. Everyone on the bus is quiet now because her conversation is audible throughout the bus. She continues yelling, "It's not my fucking fault the next bus comes five fucking hours later."

Everyone on the bus, including the bus driver, remained quiet for several minutes. Fellow passengers were empathetic: no one instructed her to quiet down because they could hear and feel her frustration. While a loud conversation over the phone would have provoked angry remarks for the speaker to be quiet in other situations, this girl's plight incited a kind of silent support. The aggravation of waiting for the bus is something that most riders can relate to. No one urges the girl to keep quiet and everyone remains silent, both eavesdropping on her conversation and understanding the tense situation. This exemplifies how nonsocial transient behavior can sometimes function as a source of silent support. By staying quiet and keeping to themselves, strangers on the bus express their understanding of the aggravating situation.

Whether the bus is long overdue or the passenger has missed his or her ride, waiting is a large part of the Greyhound experience. The Greyhound website states that some bus stops are "at a local airport or transit center, while others may simply be a stop along a highway route, without an enclosed waiting area."⁸ Indeed, many of these stops are located in areas where the waiting passenger may not be able to speak with an attendant, use the restroom, or simply have a roof over their head. As such, waiting for the bus can be an aggravating experience that causes people to disengage and want to be left undisturbed. This example illustrates how being nonsocial at times serves as a social function to uphold interaction order.

Physical and Psychological Exhaustion

A nonsocial transient space does not always entail a quiet withdrawal from others. There are moments when emotional outbursts occur, which function to reinforce nonsocial behavior. John Dixon and his colleagues write, "repressions offer reassurance that the integrity of the public order remains intact and that others

can be trusted to act as they should” (2006:188). Outbursts or repressions act to push disorder back into order.

Long Greyhound trips take a toll on people’s bodies. Because people are required to get off the bus every three to four hours, passengers are unable to have an undisturbed comfortable sleep. As exhausted people share the same enclosed space together, inhibitions begin to lower, and some people may act out even though they may typically withhold their emotions. Being in a small and enclosed space is also tiring, which allows passengers to understand or assume that others are also tired and do not wish to be bothered.

This kind of relationship is different in cosmopolitan spaces such as the café, where people do not assume that one’s neighbor is exhausted. As such, a patron may easily ask a favor of their neighbor to “watch their stuff.” Café patrons do not feel that they are placing a huge burden on their neighbors because they would return the favor.

Yet, when people are exhausted, any small noise, or an extended conversation, can be quite distressing. On the bus, the social norm and expectation is that “you keep your body to yourself, your belongings close by you, and your conversations to a minimum.” Bus drivers emphasize that all conversations, whether on mobile phones or with a neighbor, must be kept short and at a low volume. If someone speaks in an audible tone of voice, they are given looks and stares. People clear their throats to hint to the speaker that he or she is being loud. At times, someone may even overtly complain, “Hey, keep it down!” or try to silence the speaker with a “Shh!” These cues serve as a reminder to violators to uphold the rules. The following is one such example:

It is about 10:00 am. Those who are awake are quiet, only making subtle movements. People keep their eyes closed, stare out the window, or quietly read a book. A large, older white man, between sixty and sixty-five years old, sitting behind me begins a conversation with his daughter over the phone. His voice is not loud, but audible in the quiet space. A young black woman, perhaps in her early thirties, sitting in the row next to mine exclaims, “Shh!” I sit with my back against the window, being able to observe the woman and the man sitting behind me through the crevice between my two seats. The man says over the phone, “I gotta keep a little quiet. This rude woman just shushed me.”

The young black woman responds sharply, “Old man, keep your conversation down! Everyone can hear you.”

The man says to the woman, “You’re being a little rude here. Honey, I’m keeping to myself.”

The woman angrily bellows, “Old man, you need to learn some social manners. You don’t see that everyone’s sleeping here?”

The man and the woman continue to argue. Some people on the bus are quiet, including the bus driver. Others in the back of the bus chuckle and echo, “Oh!” One passenger in the back yells, “You both shut up!” Throughout their quarrel, people in the back of the bus call out for both of them to “be quiet” or “shut up.” Finally,

the driver uses his microphone to instruct the passengers to “keep it down” because the next stop will be in fifteen minutes. The driver does not threaten to kick them off the bus. After a heated verbal battle, the woman says, “I’m gonna kick your ass when we get off.” The man responds, “I’d like to see you try.”

