

Carrying the rollator together: A passenger with reduced mobility being assisted in public transport¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on instances of human-assisted mobility among strangers in Santiago's public transport. As a space of persistent physical proximity that is organised around rules of civil distance between its members, buses pose particular challenges for practices of assistance targeting people with reduced mobility. By describing the boarding process of an older woman with Parkinson's disease who uses a rollator, this article analyses how assistance is designed so that supportive acts can be produced, while preserving norms of civil distance between strangers. Operating as a tactile interface between passengers, the rollator allows managing physical proximity in assistance-giving sequences, while also presenting challenges of intelligibility and accountability. The article presents three examples of assistance: holding the rollator in place, assisting with carrying the rollator, and producing a suitable space for the rollator and its user in the bus.

Keywords: public transport – prostheses – stranger– objects in interaction – touch in interaction – assistance.

German abstract

Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich auf Fälle von menschengestützter Mobilität in den öffentlichen Verkehrsmitteln von Santiago de Chile. Als ein Raum ständiger Nähe, der nach Regeln der zivilen Distanz organisiert ist, stellen Busse besondere Herausforderungen für Praktiken der Hilfeleistung dar, die auf Menschen mit eingeschränkter Mobilität abzielen. Anhand der Beschreibung des Einsteigevorgangs einer älteren Frau mit der Parkinson-Krankheit, die einen Rollator benutzt, wird in diesem Artikel analysiert, wie Assistenz so gestaltet ist, dass unterstützende Handlungen produziert werden können, während gleichzeitig Normen der bürgerlichen Distanz gewahrt werden. Der Rollator fungiert als taktile Schnittstelle für die Fahrgäste und ermöglicht es, physische Nähe in Hilfssequenzen zu managen, während seine Benutzung Herausforderungen in Bezug auf Ergonomie und öffentliche Haftung stellt. Der Artikel stellt drei Beispiele für Hilfsleistungen vor: das Festhalten des Rollators, die Unterstützung beim Tragen des Rollators und die Bereitstellung eines geeigneten Platzes für den Rollator und seinen Benutzer im Bus.

Keywords: öffentlicher Verkehr – Prothesen – Fremder – Unterstützung – Objekte in Interaktion – Berührung in Interaktion.

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1. Introduction

Public transport users engage in a variety of practical tasks during their everyday travels; from queueing at the bus stop, to orderly boarding the vehicle, to finding a suitable space inside for themselves and their belongings. Disabled people, or older people with reduced mobility because of different impairments, have to do particular forms of interactional work in finding their way through these paths (Bissell 2009; Muñoz 2020). Among disabled or older people in mobility settings, practices of giving and receiving assistance are a relevant part of what enables their journeys (Middleton/Byles 2019; Yamamoto/Zhang 2017). Be it because of cultural norms of deference or as a response to infrastructural limitations and oversights, these users are routinely assisted with seating, climbing stairs, carrying objects, and navigating platforms, bus stops, and the interior of vehicles.

This article focuses on human-assisted mobility and how it is done in public transport. While human-assisted mobility sequences are often dependent on touching the other participants – in order to escort or steer them – my emphasis will be on how alternatives to touch are produced among fellow passengers who engage in practices of assistance. As a space that by definition is populated by strangers, the rules of a public setting like the bus require that we maintain physical distance from other members.² These rules of conviviality can friction against the similarly strong expectation of being helpful to others who may be seen as in need of physical assistance. Public transport is a space full of instances of assistance, while also being led by norms of keeping distance and enforcing 'civil inattention' (Goffman 1963). How is human-assisted mobility done, then, in the case of passengers who are routinely seen as in need of help, like disabled people or people with reduced mobility? This article aims to contribute to answering that question following an ethnomethodological and multimodal conversation analysis perspective (EMCA) (Garfinkel 1967; Mondada 2016; Sacks 1995).

EMCA research on human-assisted mobility has produced contributions with an emphasis on affective and intimate interaction – for example, between members of a family (Goodwin/Cekaite 2018). Even though Mondada (2019) indicates that practices of touch have been somehow neglected in EMCA studies, there are valuable contributions on the use of touch in family and school interactions, particularly in the case of children being instructed and directed in completing a task (Cekaite

² This can, of course, prove difficult in crowded buses. As will be shown, rules of civil distance are context dependent and will vary depending on the material surroundings. However, even in situations of crowdedness, members will typically deploy tactics to maintain some semblance of distance between them (Jirón/Imilan/Iturra 2016).

2010, 2015; Goodwin 2017). However, less has been said regarding practices of human-assisted mobility among unacquainted people.

Goodwin's (2017) research on intimate physical contact describes instances of people bodily entwining in the task of 'being with', which may take place over a period of time. Touching, in these cases, might be the end itself of the activity. This article's analysis of touch-mediated assistance among strangers, on the other hand, shows that these practices are oriented toward keeping the contact brief. In these cases, touch is designed to end quickly. Controlled and carefully designed forms of touch between strangers in a public setting – oftentimes enacted through the tactile interface of objects – enable the giving of assistance, while not compromising rules of conviviality. I argue that these practices are produced while conducting 'avoidance rituals' (Goffman 1982) between unacquainted members, and still maintaining the physical proximity that human-assisted mobility often requires.

This article shows that rules of civility in public transport preclude assistance through touch, and if this does happen, circumstances need to be framed as warranting such tactile transgression. This creates a particular 'tension' between giving assistance and keeping our distance. As public transport users we are oriented to keeping a social distance and not fixating our attention on others. Simultaneously, as fellow passengers, we are expected to orient at least *part of our actions and attention* toward the interests of other members (like being aware that the person standing next to us will be getting off the bus soon). Civil inattention, in this sense, manifests not as being indifferent to the other person's situation. Rather, it operates as "a display of disinterestedness without disregard; one could say: a competence to refuse relations without creating non-persons" (Hirschauer 2005:41). As active participants of the public character of the bus, the tram, or the train, we leave our fellow passengers alone, while remaining attentive to their needs.

Aiming to explore this public 'tension' in the case of human-assisted mobility, in this article I analyse different instances of a senior public transport user (Ana) who uses a rollator, being offered help throughout the process of boarding and finding a seating spot in buses of the public transport of Santiago, Chile. These sequences were video-recorded and analysed from a multimodal conversation analysis perspective (Goodwin 2018), with particular attention to the role of objects in the interaction (Streeck 1996; Tuncer/Licoppe/Haddington 2019).

