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SOCIAL INTERACTION:  
Private Presentations

14

## Meanwhile Backstage: Behavior in Public Bathrooms

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Erving Goffman, the founder of the dramaturgical perspective in sociology, first proposed that people behave in ways that they consciously manage in order to foster the most favorable impressions of themselves. They do this by scrupulously adhering to the microsocial norms of individual and interactional behavior, using backstage regions to prepare themselves for their frontstage public displays. To investigate these norms, Cahill and his students made systematic observations in men's and women's public bathrooms, carefully recording people's behavior patterns. In a selection that is sure to generate both recognition and amusement, Cahill et al. describe and analyze the landscape of public bathrooms, the common rituals found there, and the way people engage in backstage behavior designed to support their appearance on subsequent re-emergence into the public domain. The norms upheld in this private yet public setting assert more fully how loyal members of society are to the behavioral guidelines we share and the meanings that people attribute to them. Do you recognize some of the behaviors that these authors describe? Have you ever wondered why you do these things? How is the social order maintained by acting in these ways?

Years ago the anthropologist Horace Miner (1955) suggested, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, that many of the rituals that behaviorally express and sustain the central values of our culture occur in bathrooms. Whether Miner realized it or not, and one suspects that he did, there was more to this thesis than his humorous interpretation of bathroom rituals suggests. As Erving Goffman (1959: 112–113) once observed, the vital secrets of our public shows are often visible in those settings that serve as backstage regions relative to our public performances:

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it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. . . . Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character.

Clearly, bathrooms or, as they are often revealingly called, restrooms, are such backstage regions. By implication, therefore, systematic study of bathroom behavior may yield valuable insights into the character and requirements of our routine public performances. . . .

### THE PERFORMANCE REGIONS OF PUBLIC BATHROOMS

Needless to say, one of the behaviors for which bathrooms are explicitly designed is defecation. In our society, as Goffman (1959: 121) observed, "defecation involves an individual in activity which is defined as inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards" that govern our public performances.

Such activity also causes the individual to disarrange his clothing and to "go out of play," that is, to drop from his face the expressive mask that he employs in face-to-face interaction. At the same time it becomes difficult for him to reassemble his personal front should the need to enter into interaction suddenly occur. (Goffman, 1959: 121)

When engaged in the act of defecation, therefore, individuals seek to insulate themselves from potential audiences in order to avoid discrediting the expressive masks that they publicly employ. Indeed, over 60 percent of the 1000 respondents to a survey conducted in the early 1960s reported that they "interrupted or postponed" defecation if they did not have sufficient privacy (Kira, 1966: 58).

In an apparent attempt to provide such privacy, toilets in many public bathrooms are surrounded by partially walled cubicles with doors that can be secured against potential intrusions. In fact, public bathrooms that do not provide individuals this protection from potential audiences are seldom used for the purpose of defecation. In the course of our research, for example, we never observed an individual using an unenclosed toilet for this purpose. If a bathroom contained both enclosed and unenclosed toilets, moreover, individuals ignored the unenclosed toilets even when queues had formed outside of the enclosed toilets. In a sense, therefore, the cubicles that typically surround toilets in public bathrooms, commonly called stalls, physically divide such bathrooms into two distinct performance regions.

Indeed, Goffman (1971: 32) has used the term "stall" to refer to any "well-bounded space to which individuals lay temporary claim, possession being on an all-or-nothing basis." Clearly, a toilet stall is a member of this sociological family of ecological arrangements. Sociologically speaking, however, it is not physical boundaries, per se, that define a space as a stall but the behavioral regard given such boundaries. For example, individuals who open or attempt to open the door

of an occupied toilet stall typically provide a remedy for this act, in most cases a brief apology such as "Whoops" or "Sorry." By offering such a remedy, the offending individual implicitly defines the attempted intrusion as a delict and, thereby, affirms his or her belief in a rule that prohibits such intrusions (Goffman, 1971: 113). In this sense, toilet stalls provide occupying individuals not only physical protection against potential audiences but normative protection as well.

In order to receive this protection, however, occupying individuals must clearly inform others of their claim to such a stall. Although individuals sometimes lean down and look under the doors of toilet stalls for feet, they typically expect occupying individuals to mark their claim to a toilet stall by securely closing the door.<sup>1</sup> On one occasion, for example, a middle-aged woman began to push open the unlocked door of a toilet stall. Upon discovering that the stall was occupied, she immediately said, "I'm sorry," and closed the door. When a young woman emerged from the stall a couple minutes later, the older woman apologized once again but pointed out that "the door was open." The young woman responded, "[I]t's okay," thereby minimizing the offense and perhaps acknowledging a degree of culpability on her part.