This interaction between the woman and the man is an example of how nonsocial transient behavior is enforced. There exists a range of public spaces where the tolerability of chatting on cell phones varies. According to the woman’s outburst and proposition to have a physical fight once off the bus, she made it clear that in this space, talking on the cell phone is unacceptable. The older man was appalled because he did not expect such hostility. The older man appeared shocked by the younger woman’s response because he did not think he was breaking any rules. His greatest offense, at least to the young woman, was that he was disturbing the silence on the bus. Had other people been talking as well, the woman may not have created such a scene to single out the older man. She was upset not only because he was talking on the phone, but also because he was breaching the unspoken rules of the space. The bus driver did not intervene until the final few moments of the argument. With a few exceptions of people demanding that they both keep quiet, most passengers remained uninvolved.

When the bus reached the rest stop, people sitting toward the front of the bus quickly gathered their belongings and exited the bus. The young black woman grabbed her purse, got off, and walked past the crowd to the designated smoking area. The older white man slowly got up, pushing his body up with his hands firmly against the back of my seat. He got off the bus and walked in the opposite direction. When the twenty-minute break was over, the two got back on the bus. A physical fight never commenced and the bus remained quiet until the next stop.

Lack of inhibitions on the bus may occur especially during a long drive. People are inclined to act on their instinctual and impulsive behavior because they are tired and have been sharing an intimate space where they eat, sleep, and lounge for a long period. Emotional outbursts occur and serve to reinforce nonsocial transient behavior. When passengers are stuck at a station for numerous hours, a kind of “backstage” lack of inhibitions may take place. The fight is not important. What is significant is that an action takes place to bring the disorder back into order when the code of conduct is broken. In turn, the kind of social space necessary for people to feel safe in an otherwise uncertain space is preserved.

CONCLUSION

What causes people to withdraw in certain social spaces? A simple explanation may be that different spaces have different purposes. For example, people go to a bar to drink and mingle in a social space. However, other places such as bus terminals serve a different purpose. On Greyhound buses and its stations, passengers are inclined to isolate themselves from other passengers. Furthermore, the longer the passenger

travels with others, the more he or she will abstain from interacting with others. These nonsocial transient spaces are not social spaces and individuals in this space simply expect to get to their destination. Another reason may be that when the situation is unpredictable and incalculable, people act and behave in certain ways to minimize instability. To be sure, not everyone on the Greyhound is opposed to all interactions with others. In this study, I spoke with various people: passengers, drivers, attendants, and individuals who hang out at terminals. However, extensive conversations are not common and people mostly keep to themselves. People relax alone and learn how to secure their private spaces.

In public places, individuals must share the social space with others. However, at certain public spaces, individuals treat them as private personal spaces. Using the experience of Greyhound bus travel, this article has discussed the different ways people symbolically manage their interactions with others in, what I call, *nonsocial transient spaces*. In such spaces, people exhibit *nonsocial transient behavior*; they intricately design and carefully coordinate interaction rituals by avoiding people nearby and slipping into a personal space of the self. Nonsocial transient behavior is also symbolic because individuals shape one another's responses and, in effect, the general atmosphere of the entire social space.

The goal of these terminologies is not to figure out why people are not more social in public. Rather, it is to understand why people disengage and in what kinds of situations they do so. This article has described several scenarios in which people perform nonsocial behaviors. The objective of nonsocial transient behavior is twofold: to keep safe and to remain undisturbed in an otherwise uncertain social space. For Greyhound patrons, the combination of passengers' transient nature, fear of potential danger, physical exhaustion, and confinement in a small space without privacy cause people to actively disengage. Similarly, nonsocial transient behavior can be observed in other places of uncertainty and discomfort.

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NOTES

1. In this article, the term "Greyhound" will also refer to other independent bus lines that have partnerships with Greyhound Lines, Inc. All bus tickets for research were purchased via the Greyhound Company.
2. Since 1914, various bus companies have merged with Greyhound. Today, Greyhound Lines, Inc. lauds itself as the "largest provider of intercity bus transportation" in North America.

3. Darryl Wellington (2010:65), who has taken several cross-country trips on the Greyhound for two decades, writes that typical passengers are also “runaways (of one kind or another), released convicts, [and] recently divorced women.”
4. In all, I traveled through twenty-eight states. Some journeys were repeated.
5. Prosocial interactions such as these are rare but occur on occasion. While it is uncommon for extensive conversations to occur among strangers, some strangers may “make small talk” with others nearby.
6. Lofland (1973) similarly discusses in detail six “principles of symbolic transformation.”
7. Available from CBC news, July 31, 2008.
8. Similar to my own observations, Wellington (2010) asserts that the Greyhound is overall a “mad escapade” with unreliable luggage service and poorly lit and unsafe bus transferring locations.

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