The cases I will present show how Ana's rollator is primarily seen as a personal belonging that is there to accompany and support someone with reduced mobility. However, being a prosthetic device that is detachable from its user, and that is difficult to move while navigating the crowded interior of a bus, the rollator can be simultaneously seen as an object that Ana needs help with carrying and putting away. The fact that objects operate "as resources for the organization of social interaction" (Mondada 2019:50; Streeck 1996) is especially apparent in the case of disabled people, who can often be seen in public settings with diverse assistive devices that support or enable their movement. Wheelchairs, canes, crutches, mobility scooters, walking frames, and rollators are not only deftly incorporated into the embodied skills of their users (McIlvenny 2019; Papadimitriou 2008; Winance 2006), but they also serve interactional purposes in making their users recognisable as members with particular ways of moving. This has been mainly explored in the case of visually-impaired people, who are recognised as such because they use canes

(Due/Bierring Lange 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Schillmeier 2008; Wong 2018), but an object like a rollator brings about different challenges.

In the data, human-assisted mobility practices take place as offers to hold the rollator, to put it away, to help Ana carry it, and to free up a space for it. These instances will show that Ana's rollator becomes, simultaneously, the focus of the interaction (Tuncer/Licoppe/Haddington 2019) and the medium through which she is assisted without the need of direct physical contact. Sensing each other's bodies through the object (Goodwin/Cekaite 2018; Meyer/Streeck/Jordan 2017), Ana receives assistance from her fellow passengers without transgressing civil norms of physical distance. Importantly, through skilful use of embodied and verbal resources, Ana takes active part in these assistance-giving sequences, thus retaining her agency and control throughout. By illustrating the local resources underpinning everyday forms of assistance in the public transport, as well as reflecting on the role that objects play in embodied interaction, my aim is to expand current understandings on the interactional production of accessible spaces.

In the following section, I will discuss the particular character of public transport as a space in which physical proximity between people is routinely negotiated, as well as the practical challenges of maintaining 'strangeness' between members. In the methodology and data section, I discuss the nature of the video data collected in the bus journeys that Ana and I shared. In the analysis section I will describe three different instances in which public transport users offer or give assistance to Ana. The first one concentrates on a passenger holding the rollator for Ana; the second shows how Ana and a fellow passenger carry the rollator together; and the third case shows different offers of assistance being formulated, depending on whether the rollator is appropriately visible and intelligible to other members of the bus. The article concludes by reflecting on the active role Ana plays as the assisted person, leading the assistance-giving sequence and influencing how the rollator is seen by others – causing it to become an accountable part of the situation.

2. The social paradox of being in the bus: Social distance in persistent physical proximity

In 1836, *The Times* published a set of instructions of appropriate conduct for users of the omnibus. These rules included: not resting the feet on the seating spaces, not opening the window without prior consultation with others, not raising the voice when speaking of religion or politics, keeping the legs parallel while sitting, rather than open in 45 degrees, and so forth (Giucci/Errázuriz 2018). From the mid 19th century to the early 20th century, similar lists of norms were published in different Latin American cities, as trams and buses became more common.

Since very early on in its modern history, public transportation has been treated as a site that calls for control of our own selves, and refraining from doing things that might upset others around. Confined spaces that are to be shared with strangers, like streetcars and elevators, have been described as sites where it is paramount to avoid touching other people (Hall 1990). As Giucci and Errázuriz (2018:170) assert, "[i]t is during these journeys, in confined spaces of fastidious inner translation, that it is more strongly demanded from the user that they learn to control their body, gaze, and words".

Among social scientists interested in urban life, public transport has been given attention as a space of crowdedness where social boundaries are constantly being renegotiated (Brömmelstroet et al. 2017; Wilson 2011), and remaining a stranger is important (Bissell 2010). We have seen scholars analysing this space by drawing on Simmel's (2013 [1903]) *blasé attitude*, and on Goffman's (1963) description of rituals to preserve an 'involvement shield' that protects us from the scrutiny of others, including practices of reading and listening to music that maintain civil inattention (Bissell 2010), and people developing tactics for *cocooning* (Jirón/Imilan/Iturra 2016) – that is, ways of creating a physically intimate space of our own. Edward T. Hall (1966, 1990), in his studies on human proxemics, too, highlighted public transport as a relevant setting (Hall 1966:118):

Crowded subways and buses may bring strangers into what would ordinarily be classed as intimate spatial relations, but subway riders have defensive devices which take the real intimacy out of intimate space in public conveyances. The basic tactic is to be as immobile as possible and, when part of the trunk or extremities touches another person, withdraw if possible. If this is not possible, the muscles in the affected areas are kept tense. For members of the non-contact group, it is taboo to relax and enjoy bodily contact with strangers!

Even though it is true that touching strangers in the bus is somehow inevitable – from brief contacts with the hand of someone who is grabbing the same bar, or touching elbows with the one seating next to us – it is undeniable that embodied practices of passengers are oriented toward minimising these moments of tactility. The bodies remain engaged, tense even, in an attempt not to spill over another passenger's spot, or fully rest their weight on someone with whom they are sharing a square metre.

The challenge of managing civil distance and inattention with others who are physically close to us, as Koefoed and Simonsen (2011) assert, is a crucial aspect of the social conformation of the stranger. To the authors, being a stranger is not an intrinsic value of certain individuals but rather the outcome of "specific, embodied encounters. The stranger is a relational figure, constituted in a spatial ambivalence between proximity and distance" (ibid: 344). The careful management of proximity and distance between public transport users, we will see, is a crucial element of human-assisted mobility practices in this interactional setting. Keeping strangeness and social distance between passengers is, in fact, a carefully executed interactional practice.

Working from an ethnomethodological perspective, Hirschauer (2005) provides a reading of 'doing being a stranger' that reveals the social work underpinning the maintenance of civil distance between unacquainted people. Even though he concentrates on elevators, some aspects of the issue are quite similar to being in a bus, tram, or underground carriage. In both cases, users of either the lift or the bus share a confined space with strangers for a determined period of time, during which different practices that preserve civil distance are expected to be deployed. The author describes a delicate balance between not orienting oneself toward others while simultaneously not rudely ignoring them. Such balance allows to retain individuality while still being socially oriented toward others (who might need to pass through, get off the lift, etc.). He also notes that being with others in a lift has the effect of refocusing our relations. We go from being completely unrelated outsiders to being, in his words, "inmates with equal rights" (Hirschauer 2005:49). As we will see, bus

passengers are also bound to recognise one another as 'fellow passengers', and visibly demonstrate it through their carefully modulated attention to other members of the bus. Hirschauer (2005) stresses that unrelatedness among people is not a given, and needs, in fact, to be interactionally maintained. It is not a passive experience, but an actively pursued achievement. The following cases show how assistance among strangers in public transport is routinely designed to preserve civil distance, a design of which the assisted person also takes part.