As is the case with many physical barriers to perception (Goffman, 1963: 152), the walls and doors of toilet stalls are also treated as if they cut off more communication than they actually do. Under most circumstances, for example, the walls and doors of toilet stalls are treated as if they were barriers to conversation. Although acquainted individuals may sometimes carry on a conversation through the walls of a toilet stall if they believe the bathroom is not otherwise occupied, they seldom do so if they are aware that others are present. Moreover, individuals often attempt to ignore offensive sounds and smells that emanate from occupied toilet stalls, even though the exercise of such "tactful blindness" (Goffman, 1955: 219) is sometimes a demanding task. In any case, the walls and doors of toilet stalls provide public actors with both physical and normative shields behind which they can perform potentially discrediting acts.

Toilet stalls in public bathrooms are, therefore, publicly accessible yet private backstage regions. Although same-sexed clients of a public establishment may lay claim to any unoccupied stall in the bathroom designated for use by persons of their sex, once such a claim is laid, once the door to the stall is closed, it is transformed into the occupying individual's private, albeit temporary, retreat from the demands of public life. While occupying the stall, that individual can engage in a variety of potentially discrediting acts with impunity.

When not concealed behind the protective cover of a toilet stall, however, occupants of public bathrooms may be observed by others. For the most part, as previously noted, same-sexed clients of a public establishment can enter and exit at will the bathroom designated for their use, and it may be simultaneously occupied by as many individuals as its physical dimensions allow. By implication, therefore, occupants of public bathrooms must either perform or be ready to perform for an audience. As a result, the behavior that routinely occurs in the "open region" of a public bathroom, that area that is not enclosed by toilet stalls, resembles, in many important respects, the behavior that routinely occurs in other public settings. . . .

## THE RITUALS OF PUBLIC BATHROOMS

As Goffman (1971) convincingly argued, much of this behavior can best be described as "interpersonal rituals." Emile Durkheim (1965), in his famous analysis of religion, defined a ritual as a perfunctory, conventionalized act which expresses respect and regard for some object of "ultimate value." In a different context, moreover, he observed that in modern, Western societies,

the human personality is a sacred thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others. . . . (Durkheim, 1974: 37)

According to Durkheim, negative rituals express respect and regard for objects of ultimate value by protecting them from profanation. By implication, according to Goffman (1971: 62), negative interpersonal rituals involve the behavioral honoring of the sacred individual's right to private "preserves" and "to be let alone." For example, individuals typically refrain from physically, conversationally, or visually intruding on an occupied toilet stall. In doing so, they implicitly honor the occupying individual's right to be let alone and in this respect perform a negative interpersonal ritual.

Similarly, the queues that typically form in public bathrooms when the demand for sinks, urinals, and toilet stalls exceeds the available supply are also products of individuals' mutual performance of negative interpersonal rituals. Individuals typically honor one another's right to the turn claimed by taking up a position in such a queue, even when "creature releases" (Goffman, 1963: 69) threaten to break through their self-control. Young children provide an occasional exception, sometimes ignoring the turn-order of such queues. Yet even then the child's caretaker typically requests, on the child's behalf, the permission of those waiting in the queue. Between performances at a music festival, for example, a preschool-age girl and her mother were observed rapidly walking toward the entrance to a women's bathroom out of which a queue extended for several yards down a nearby sidewalk. As they walked past those waiting in the queue, the mother repeatedly asked: "Do you mind? She really has to go."

The interpersonal rituals that routinely occur in the open region of public bathrooms are not limited, however, to negative ones. If individuals possess a small patrimony of sacredness, then, as Durkheim (1974: 37) noted, "the greatest good is in communion" with such sacred objects. When previously acquainted individuals come into contact with one another, therefore, they typically perform conventionalized acts, positive interpersonal rituals, that express respect and regard for their previous communion with one another. In a sense, moreover, negative and positive interpersonal rituals are two sides of the same expressive coin. Whereas negative interpersonal rituals symbolically protect individuals from profanation by others, positive interpersonal rituals symbolically cleanse communion between individuals of its potentially defiling implications.<sup>2</sup> Although a positive interpersonal ritual may consist of no more than a brief exchange of greetings, failure to at least acknowledge one's

previous communion with another is, in effect, to express disregard for the relationship and, by implication, the other individual's small patrimony of sacredness (Goffman, 1971: 62-94).

