

*Stranger Danger: How Our  
Perceptions Shape Others*

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*It is a cloudy Tuesday morning and I am aimlessly walking along the streets of downtown Napa. Most of the town's residents are at work or school and the usually bustling area is oddly silent. A small woman with short dark hair walks towards me on the sidewalk pushing a pink stroller in which her toddler sleeps soundly. As we approach each other I try to decide whether or not I should make eye contact. We are the only people on the street. Ignoring her would be rude, but making eye contact somehow doesn't seem very polite either. What do I do? How should I act around this stranger?*

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The unknown is fascinating to me. If one tries understanding or becoming familiar with it, its entire identity changes because the unknown is now the known. It is therefore impossible to ever understand what, by definition, we cannot understand. The entire concept is one big unclear and confusing cycle. The same bewildering definition applies to strangers as well; every human being with whom I have not yet interacted is a stranger to me. Why does this label exist? Why do I group these people, whose only link to each other is that I do not know them, under one large blanket term that carries with it thousands of assumptions and preconceived notions?

I had never questioned this terminology until my encounter with the mother and her child on the street. It is a dilemma I seem to find myself in constantly but I had previously never stepped back to analyze why avoiding eye contact always seems to simultaneously be the rude and polite way to act. My indecision made me wonder why it is customary to avoid making eye contact with strangers in the first place. Is this seemingly universal habit a reflection of our perceptions about strangers? What creates or affects these perceptions?

By defining someone as a stranger, we are labeling them "the Other" and implying that they do not belong. Throughout history and in the present day, many societies have felt the need to distinguish between those who belong and those who do not. Various African and American Indian tribes traditionally decorated themselves with colorful body paint to indicate their membership in a particular tribe. This behavior is present in other peoples as well. Yarmulkes are worn only by observant Jews and therefore testify to their membership in the faith. Even current fashion trends and hairstyles help show who is a member of a certain social group and who is not. This categorizing, which stems from an innate need to be a part of something, has dramatically changed the way that we view and treat people unlike or anonymous to us.

What makes a person a "stranger?" In its simplest form, a stranger is someone that we are unfamiliar with or do not know. But what does it mean to "know" a person? Do we know someone once we learn their name and can put that name to a face? Or do we know someone when we know all of their thoughts, wants, needs, and hopes? Can we truly know a person without actually being them? John D. Mayer, PhD and professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, approaches the topic from a psychoanalytic point of view. Mayer describes the three "levels" of knowing a person, saying that you must learn about the first level of a person to reach the second, and fully know the person at their second level in order to reach the third. Level one of knowing a person, Mayer claims, is a description of a person's broad general traits. Knowing that a person is outgoing, intelligent, reserved, or contemplative, for example, is knowing someone at the first level. Level two is a description of the person's wants, needs, and the means that they go to in order to obtain these things. Once you fully know the second level of someone, Mayer says that you can know them on their third and final level. The third level of

knowing a person is to know someone's life events and identity. Mayer describes the identity as their full personality combined with their personal story (Connecting Through Eye Contact). He approaches the concept of knowing a person in a very concrete, simple way. Is it truly possible, however, to know "levels" of a person? Do we have levels of ourselves at all? The transition someone makes in another person's mind from stranger to acquaintance is likely not as concrete as this psychoanalytical point of view makes it seem. Mayer's approach towards the process of getting to know a person is very methodical. According to him, it takes a lot of time, effort, and commitment to fully "know" a person. It takes almost no time, however, to fear someone that you do not know at all.

This fear of people is called Anthropophobia, and about 13% of adults regularly experience this uncontrollable anxiety around others (Understanding Anthropophobia). It is also extremely common for infants and young children to have stranger anxiety, or in more extreme cases, stranger terror. Symptoms of stranger terror include fleeing when an unknown person enters the young child's home, being upset by a stranger's presence, or loud screaming in the company of the unknown person (Separation Anxiety). This fear of strangers is innate, likely for survival and safety reasons, and is fairly normal. After a certain age, however, it becomes more of an irrational phobia that can negatively impact people's lives.

Eliezer Sobel, one such Anthropophobe, wrote an article entitled "Fear of People" that was published in Psychology Today. Sobel is a writer, musician, and teacher who happens to be very afraid of strangers. Descended from victims of the Holocaust, he perceives his Jewish identity as a yellow star on his jacket that makes him a potential target and has caused scary, potentially life-threatening encounters with anti-Semitic strangers in the past. "It's all those 'other' people I am afraid of," Sobel says. "The ones who are out to kill me based on all sorts of notions I can't begin to fathom, given that none of them has ever hung out or gone for a bike ride with me or talked with me about the meaning of life and love, or even cats and music (Fear of People)." Because everyone that he does not know has been labeled as a "stranger" to him, Sobel has applied his negative experiences with certain strangers to every person unknown to him. In doing so, he has developed a fear of millions of people that he knows are truly harmless. If it harms our perceptions of likely well-intentioned people, why do humans label others as strangers? This tendency is engrained in human nature and goes hand in hand with the individual's need to feel like a part of something.