3. Methodology and data

The encounters that will be presented were video-recorded during four different go-along journeys I conducted with one of my participants, Ana, who is a woman of over 60 years old with Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease is a degenerative nervous system disorder that affects movement. While tremors are a common symptom, in Ana's case the disorder manifests mainly as muscle stiffness, slowed movement, a stooped posture, and loss of balance. She has to use a rollator when she goes out.

While using the rollator, she experiences all manner of difficulties in public transport. Issues of not fitting, being too slow, or being too heavy are ever-present and she sometimes receives other people's assistance to fill in those gaps (Schwanen/Banister/Bowling 2012). Regardless, the rollator (Figure 1) is a complex and multifunctional device. Ana uses it as her preferred seating spot when in the bus. As we will see, contrary to other passengers' expectations, she avoids using priority seating in the bus.



Figure 1: Ana's rollator is a four-wheeled heavy duty rollator made of lightweight aluminium. It includes lockable brakes, a padded seating area, and a basket underneath.

The clips were recorded with a GoPro Hero 5 Session camera, which was attached to the right 'arm' of the rollator, where it would not be bothersome to Ana. Given this arrangement, part of the embodied action is, unavoidably, out of shot. I would like to address the limitations and affordances of such approach. For example, there is limited access to the participants' gazes and body orientation throughout some

sequences. However, these elements are used in the analysis as they become available.

While EMCA typically relies on fixed camera positioning when gathering video data (Heath/Hindmarsh/Luff 2010), an increasing number of studies have used mobile cameras to follow activities in motion (Mondada 2014). The ethnographic nature of my participation in Ana's journeys lent itself as an opportunity to experiment with a camera positioning that, first, would not encumber our experience of traveling together, and second, that would present the action from a perspective that is closer to Ana and her device. Even though this camera positioning has limitations, a less conventional perspective is gained by recording from the rollator's point of view. Rich detail on how members approach and touch the device is available due to the camera angle originating from the very object that becomes the focus of these interactions.

The 'incompleteness' of video recordings goes beyond camera positioning. For example, no matter how the video is recorded, haptic elements of the interaction – potentially very relevant to analyse human-assisted mobility – will hardly be available. Thus, my analysis concentrates on a combination of ethnographic knowledge – due to having been there – and what the images *do* make available. While not the main goal of this article, I do hope that my analysis contributes to show the validity of conducting multimodal video analysis using materials that portray rich social interaction, even if they offer an 'incomplete' perspective of the events.

I joined Ana in all of the journeys that will be presented. Due to the particular recording conditions, I am not usually visible in the shot. My presence as a participant and as Ana's co-mover (McIlvenny 2019) enabled me to gain embodied insight on the events, as well as haptic knowledge of how it was to move with Ana in the bus, helping her carry the rollator, and so forth. This type of ethnographic involvement is not uncommon during video recordings for later analysis, and offer the analyst a richer perspective on the phenomenological aspects of the sequences documented. During boarding sequences (which include Ana getting in the bus, paying, and finding a space to install her rollator) I would typically be walking behind Ana and not necessarily seen as a companion. This might explain the amount of offers of assistance that Ana received even when I joined her journeys. Although she does not depend on these forms of assistance, she is used to being offered help and, as we will see, has become proficient at handling these offers.

I conducted four go-along journeys with Ana, including taking the bus or the underground train to the hospital, the supermarket, a street market, and a healthcare centre specialised in movement disorders. Each roundtrip was at least 60 minutes long and some lasted up to 180 minutes, including walking, waiting at the bus stop, and the ride itself. The collected video data was compiled and, following a preliminary analysis, it became clear that offers of assistance were a relevant element in her journeys. The data was then substantively reviewed, searching for instances of human-assisted mobility. The cases were analysed with attention to the role of objects (especially Ana's rollator) in the interaction, and the design of gestures to grab the object and/or offer assistance. The analysis revealed how passengers would produce supportive acts towards Ana, while avoiding to take over the sequence or physically touch her.

The cases that will be presented reflect Ana's typical bus journey, depicting three ways in which passengers assist Ana's boarding and sitting process: by holding the

rollator, helping her carry it, and freeing up space for it. The small number of cases selected does not mean that these occurrences are scarce in Ana's everyday use of the public transport. They were chosen as instances in which the interaction between passengers and rollator is clearer, especially regarding aspects of touch, or distinct multimodal orientation towards the object.

All instances were transcribed following the principles of the 'graphic transcript' (Laurier 2014, 2019a), aiming to highlight multimodal interaction in assisted mobility sequences, particularly the simultaneous use of gestures and talk. This format of presentation of video recordings grants access to the *continuous and parallel* embodied action that is locally observable in the material interactional setting of the bus. Jeffersonian transcripts are included to supplement the graphic transcripts. The language spoken in all cases is Chilean Spanish, and it has been translated to English.

4. Analysis

Ana is a frequent user of Santiago de Chile's public transport system, known as Transantiago. Although the city is served by both a bus system and a Metro network, all of the cases included in this article are from recordings on different buses. Transantiago operates with an electronic payment system that is based on smart-cards. When boarding the bus, passengers tap their 'Bip cards' against a sensor. If there is enough credit in the card, a green light turns on and a single beeping sound can be heard. This signals a successful payment, after which boarding passengers can continue down the bus aisle and find a space to sit or stand.

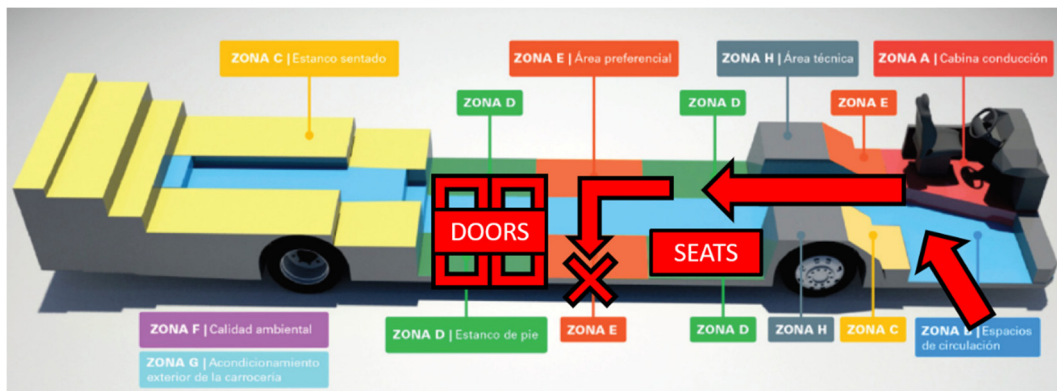


Figure 2: Ana's seating programme.