Even when previously acquainted individuals come into contact with one another in a public bathroom, therefore, they typically acknowledge their prior relationship. In fact, the performance of such positive interpersonal rituals sometimes interfered with the conduct of our research. On one occasion, for example, a member of the research team was in the open region of an otherwise unoccupied men's bathroom. While he was writing some notes about an incident that had just occurred, an acquaintance entered.

A: Hey——! (walks to a urinal and unzips his pants) Nothing like pissin.

O: Yup.

A: Wh'da hell ya doin? (walks over to a sink and washes hands)

O: Writing.

A: Heh, heh, yea. About people pissin. . . That's for you.

O: Yup.

A: Take care.

O: Mmm Huh.

As this incident illustrates, individuals must be prepared to perform positive interpersonal rituals when in the open region of public bathrooms, especially those in public establishments with a relatively stable clientele. Whereas some of these may consist of no more than a brief exchange of smiles, others may involve lengthy conversations that reaffirm the participants' shared biography.

In contrast, when unacquainted individuals come into contact with one another in the open regions of public bathrooms, they typically perform a brief, negative interpersonal ritual that Goffman (1963: 84) termed "civil inattention":

[O]ne gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present. . . while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.

Through this brief pattern of visual interaction, individuals both acknowledge one another's presence and, immediately thereafter, one another's right to be let alone.

A variation on civil inattention is also commonly performed in the open region of public bathrooms, most often by men using adjacent urinals. Although masculine clothing permits males to urinate without noticeably disturbing their clothed appearance, they must still partially expose their external genitalia in order to do so. Clearly, the standards of modesty that govern public behavior prohibit even such limited exposure of the external genitalia. Although the sides of some urinals and the urinating individual's back provide partial barriers to perception, they do not provide protection against the glances of someone occupying an adjacent urinal. In our society, however, "when

bodies are naked, glances are clothed" (Goffman, 1971: 46). What men typically give one another when using adjacent urinals is not, therefore, civil inattention but "nonperson treatment" (Goffman, 1963: 83-84); that is, they treat one another as if they were part of the setting's physical equipment, as "objects not worthy of a glance." When circumstances allow, of course, unacquainted males typically avoid occupying adjacent urinals and, thereby, this ritually delicate situation.

It is not uncommon, however, for previously acquainted males to engage in conversation while using adjacent urinals. For example, the following interaction was observed in the bathroom of a restaurant.

A middle-aged man is standing at one of two urinals. Another middle-aged man enters the bathroom and, as he approaches the available urinal, greets the first man by name. The first man quickly casts a side-long glance at the second and returns the greeting. He then asks the second man about his "new granddaughter," and they continue to talk about grandchildren until one of them zips up his pants and walks over to a sink. Throughout the conversation, neither man turned his head so as to look at the other.

As this example illustrates, urinal conversations are often characterized by a lack of visual interaction between the participants. Instead of looking at one another while listening, as is typical among white, middle-class Americans (see LaFrance and Mayo, 1976), participants in such conversations typically fix their gaze on the wall immediately in front of them, an intriguing combination of the constituent elements of positive and negative interpersonal rituals. Although ritually celebrating their prior communion with one another, they also visually honor one another's right to privacy.

Due to the particular profanations and threats of profanations that characterize public bathrooms, moreover, a number of variations on these general patterns also commonly occur. In our society, as Goffman (1971: 41) observed, bodily excreta are considered "agencies of defilement." Although supported by germ theory, this view involves somewhat more than a concern for hygiene. Once such substances as urine, fecal matter, menstrual discharge, and flatus leave individuals' bodies, they acquire the power to profane even though they may not have the power to infect. In any case, many of the activities in which individuals engage when in bathrooms are considered both self-profaning and potentially profaning to others.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a variety of ritually delicate situations often arise in public bathrooms.

After using urinals and toilets, for example, individuals' hands are considered contaminated and, consequently, a source of contamination to others. In order to demonstrate both self-respect and respect for those with whom they might come into contact, individuals are expected to and often do wash their hands after using urinals and toilets. Sinks for this purpose are typically located in the open region of public bathrooms, allowing others to witness the performance of this restorative ritual.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, however, public bathrooms are not adequately equipped for this purpose. Most commonly, towel dispensers are empty or broken.

