

How should we interact with strangers on the bus?

Travelling on public transport gives us a unique opportunity to cross paths with people from all walks of life. But how do we know how to behave and interact with strangers in such close proximity? At the **University of British Columbia** in Canada, sociologist **Dr Amy Hanser** is studying the unwritten rules that underly our social interactions on buses.



Dr Amy Hanser

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Field of research

Sociology

Research project

Uncovering the unwritten rules that underly how we behave and interact with others on public buses

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Talk like a ...

sociologist

Civil inattention — being aware of the people around us without imposing on them or paying direct attention to them

Ethnography — the study of individuals and communities in their own environment through direct observation

Explicit — clearly expressed or stated without ambiguity or vagueness

Field notes — detailed records of observations made by researchers when studying behaviour in a social setting

Implicit — generally understood but not clearly stated or put into words

Patterns — behaviours or sets of behaviours that reoccur over time

Social interaction — the actions and reactions between individuals when encountering one another in a social setting

Picture yourself waiting at a crowded bus stop by the side of a busy road. Maybe you're travelling home after a long day at school or heading into town to meet your friends. It's raining but there's no room under the shelter, so you stand impatiently with your hood up and your hands in your pockets, trying to dodge the spray from passing cars.

By the time the bus pulls up, you're drenched. You climb aboard, shaking off the rain like a wet dog, and pay for your ticket. Looking

down the length of the bus, you search for a seat amidst a sea of dripping raincoats and unfamiliar faces. What do you do next?

Scenarios like this fascinate Dr Amy Hanser, a sociologist from The University of British Columbia. Social situations, such as riding a bus, are often governed by unwritten social rules that influence how we interact with the people around us. Using a range of sociological and ethnographic techniques, Amy is studying social interaction on public buses and the unwritten rules that govern our behaviour.

What is social interaction?

"Social interaction is a fundamental part of our social lives," says Amy. "We can think of it as the 'building blocks' of our social experiences." Essentially, any time that you interact with another human being, whether talking to a friend, walking past a stranger, or exchanging eye-contact with a passenger on a bus, you are involved in social interaction.

"Studying social interaction allows us to identify patterns of behaviour that are associated with groups of people and social



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settings,” explains Amy. These patterns give sociologists clues about the ‘rules’ that shape how people act in social situations. “Most of us know these rules implicitly, but by making them explicit and thinking about them, we can see these public spaces in a new way, and ask new questions about them,” adds Amy.

What patterns and rules exist on buses?

Buses, and other forms of public transport, are important social settings that often facilitate social interaction between strangers. As a result, there are plenty of behaviour patterns and unwritten social rules for Amy to explore.

For example, when you ride a bus, there is no need to concentrate on traffic or directions, so you are free to turn your attention elsewhere. You might read a book, look out the window or play a game on your phone. “Some people might look around the bus, but most people expect that passengers will avoid staring at one another,” says Amy. “In fact, this is one of the unwritten rules of public transport: people should be aware of others, but not focused on them.”

At the same time, you cannot ignore other passengers entirely. You might have to give your seat to another passenger, step aside to let someone pass or shift your body so that the person next to you has enough space. Showing that you are aware of others but not intruding on their privacy is called civil inattention and is a key unwritten rule in most social situations.

Another set of unwritten social rules on buses relates to who you can or cannot talk to. “Some people, like the bus driver, but

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Understanding how different people experience these rules can help us make our public transport more welcoming and inclusive.

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also elderly passengers and children, are more ‘open’ to interaction with strangers on public transit than others are,” explains Amy. “People feel more comfortable starting conversations with ‘open’ people, even if they are strangers to them.”

But do these rules change depending on where you sit? “It has been argued that there are ‘zones’ of conversation on buses,” says Amy. “Most interactions and conversations between strangers happen at the front of the bus, though the back of the bus tends to be where people travelling together locate themselves.”

“There are so many interesting questions to ask about social interactions on buses and what might cause them,” continues Amy. For example, how do social interactions change from morning commutes to late-night journeys? How does the atmosphere on a bus change as it moves through different neighbourhoods? How do people from different backgrounds experience these interactions?

“Once you start noticing these patterns, you will find it hard to stop,” enthuses

Amy. “Identifying these rules and patterns allows us to ask questions about why they are the way they are, who or what might be enforcing them, and what consequences they might have.”

How does Amy study social interaction on buses?

Social scientists often adopt a research method called ‘ethnography’ which involves collecting data through observations and interviews. “One of the best ways to study social interaction is to observe people’s actions and behaviours when they interact with one another,” explains Amy. When observing behaviours in a social setting, researchers take ‘field notes’ to record their observations.

“However, one challenge that researchers face is that it is not always possible to know what the people being observed are thinking or feeling,” says Amy. “For this reason, ethnography usually involves some form of interviewing, either informally, for example, when the researcher asks people around them why they are doing things the way they are, or more formally, when a researcher sits down with someone and asks them a set of questions prepared in advance.” Often, the researcher will use their field notes to prepare the interview questions.