Source: Handbook of norms for interior design of buses Santiago's public transport system.

The cases I will present are all of boarding sequences, in which Ana has just entered the bus and is looking for a suitable seating spot. As opposed to what has been inscribed in the design of Transantiago buses, priority seats are not what Ana is ordinarily after. Her preferred seating programme consists of moving to the centre of the vehicle, past the first row of seats (rearward-oriented), and installing her rollator as a seating space of her own next to the exit doors of the bus (Figure 2). The rollator's brakes are activated and the device becomes locked in place. This way, Ana does not need to climb into the seating spaces. She instead turns her assistive device into her own seat.

The following cases show how producing a certain understanding of what Ana and the rollator can do, and need, is not easily achieved in these circumstances. However, such an accomplishment is crucial to orient offers of assistance and co-ordination across passengers. In the following excerpts I aim at describing how these offers are made, accepted or rejected, and the role that the prosthetic device plays in these interactions. Section 4.1 focuses on Ana boarding the bus and paying, while a passenger holds the rollator for her. Section 4.2 shows Ana and another passenger carrying the rollator together. Section 4.3 analyses a sequence during which difficulties in making the rollator intelligible to other members cause Ana to have to reject several offers of assistance.

4.1. Ana boarding the bus

Figure 3 (next page) shows Ana, who is being followed by me, boarding the bus. She has just entered and greeted the driver, who replies with a *Buenos días* ('Good morning', panel 1). Seated behind the driver, a passenger wearing a white t-shirt watches Ana and the rollator; his gaze switching back and forth between her and the device (panel 1). Ana then moves closer to the card sensor in order to pay the fare. She stops by the man in the white t-shirt and lets go of the rollator (out of shot) while she looks for her card in her bag³ (panel 2). Without saying anything, the man extends his right arm and grabs the rollator, keeping it in place (panel 3). After several seconds, Ana is still trying to find her card. The bus is still stopped. The man's grip loosens up (panel 4). From grabbing it, the man's hand now just rests two fingers on the rollator (panel 5). Ana finally finds her card and now taps it against the sensor. The machine beeps, and the man lets go of the rollator entirely (panel 6).

This sequence shows an interaction between Ana and another passenger, with no verbal exchange between them. Instead, the other passenger provides assistance through touching the rollator. The bus can start going at any moment, compromising Ana's balance or causing the rollator to roll away from her. In this sense the man is preventing potential trouble, rather than helping with an existing problem.

The sequence gives some indication of a crucial interactional element that members of the bus face when encountering a passenger like Ana. When and how does someone's body (or body composite) become morally available to be touched by strangers in a public setting? First, there are signs that the man studies Ana and the rollator as embedded in a prosthetic relation. His gaze switches back and forth between her and the device, which indicates that he is not seeing Ana as a conventional 'body-unit' passenger. The rollator is an indicator of Ana's frailty, and thus assisting her can be done through the device (for instance, by holding it for her while she does something else).

As soon as Ana stops by the man and lets go of the rollator, the man extends his right arm without saying anything and grabs the object, keeping it in place. Here we see the man treating the rollator as 'available-to-grab' both in physical and moral

³ Transantiago passengers who board the bus ordinarily do so with their Bip cards ready in hand. This can be interpreted as gesture oriented toward minimising the time of the fare-payment process, which consists in tapping the card against one of the two sensors available next to the driver. Because Ana uses both her hands to steer the rollator, she does things differently. She first stops by the sensor, lets go of the device, and then searches for the card in her bag.

terms. Rather than verbally requesting permission or announcing his intentions before grabbing someone else's personal object, he designs his touch in a way that is visually available as holding the rollator with an orientation towards Ana's own payment sequence. The object's status (Tuncer/Licoppe/Haddington 2019), in this sense, has changed from being an assistive device that is being steered by Ana, to a thing that is not currently being controlled and can produce further trouble by rolling away. This categorial shift is one of the elements that warrants the man's intervention to be seen as appropriate.



Figure 3: Seeing the rollator as 'available-to-grab'.

The accountability of the man's gesture is built in regards of Ana's current disposition toward the object, and the dynamic context the participants are in. Thus, while Ana is paying and it becomes evident that the bus is not moving, the man relaxes his grip and merely indicates his availability to hold the device in case the vehicle starts moving.

This is a form of assistance that has not been requested, nor verbally offered, and that is underpinned by the shared understanding that it is civil to pay attention to and help Ana. This is consistent with the fact that she does not react in any way

when a stranger decides to grab her rollator. In this sense, the man's actions are seen as providing help, rather than transgressing Ana's ownership or control over the device. His gesture is given a legitimate place throughout Ana's boarding sequence.

We can also note that the man's intervention occurs once Ana is physically within reach. As opposed to what it would have been, for instance, for the man to stand up from his seat and go help Ana with the rollator, he produces a less disruptive form of assistance that is done from his seat. This approach indicates that the 'problem' the passenger is seeing becomes visible to him once Ana lets go of the object. The man's reaction to Ana's proximity hints at how increasingly difficult it is to do nothing in Ana's presence. Once she is that close and there is a clear 'gap' (Laurier et al. 2020) where he could intervene in an assistive manner, 'doing nothing' looks more similar to 'ignoring Ana'. Categorised as an appropriate target of assistance, there is a social expectation of intervening in a helpful way, especially when we are the closest person to the 'target'. Ana's physical 'frailty', which is in part made visible by the presence of the assistive device (Due/Bierring/Lange 2019), is one of the visually available elements that warrant that the grabbing gesture will be seen as assistance. Conversely, it also causes 'not intervening' to be potentially seen as morally accountable. This is indicative of the moral tension that exists, in public settings, between maintaining 'civil inattention', and providing assistance to those who are seen as in need of it. Section 4.3 analyses this dynamic in more detail.

A second element of note is that this touch-mediated assistance displays an acute awareness of Ana's course of action. As discussed by Kendrick and Drew (2016), assistance can be recruited without being verbally requested, because the assistance-giver relies on the projectability of the assistance-receiver course of action. We see the man aligning his actions to Ana's, mainly through visual (Ana letting go of the device) and aural cues (the beeping sound signalling a successful payment). As soon as the beep from Ana's card is heard, the man lets go of the rollator, giving the control over the device back to her. This alignment enables the man to assist Ana with her boarding process by 'propping it up' with supportive action (Goffman 1972). This, as we can see, does not cause the participants to become socially closer or to stop being 'strangers' to one another. Once the aural cue occurs, the man stops his intervention and Ana continues down the bus aisle. This case shows how the man is able to align his actions to Ana's because her course of action is intelligible to him. The following examples show how offers of assistance are produced and handled when Ana's course of action is not successfully anticipated by fellow passengers.