Although individuals sometimes do not discover this situation until after they have already washed their hands, they often glance at towel dispensers as they walk from urinals and toilet stalls to sinks. If they discover that the towel dispensers are empty or broken, there is typically a moment of indecision. Although they sometimes proceed to wash their hands and then dry them on their clothes, many times they hesitate, facially display disgust, and audibly sigh. By performing these gestures-in-the-round, they express a desire to wash their hands; their hands may remain contaminated, but their regard for their own and others' sacredness is established.

Because the profaning power of odor operates over a distance and in all directions, moreover, individuals who defecate in public bathrooms not only temporarily profane themselves but also risk profaning the entire setting. If an individual is clearly responsible for the odor of feces or flatus that fills a bathroom, therefore, he or she must rely on others to identify sympathetically with his or her plight and, consequently, exercise tactful blindness. However, this is seldom left to chance. When other occupants of the bathroom are acquaintances, the offending individual may offer subtle, self-derogatory display as a defensive, face-saving measure (Goffman, 1955). Upon emerging from toilet stalls, for example, such persons sometimes look at acquaintances and facially display disgust. Self-effacing humor is also occasionally used in this way. On one occasion, for example, an acquaintance of a member of the research team emerged from a toilet stall after having filled the bathroom with a strong fecal odor. He walked over to a sink, smiled at the observer, and remarked: "Something died in there." Through such subtle self-derogation, offending individuals metaphorically split themselves into two parts: a sacred self that assigns blame and a blameworthy animal self. Because the offending individual assigns blame, moreover, there is no need for others to do so (Goffman, 1971: 113).

If other occupants of the bathroom are unfamiliar to the offending individual, however, a somewhat different defensive strategy is commonly employed. Upon emerging from a toilet stall, individuals who are clearly responsible for an offensive odor seldom engage in visual interaction with unacquainted others. In so doing, they avoid visually acknowledging not only the presence of others but others' acknowledgement of their own presence as well. In a sense, therefore, the offending individual temporarily suspends his or her claim to the status of sacred object, an object worthy of such visual regard. The assumption seems to be that by suspending one's claim to this status, others need not challenge it and are, consequently, more likely to exercise tactful blindness in regard to the offense.

Despite Miner's humorous misidentification and interpretation of bathroom rituals, therefore, there is something to recommend the view that many of the rituals that behaviorally express and sustain the central values of our culture occur in bathrooms. Although these "central values do but itch a little," as Goffman (1971: 185) noted, "everyone scratches." And, it must be added, they often scratch in public bathrooms. However, routine bathroom behavior consists of more than the interpersonal rituals that are found in other public settings or variations on their general theme. . . .

## MANAGING PERSONAL FRONTS

When in a public setting, as Goffman (1963: 24) pointed out, individuals are expected to have their "faculties in readiness for any face-to-face interaction that might come" their way. One of the most evident means by which individuals express such readiness is "through the disciplined management of personal appearance or 'personal front,' that is, the complex of clothing, make-up, hairdo, and other surface decorations" that they carry about on their person (Goffman, 1963: 25). Of course, keeping one's personal front in a state of good repair requires care and effort (Gross and Stone, 1964: 10). However, individuals who are inspecting or repairing their personal fronts in public encounter difficulties in maintaining the degree of interactional readiness often expected of them; their attention tends to be diverted from the social situations that surround them (Goffman, 1963: 66). For the most part, therefore, close scrutinization and major adjustments of personal fronts are confined to backstage regions such as public bathrooms.

Most public bathrooms are equipped for this purpose. Many offer coin-operated dispensers of a variety of "personal care products" (e.g., combs and sanitary napkins), and almost all have at least one mirror. The most obvious reason for the presence of mirrors in public bathrooms is that the act of defecation and, for females, urination, requires individuals to literally "drop" their personal fronts. In order to ensure that they have adequately reconstructed their personal front after engaging in such an act, individuals must and typically do perform what Lofland (1972) has termed a "readiness check." For example, the following was observed in the men's bathroom of a neighborhood bar:

A young man emerges from a toilet stall and, as he passes the mirror, hesitates. He glances side-long at his reflection, gives a nod of approval and then walks out the door.

When such a readiness check reveals flaws in the individual's personal front, he or she typically makes the appropriate repairs: Shirts are often retucked into pants and skirts, skirts are rotated around the waist, and pants are tugged up and down.

Because bodily movement and exposure to the elements can also disturb a disciplined personal front, the post-defecation or urination readiness check sometimes reveals flaws in individuals' personal fronts that are the result of normal wear and tear. Upon emerging from toilet stalls and leaving urinals, therefore, individuals sometimes repair aspects of their personal fronts that are not normally disturbed in the course of defecating or urinating. For example, the following was observed in the women's bathroom of a student center on a college campus.