Why is Amy studying social interaction on buses?

“My goal is not to create a list of the hidden ‘rules’ on public transport and then get people to follow them,” explains Amy. “These unspoken rules are subject to interpretation, and are not always shared or recognised.” Understanding how different people experience these rules can help us make our public transport more welcoming and inclusive.

About sociology

“**W**orking as a sociologist is exciting because we study a wide range of topics, and use a diverse set of research methods to do so,” says Amy. “Many sociologists rely on survey data, but others draw upon interviews, ethnography, historical documents or large online datasets.” Sociologists study a huge range of topics, from workplaces and the education system to gender roles and family dynamics. “What holds these diverse topics together is an interest in how the larger patterns, beyond the individual, structure how social life is organised,” explains Amy. “Once you develop a sociological way of thinking, you can turn your attention to all sorts of topics.”

One of the biggest challenges facing

researchers is figuring out the best way to answer the questions that they want to investigate. What kind of data do they need to answer a specific research question? Do those data already exist, or do they need to collect them?

“Once you have completed your study and started to analyse your data, another challenge is to constantly question your own findings,” says Amy. “Are there other explanations for your results than the explanation you have come up with?” Researchers can address this challenge by sharing and discussing their findings with other researchers.

Often, sociologists will also share their findings with the wider population. Finding

ways to communicate research with non-scientists can be challenging, but there are lots of options. “Many sociologists try to write opinion columns in news media or use social media outlets to communicate relevant research,” says Amy. “Some of my colleagues have blogs where they ‘translate’ their work for a general readership.”

When conducting sociological research, it is important to consider the whole spectrum of experiences. “Often the most challenging differences that we encounter in social spaces like public transport are not, in fact, social or cultural ones,” explains Amy. “Physical disability, neurodiversity and mental illness all present difficulties that may change how people experience social interaction on public transport.”

Pathway from school to sociology

At school and college, study subjects related to sociology such as philosophy, economics, history and politics. Sociology often involves conducting research and analysing results, so studying science, data analysis and statistics will help you develop these skills.

Studying a degree in sociology at university will give you an excellent base to build on, and give you experience of using different research and analysis methods.

Most universities will regularly ask for volunteers to participate in experiments. Taking part will help you to develop your own understanding of how research works. You could also look for relevant internships and work experience opportunities.

Explore careers in sociology

You can learn more about sociology, and what sociologists study, by reading *Contexts* magazine (contexts.org) and The Society Pages website (thesocietypages.org). “These two excellent resources both showcase recent sociology research,” says Amy.

Most countries have a professional sociologist’s association such as the British Sociological Association (britsoc.co.uk), the American Sociological Association (asanet.org) and the Canadian Sociological Association (csa-scs.ca). “These associations often have information about studying and pursuing a career in sociology,” says Amy. You could even consider becoming a student member.

“Most professional sociologists work in university settings, conducting research and teaching university courses. But there are also many sociologists conducting research for government, in the business world, or working in the non-profit sector,” says Amy.



Meet Amy

I didn't know anything about sociology when I was a teenager! I was interested in lots of things, but I thought I would study chemistry at university and maybe become a professional chemist.

My actual path was quite unexpected. I took a class on Asian studies in high school, became very interested in Chinese society, and then studied Chinese language and East Asian studies at university. After I graduated, I lived and worked in China as an English teacher for two years, before moving to Hong Kong to work as a business journalist.

I knew that I wanted to learn more about how Chinese society was changing, so I applied to graduate programmes in the US. I was accepted onto a sociology programme despite having taken only one sociology course at university. Sociology picked me!

I started doing research in China. I studied young people's experiences in the job market. For my dissertation, I studied emerging consumerism and retail settings in China, actually working as a sales clerk in two department stores.

Now that I live in Canada, my research interests have shifted closer to home. I've studied the street food scene in Vancouver, my home city, and I've also studied the experiences of Chinese immigrants here, as I am still deeply interested in China.

Having such a wide range of interests makes me a little unusual as a sociologist, but it is also what drew me to sociology in the first place.

I've wanted to study social interactions on public transport for a long time – mostly because, as a regular bus rider, I have had a lot of interesting experiences on transport. Curiosity, and a real interest in people, is what motivates me.

I've had lot of role models, but what probably inspires me most are my students and their passion and curiosity about the world. I learn so much from them!

I love to go on urban rambles with one of my sons – we love to walk around the city where we live, both in our own neighbourhood and in other parts of the city. When our rambles take us further afield, we always ride the bus to get there!

Amy's top tips

1. If sociology or another social science, like political science, psychology or economics, sparks your interest, then university studies in that area are definitely the place to start.
2. Try out courses in a variety of topics and fields.
3. Don't be shy with your professors! Talk to them, go to their office hours, and find out if there is a way you can get involved in their research or do some of your own. I didn't even study sociology when I was a university student, but I had professors who encouraged me to consider graduate school. For me, this was important.