This encounter between Ana and another passenger shows how assistance can be designed in such a way that it does not disrupt the programme of the assisted person. Indeed, the assistance is effective because it aligns itself to Ana's course of action. Among strangers in the bus, help can be provided while minimally compromising civil distance between members. The tension between 'civil inattention' and becoming involved (Hirschauer 2005) is resolved by the man's deployment of carefully controlled gestures. First, he assists Ana by grabbing her rollator without standing up from his seat, which frames his approach as less costly and involved (the following cases show that Ana reacts differently towards passengers who stand up to assist her). There is, in fact, no verbal exchange between them, which reinforces the sense that the man's action is a passing and minimal intervention. The

rollator's status temporarily changes from being an assistive device to being an object that might roll away, which turns it into a 'grabbable' by a stranger. Secondly, the grabbing gesture is designed not to interrupt or reshape Ana's current action, and is released as soon as an aural cue (the beep) is heard. The following section presents a more involved case of assistance, in the form of the joint activity of carrying the rollator together.

4.2. Carrying the rollator together

After paying the bus fare, Ana moves along. Because the bus's aisle is too narrow for her and the device, she lifts the rollator's seat and grabs a strap underneath. She pulls it up, lifting the rollator, which folds it flat (Figure 4).



Figure 4: A folded rollator for carrying purposes.

She then moves sideways, carrying the object. Figure 5 shows a woman sitting rearward, who sees Ana and reacts by standing up. Ana responds by saying that is not necessary, thanking the passenger (panel 1). The woman stands up anyway, turns around and extends her hand towards the rollator. Ana thanks again, and as the woman grabs the device, Ana clarifies: *Yo lo pongo acá* ('I put it here', 1.4). They walk carrying the rollator together, and as they get near to Ana's target spot, Ana gives indications by saying: *A- aquí- #ah:í#* ('There, there', 1.6). *°Aquí ↓quehhda°* ('Here it is [stays]', 1.7), says Ana, and the passenger lets go of the object. Ana then thanks her and prepares to install the rollator (panel 4). She lowers the rollator's seat again, and saying *Y ahí °quehhda°* ('And there it is', 1.10) seems to finalise the sequence of producing a seating space for her (panel 5). She then turns around and grabs the handrail, preparing to sit down. The other passenger, who had been observing the sequence, moves her hand and grabs the rollator while Ana sits down (panel 6).

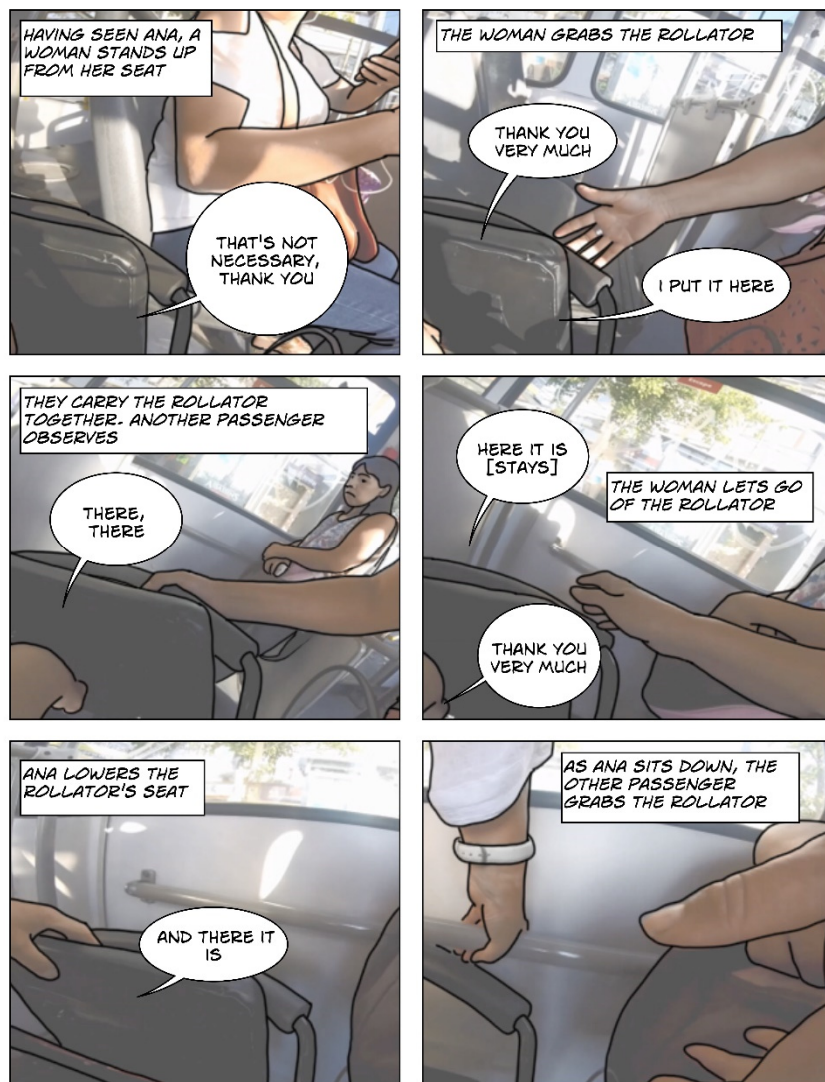


Figure 5: A passenger stands up to help Ana carry the rollator.

(2) Carrying the rollator together

- 01 ANA: †No (.) no es necesario (.) °grahhcias°
 †No, that's not necessary, °thank you°
 (1.5)
- 02 ANA: °Muchas gracias°
 °Thank you very much°
- 03 ANA: Yo lo pongo acá
 I put it here
 (2.2)
- 04 ANA: A- aquí- #ah:í#
 There, the:re
- 05 ANA: °Aquí ↓quehhda°
 °Here ↓it is°
- 06 ANA: <Muchas gracias
 <Thank you very much
 (9.2)
- 07 ANA: Y ahí °quehhda°
 And there °it is°

Similar to section 4.1, this case shows a stranger grabbing the rollator. Again, we see what is accomplished by producing a particular 'design of touch' (Cekaite 2010). In panel 2, the woman has stood up and reaches out to grab the rollator with her right hand. This gesture is done at a speed that leaves time for Ana to react to it. Since Ana had already rejected an offer implied in the woman's standing up, it is possible that this second attempt at assisting her will also be refused. The slowed-down gesture leaves a gap for Ana to reply to the gesture, which is seen as an offer of assistance and triggers an affirmative response: "Thank you very much". Following Streeck's (2009) observations, a grasping sequence can be broken down into three phases:

- (1) a 'preparatory stage' which projects the movement of the hand and shows it as oriented to the extrinsic properties of an object (location, orientation, potential movement etc.);
- (2) a contact period of grip adjustment to the intrinsic properties of the object (shape, size, weight, etc.); and
- (3) release.