A young woman emerges from a toilet stall, approaches a mirror, and inspects her reflection. She then removes a barrette from her hair, places the barrette in her mouth, takes a comb out of her coat pocket, and combs her hair while smoothing it down with her other hand. With the barrette still in her mouth, she stops combing her hair, gazes intently



at the mirror and emits an audible "ick." She then places the barrette back in her hair, pinches her cheeks, takes a last look at her reflection and exits.

Interestingly, as both this example and the immediately preceding one illustrate, individuals sometimes offer visible or audible evaluations of their reflections when inspecting and repairing their personal front, a finding that should delight proponents of Meadian sociological psychology. Public bathrooms may protect individuals from the critical reviews of external audiences, but they do not protect them from those of their internal audience.

In any case, public bathrooms are as much "self-service" repair shops for personal fronts as they are socially approved shelters for physiological acts that are inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards that govern our public performances. In fact, individuals often enter public bathrooms with no apparent purpose other than the management of their personal front. For example, it is not uncommon for males to enter public bathrooms, walk directly to the nearest available mirror, comb their hair, rearrange their clothing, and then immediately exit. In our society, of course, females are often expected to present publicly a more extensively managed personal front than are males. Consequently, females often undertake extensive repairs in public bathrooms. For example, the following was observed in the women's bathroom of a student center on a college campus:

Two young women enter, one goes to a toilet stall and the other immediately approaches a mirror. The second woman takes a brush out of her bookbag, throws her hair forward, brushes it, throws her hair back, and brushes it into place. She returns the brush to her bookbag, smooths down her eyebrows, and wipes underneath her eyes with her fingers. She then removes a tube of lipstick from her bookbag, applies it to her lips, and uses her finger to remove the lipstick that extends beyond the natural outline of her lips. As her friend emerges from the toilet stall, she puts the lipstick tube back into her bookbag, straightens her collar so that it stands up under her sweater and then exits with her friend.

Even though individuals routinely inspect and repair their personal fronts in the open regions of public bathrooms, they often do so furtively. When others enter the bathroom, individuals sometimes suspend inspecting or repairing their personal fronts until the new arrivals enter toilet stalls or approach urinals. In other cases, they hurriedly complete these activities before they can be witnessed. For example, the following was observed from inside a toilet stall in a women's bathroom:

A young woman walks to the end of the sinks where there is a full-length mirror. She turns sideways, inspects her reflection and reaches up to adjust her clothing. The outer door of the bathroom begins to open, and the young woman quickly walks over to the sink on which her purse is laying, picks it up and heads for the door.

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Despite the furtiveness that sometimes characterizes individuals' inspection and repair of their personal fronts, however, the open region of a public bathroom is often the only available setting in which they can engage in these activities without clearly undermining their frontstage performances. As Lofland (1972: 101) observed in a somewhat different context, "[I]t is apparently preferable to be witnessed by a few . . . In a brief episode of backstage behavior than to be caught . . . with one's presentation down" on the frontstage. . . .

In short, the systematic study of routine bathroom behavior reveals just how loyal members of this society are to the central values and behavioral standards that hold our collective lives together. Whatever else they may do, users of public bathrooms continue to bear the "cross of personal character" (Goffman, 1971: 185), and, as long as they continue to carry this burden, remain self-regulating participants in the "interaction order" (Goffman, 1983).

### NOTES

- 1 Yet a closed door is not always a reliable indicator that a toilet stall is occupied, as anyone who has cared for children is aware. The young sometimes exit toilet stalls by crawling under locked doors.
- 2 Along these lines, casual sex may make an individual "feel so cheap" in part because this intimate communion with another has not been adequately cleansed of its defiling implications by the performance of positive interpersonal rituals.
- 3 One further expression of these defiling implications is the fact that cleaning bathrooms is an almost universally despised activity in our society. Apparently, such close contact with objects that are used for the elimination and disposal of bodily excrete profanes individuals. Indeed, those who routinely clean bathrooms, janitors in particular, are often treated as if they had abdicated their claim to a small patrimony of sacredness.
- 4 Although we did not record the frequency of hand washing, it was our impression that individuals are more likely to wash their hands after using toilets or urinals if they think others would notice their failure to do so. When a bathroom was not otherwise occupied and we were observing from within a toilet stall, for example, it was not uncommon for individuals to neglect this practice.

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