In this case, the 'preparatory stage' of the grabbing gesture is used by both members as an opportunity to align their actions.

This occurrence resonates with Tuncer and Haddington's (2019:66) description of object transfers, within which certain moves are sequentially implicative – they make relevant subsequent embodied actions involving the object. In this case, the passenger's reaching out to grab the rollator, and receiving no negative response from Ana, warrants that she will indeed grab the rollator next. In fact, the woman completes her grabbing of the rollator after Ana has said °*Muchas gracias*° ('Thank you', 1.3). The uses of 'thank you' to organise these interactions is discussed in more detail further below.

This particular design of the grabbing gesture is functional to conforming a joint activity, in which Ana and the woman go from doing different things, to doing the same thing together. The woman extends just one hand to grab the rollator, which is presumably seen differently to what it would have been to extend both hands to grab the object (potentially interpretable as the woman wanting to take the rollator away from Ana). Touch is delicately designed, permitting the assisting woman to align her physical strength to Ana's, providing support and not, for instance, causing Ana to lose her balance. Simultaneously, Ana allows the passenger to help her – she aligns to her proposed course of action which is intelligible as assistance-giving. She integrates the passenger into the course of action of carrying the rollator, sharing relevant information regarding the (now joint) activity, by saying "I put it here".

Ana's utterance ("I put *it* here") unequivocally marks the sequence as becoming object-centred. Here, talk is (Tuncer/Licoppe/Haddington 2019:388)

topically and sequentially contingent on participants' joint orientation to the object. In this progressive and reconfiguring articulation of talk and embodied, object-oriented conduct, talk is sequentially produced and topically designed so as to be 'about the object'; it may be made into a 'viewable', a 'manipulatable', or a 'mentionable' in the here and now.

As the assisting woman grabs the rollator, talk becomes *about the object*, and is not anymore centred on accepting or rejecting offers. Verbal resources, from this point

onward, are topically designed to steer the carrying formation, conformed by the two participants moving with the object in the middle.

As Laurier (2019b) describes in car driving settings, the act of thanking (verbally or with gestures) recognises an offer as an offer, while also accepting it. In a first instance (panel 1), Ana pairs a 'thank you' with a rejection to an offer (or what is presumed to be the offer, i.e. being given a seat), which configures the rejection as polite and civil. Then, we see a form of thanking that operates as accepting the 'right' type of offer (panel 2), paired with relevant information to carry over the action together ("I put it here"). The pairing of "thank you" (accepting the offer) and "I put it here" (relevant information), along with a specific design of touch by the passenger, is what initiates the joint-sequence of carrying the rollator together. In panel 4, thanking is again a relevant part of the joint-action, namely the closure of the assistance-giving sequence. This is paired with an utterance that signals such closure ("Here it is [stays]"). This dynamic use of the 'thank you' specifies and gives shape to the assistance-giving sequence. As Ana's and the passenger's bodies come together in a joint-activity, saying 'thank you' marks the beginning and end of the formation. It thus works as a form of acknowledgement and appreciation, as well as a resource for coordination.

Ana provides a verbal directive as a form of steering: "I put it here". This is not explicitly phrased as a directive, but it is taken as one since Ana is recognised as the lead of the joint activity. The phrasing "I put it here" exhibits a recursive programme on Ana's part, and thus the other passenger aligns to what Ana presents to be her habitual way of doing things. Being able to understand the orientation of the acts of others is what warrants the emergence of the joint activity (Blumer 1966).

Crucially, Ana's directives reaffirm her agency over the joint-activity. It is Ana who puts the rollator there ("I put it here"), and who is doing it now too, though with assistance. Ana is the assisted one, but she retains control and authority over the action. The helper recognises this and aligns herself to what Ana indicates. Here we may trace differences from Cekaite's (2010) concept of 'scaffolding', which in the case of parental shepherding moves is used as a form of controlling the child's movements during directive sequences. Conversely, in the cases of two adults who are strangers to one another, 'scaffolding' is jointly achieved. While the assisting passenger adds to the formation's physical stability, Ana, the assisted, provides a steering reference frame through words.

As argued by Tuncer, Licoppe and Haddington (2019), membership categories can be generated through object-centred sequences. Categories like assistance-giver and assistance-receiver can emerge in the act of carrying something together. However, the object belongs to one of the members and thus the categories are further specified, entitling the owner of the object to give directions. Thus, categories are enacted throughout the sequence as it is the assistance-receiver (Ana) who owns and knows what to do with the object, and steers the course of action by verbal and non-verbal means. The other participant contributes to the physical stability of the formation, providing support and following instructions. This is a particular form of intersubjectivity in which one of the participants leads, even though they may simultaneously be helped.

The helper decouples from the formation at a point that is also indicated by Ana, by saying "here it is [stays]". These deictic expressions ("I put it here", "there, there", and "here it is") are used for steering the formation while foregrounding a

certain hierarchy: Ana is the one who knows what to do with the rollator, and the assistance-giving passenger follows her indications. Albeit impossible to appreciate in the images, we may venture that Ana's verbal steering is paired with tactile steering (Cekaite 2010), pushing the rollator in a certain direction. In this sense, the object is carried via a joint effort that is coordinated, partially, through the object itself.

The joint-activity of carrying something together can be compared to Allen-Collinson's (2006, see also Hockey/Allen-Collinson 2013) take on 'running-together' as a joint accomplishment. She highlights that such activities rely on the members' methods to maintain and restore synchrony. In Ana's case, this is achieved by a) Ana's verbal steering of the sequence, and b) the material stability of the rollator itself. This resonates with Cekaite's (2010:20) assertion that "[t]actile engagement was not only a method for taking in, but also for giving information, notably about the recipient's alignment with the co-participant's suggested course of action". In this case, the very materiality of the rollator contributes to the alignment of the bodies and the projection of a shared trajectory.

The carrying formation, then, maintains its integrity thanks to the materiality of the thing that is being carried, and by the clear agreement on what the task at hand is, which is accomplished by Ana's indexical and continual indications throughout. These indications help steer the formation and also cue for its dissolving. This form of embodied attunement and collaboration is commonly seen in public spaces like Transantiago, as unacquainted people routinely engage in the task of carrying something together. Passengers helping one another with carrying heavy bags or buggies while going downstairs into a Metro station are not an uncommon sight, but Ana's case shows how this practice is slightly modified when the object being carried is not familiar to everyone involved.

Finally, the emergence of the carrying formation also composes a new 'contextual configuration' (Goodwin 2018). Ana is now visibly being assisted and calls for no further intervention from others. This warrants that the other passenger (panel 3) stays in her position while the sequence plays out. However, she remains attentive to the formation's movement. After the carrying formation is disassembled, she intervenes with a minimal form of assistance similar to the one analysed in section 4.1. She grabs and holds the rollator in place while Ana turns and sits on it. The minimal character of this assistance-giving gesture requires no verbal offer and is possibly warranted by the fact that another stranger had just grabbed Ana's rollator.

The following section explores in more detail how visible changes in contextual configuration shape accountability in regards of assisting, or not, a person who is seen as in need of help.

4.3. Giving up a spot to Ana and her rollator

In this sequence, we see various offers of assistance and different ways in which Ana deals with them. We start with Ana having already paid the bus fare, and making her way to her preferred spot. As in the previous case, Ana has lifted the rollator and carries it slowly walking sideways.



Figure 6: Ana manages several offers of assistance.

(3) Giving up a spot to Ana and her rollator

- 01 ANA: >No se preocupe<
>Don't worry<
(2.0)
- 03 ANA: ()
- 04 DAN: Podemos subirlo acá
We can leave it here
- 05 ANA: No (.) es más difícil bajarlo después
No (.) it's too difficult to get back afterwards
- 06 DAN: [Yo creo q-]
[I think-]
- 07 WOM: [Yo me voy-] (.) No si yo me voy a bajar ahora=
[I'm getting-] (.) No I'm about to get off=
- 08 WOM: =Puede sentarse [acá
=You can sit [here
- 09 ANA: [↑No >no se preocupe<
[↑No don't worry
- 10 ANA: Es muy difícil bajarlo
It's too difficult to get back
(4.2)
- 11 ANA: Gracias
Thank you

Figure 6 shows how, in order to keep her balance while carrying the rollator, Ana grabs the armrest of an occupied seat. Its occupant notices Ana and starts standing up, to which Ana replies *>No se preocupe<* ('Don't worry', 1.1). The man stands up anyway (panel 1). I then suggest to Ana that we leave the rollator in an unoccupied spot behind the seating space (only my hand is visible). Ana rejects my offer explaining that it would be cumbersome to retrieve the device later. Meanwhile, a woman has seen Ana and prepares to offer her seat (panel 2). In panel 3 the woman interjects with an offer, overlapping with my line. The woman treats this as a rejection of her offer, and immediately provides further reason for her offer to be accepted (panel 3). The fourth panel shows Ana continuing to move down the aisle, saying *↑No >no se preocupe<* ('No, don't worry', 1.9) to the woman and repeating that the rollator would make that operation difficult. Both the woman and another male passenger gaze down at the rollator, which is now visible to them (panel 4). The man steps to the side, half-freeing up a space that is offered to Ana. The offer is completed with a hand gesture (panel 5). With a *Gracias* ('Thank you', 1.11) Ana accepts the offer and moves closer to the available spot. The man walks away (panel 6).

This is a complex sequence during which several offers of assistance are produced, which Ana skilfully manages by rejecting some of them and finally accepting one that accommodates her programme. It seems that despite an abundance of people willing to help Ana, she still needs to engage in the work of managing the offers, giving explanations as to why some are rejected, while continuing to advance toward her objective. The use of "Don't worry" here is instrumental in producing a rejection that remains polite, marking a desire not to be a burden rather than merely pointing out the offers as inadequate.

So why are most of the offers inadequate? A characteristic all of the rejected offers seem to share is that they propose that Ana separates from the rollator. I first suggest to put the rollator away (panel 2), and two other passengers invite Ana to take a seat (panels 1 and 3). However, taking a seat would force Ana to keep the device somewhere else or by her side, folded, turned into cumbersome luggage rather than a seating space.

Her preferred strategy – installing the rollator and sitting on it – is one that makes the most of the device's affordances, while keeping it close to her and under her control. The passengers, however, remain unaware of this (and even, perhaps, of what the rollator can do). While for Ana and for me the rollator was the focus of the sequence from the start, other members, like the man who leaves his seat and the woman who offers hers, are oriented toward Ana rather than the object. It is after the object becomes visible that the other passengers align to Ana's needs, treating the rollator as central. Revealing the rollator to the other passengers enables that the sequence becomes object-centred, contributing to a shared perspective of the object's status, purpose, and features, thus making the object accountable for the situation. Even though Ana and I are the only ones who indeed talk about the rollator, once the object becomes visible to all, this frames the device as 'attendable' (Tuncer/Licoppe/Haddington 2019) and triggers reactions that are topically designed toward it.

Here we may analyse how Ana and the rollator are seen by other passengers. First, as in previous cases, she is treated as an appropriate 'target' for help, though the form the help should take is less clear. Thus, Ana is the one who manages these

offers, rejecting or accepting them while maintaining a certain autonomy over what is to happen. Second, the rollator remains an obscure element to others, first because it is less visible, and second because its capabilities might be unknown. In its folded state, the rollator is a weird object that in this case does not facilitate understanding with others. This was also revealed to me in semi-structured interviews with Ana; other passengers do not usually understand the rollator's place in Ana's programme.

The sequence shows that Ana is, to the other passengers, a difficult entity to figure out. Her course of action becomes hard to anticipate, precluding the formulation of adequate offers of assistance (Kendrick/Drew 2016). The Ana-rollator composite struggles to 'do being ordinary', in the sense of presenting themselves in a way that "permits all kinds of routine ways of dealing with it" (Sacks 1995:221). Passengers with prosthetic devices remain a more or less uncommon entity within Transantiago, and while some of its users are ordinarily seen as appropriate recipients of assistance, there is less clarity as to how exactly the assistance should be delivered. In the absence of common ground rules and expectations as to what a device can do, where it should go, or how it is used, navigating these situations can become even more difficult for the user.

Ana manages the situation by providing verbal accounts that are topically designed towards the rollator ("It's too difficult to get back"), while moving forward and making the object visible to other participants. With these resources, Ana makes her trajectory intelligible (Broth/Cromdal/Levin 2018), prompting an appropriate offer of assistance. In this case, human-assisted mobility takes the form of simply removing oneself from Ana's desired spot in the vehicle.

Finally, the densely inhabited space of the bus reveals a spatial and topical dimension in the ordering of who is more expected to assist Ana. There is an accountability 'queue' that seems to be given by proximity to Ana, in the first place, but also by being in an appropriate position to offer assistance. The passenger who is sitting and is closer to her is the first person who reacts with an offer. Then the second closest passenger makes their own offer in turn. Passengers who are closer to Ana – and, crucially, who are in a position to offer what is seen Ana needs – behave as though they are accountable to offer help. The man whose offer is accepted in the last two panels remains uninvolved, although attentive to the events, until he sees himself in a position to offer what Ana needs. The progression of this accountability 'queue' is enabled through the particular civil disposition that has been discussed in the previous sections, and that characterises interactions among unacquainted members of the public. That is, a balanced combination of civil distance and attention.

The organisation of assistance is partially given by the material arrangements of buses and trains. Following Goodwin's (2018:172) analysis of hopscotch grids as both durable materiality and semiotic structure, the inner material disposition of a bus also provides a framework for the building of assistance while it physically accommodates and carries human bodies. Inside the bus, there is an attention to the spot each participant is currently occupying. For instance, depending on where they are inside the bus, they may be liable/expected to give their seat, clear the way, etc. This spatial organisation plays a relevant role in framing human-assisted mobility inside the bus as accountable action, marking a certain order or hierarchy as to who is accountable to react first, and in what ways, to someone like Ana boarding the bus.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have seen the production of three different instances of human-assisted mobility that were designed with a focus on a particular object: a rollator. These were: holding the rollator in place, assisting with carrying it, and giving an appropriate space to a person and their rollator in the bus. In a public setting, among strangers – who are to remain strangers – human-assisted mobility will often take place through offers, rather than directive sequences or direct physical contact. The person who is the target of the offer of assistance needs to manage such offers, by accepting or rejecting them, and sometimes by giving account as to why an offer is not adequate.

In the case of touch-mediated assistance, different methods are deployed so that civil distance is preserved. The cases presented show that touching a stranger (or their belongings) is treated as an accountable action that is carefully designed so as not to be transgressive or disruptive. 'Doing touching', in this sense, is produced as an interactional display of both concern and respect of the assisted person's autonomy. The first case showed a man who designed his grabbing gesture within a framework that allowed his intervention to be seen as legitimate and unobtrusive of Ana's course of action. The second case showed the detailed work of configuring a carrying formation. Ana was seen as having difficulties carrying the rollator, and so human-assisted mobility manifested as a carrying formation which was verbally steered by Ana and made stable by the materiality of the rollator itself.

In a public setting, where several civic rules to avoid physical contact are in place, a crucial question is when and how someone's body (or object) becomes available-to-touch by strangers. For this to happen, a person has to be *commonly* seen as an appropriate target of embodied assistance. This accomplishes two things. First, it makes it so that the person engaging in touch is less likely to be framed as invasive or overstepping civil boundaries. Second, it produces an accountability 'queue' in which the more 'available' we are as assistance-givers – by means of being closer, or in better position to help (e.g. because we can give our seat) – we are all the more *publicly* compelled to assist.⁴ In other words, the more evident and unambiguous it is that someone needs physical assistance, the more it warrants physical contact, and the more it turns 'not intervening' into an accountable action. However, as we have seen, being intelligible as a target of assistance is not a given. For Ana, it is often the case that there will be some confusion.

An element that makes it difficult for others to help Ana, and for Ana to receive help, is that what she is up to with the rollator might remain obscure, or difficult to understand, to some participants. Schegloff (2007) has asserted that, in the categorisation of actors by seeing category-bound activities, identifying the activity itself

⁴ Interestingly, I was travelling with Ana and therefore was potentially part of the 'queue'. There were, however, various elements that prevented me from being seen as 'next in line'. First, during these boarding sequences I was always walking behind Ana, which made our relationship less obvious to the rest. Oftentimes, similar to the rollator itself, the fact that we were travelling together was not evident until later. Second, the material structure of the bus (narrow and crowded) rendered me less available to assist Ana with her progression. Finally, while I was standing behind Ana, others were occupying priority seating and were in a better position to offer something that she might have needed.

might require effort to discern. What is Ana doing? And therefore, is she a person in need of assistance with... what exactly?

This hints at the social dimension of prosthetic devices, which are usually understood as personal things, but in these instances become relevant as *social* things. For an assistive device user, such as Ana, it is indeed relevant that strangers around her understand what the rollator is for, and what it can do, as this will shape the design of offers of assistance. How the object is categorised by members of the public changes dynamically throughout the sequence (Streeck 1996; see also Mondada 2019). The cases analysed show how Ana gets involved into that categorisation process. Either by making the object visible, explaining its characteristics ("It's too difficult to get back"), or her habits regarding the object ("I put it here"), Ana influences how the object is seen by other members of the bus, which is a relevant part of managing offers of assistance, especially because the rollator is often misunderstood by other passengers. Ana actively contributes to making the rollator accountable part of the situation.

Overall, as a person with reduced mobility who routinely uses the public transport, Ana demonstrated to be a proficient assistance-receiver. She used verbal, embodied, and material resources to steer the action – thus allowing others to physically align to her, to touch her rollator, and by prompting, accepting, or rejecting offers. This proficiency contributed to her being treated as an independent fellow passenger, whose autonomy over the assistance-giving sequences was successfully preserved.

This article's aim has been to showcase the complex social work of enabling human-assisted mobility among fellow public transport users, while preserving the civil distance that exists between strangers. The 'tension' described by Hirschauer (2005:51), between "turning to or away from others", can be found in Goffman's (1972) distinction between supportive interchanges and avoidance rituals. Supportive interchanges and avoidance rituals have been presented as different things – the former when individuals display courtesy and concern towards others, and the latter when avoiding to trespass civil boundaries. Ana's case shows both 'forces' simultaneously at work, enabling one other. A collection of supportive interchanges of involvement and assistance, underpinned by the avoidance rituals of maintaining distance from someone who is acknowledged as an autonomous fellow passenger, and is to remain a stranger in the bus.

Principles of design that aspire to ensure the independency of users are highly prevalent among transport engineers and accessibility designers (Schwanen/Banister/Bowling 2012). While this perspective frequently equates 'being assisted' as a failure of accessible design, this article pointed in a different direction. People's autonomy and anonymity are not necessarily endangered because they are being assisted by strangers in public. Human-assisted mobility *can* be done in such a way that the assisted person remains in control of their actions, as long as their needs, actions, and abilities are intelligible and made accountable. If more people with reduced mobility and other impairments are welcome to populate and share these public spaces, the more accessible these spaces will become for them.

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