It is human nature to want to belong in a group and societies have been arranged and divided into tribes for thousands of years. This tribe mentality has likely influenced and led to a lot of the preconceived notions people hold regarding strangers today. When societies were largely organized into tribes, strangers were uncommon. Any encountered strangers were almost always present for a malicious reason such as theft, murder, enslavement, or taking someone's property. In such tight-knit communities, strangers and the unknown were dangerous and untrustworthy (Tribes). Although the majority of modern day societies are not organized in quite the same way and meeting or encountering strangers has become a normal part of everyday life, humans still crave to belong, to be a part of something important. Is it engrained in us to want to stick with our own "tribes," or even to be in tribes in the first place?

There are many aspects of the modern-day human experience that seem to indicate that this is the case. We have nations, towns, secret societies, political parties, the boy scouts, fraternities and sororities, even book clubs that help us feel like we are part of a larger group. In order to further emphasize our place and belonging in these social groups, a lot of time is

devoted to deciding who is and should be “in” and “out” of the tribe. What is important when deciding who belongs and who does not belong?

Many groups and tribes throughout history have adopted a list of characteristics that all of their members must possess. Many tribes mandate that their members must live in the same area, have certain family ties to the group, or have a certain social status or special possessions that secure their places in the tribe. For some organizations, seemingly obsessive amounts of time are spent deciding who belongs and who does not; who is a stranger and who is a welcome, familiar face (Tribes). Why do we spend so much time focusing on these distinctions? Why does society have an obsession with exclusivity?

For as long as tribes have existed (and likely before then as well), “the Other” has been present. The Other is an individual who the group has decided does not belong. He or she is perceived as inferior and is often treated accordingly. This trope is also present in various social dynamics in which not necessarily numerically dominant groups have deemed not necessarily numerical minorities inferior (women have been deemed “the Other” in comparison to men, for example). Strangers are also always the Other and are often treated as such. There is a difference, however, between the Other and another “character” frequently present in social dynamics, “the outsider.” While the outsider could eventually be incorporated into the dominant group and their offspring will likely automatically belong, the Other will never get the chance to be accepted by the tribe because he or she is thought of as “different in kind.” While an immigrant would be considered “the outsider,” for example, a foreigner is “the Other.” The main difference between the Other and the outsider is that the Other is thought by the dominant group to lack some essential trait and can therefore never be accepted or included (The Other). Because all strangers are classified as the Other, we will always at least slightly, and perhaps unconsciously, consider them different and possibly inferior to ourselves.

Humans have many subconscious and often incorrect assumptions about others (Hidden Assumptions). We may be prejudiced or biased against or towards a certain group of people and be completely unaware of it. Unfortunately, there is no way to correct a false assumption if we do not even know that we have it. What do we assume about a stranger that we pass on the street? It is likely- because of instinctive safety reasons dating back to when encountering a stranger was uncommon and almost always dangerous- that humans tend to view strangers as ill intentioned instead of well intentioned. It is almost easier, in a fast encounter with a stranger, to assume that they are immoral in nature and should be avoided or ignored. This is always a safer conclusion to come to as opposed to assuming that the person is well intentioned or simply a complicated being who is not purely good or bad.

The label of “stranger” tends to simplify and “flatten” people into two-dimensional beings without backstories who are either wholly good or wholly bad. Strangers are just nameless, anonymous faces to us and we often forget that they are complex humans. Is anyone truly good or evil in nature? If so, do all humans possess the same tendencies to lean towards good or evil? In their book *Introducing Ethics*, Dave Robinson and Chris Garratt write, “there is no such thing as ‘human nature’- only citizens internalizing external moral codes” (Introducing Ethics). This statement aligns with the recurring theory that humans are born a “blank slate” without any initial human nature of any kind. If this is the case, external factors and the person’s environment shape their personality and morals. When most of the world was organized into tribes, any stranger a person encountered had grown up and lived in an entirely different environment and with fairly different experiences than those of the people in the tribe. Perhaps this meant that a stranger’s morals, personality, and habits differed from those of the tribe

enough to make them seem inherently bad in the eyes of a group that valued uniformity. Although it has its negative effects, perceiving strangers as two-dimensional and purely good or bad is likely still engrained in us because it is such a good survival skill. In quick encounters with strangers, deciding that a stranger is either “good” or “evil” can help people act appropriately to ensure their safety.

Journalist and best-selling author of the popular book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell calls these quick conclusions humans come to “snap judgments.” Our snap judgments can assist us in making surprisingly accurate decisions when making rapid assessments of strangers and in thousands of other situations and decisions as well. In *Blink*, Gladwell writes, “There can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis” (Gladwell, 17). His book recounts the stories of instances in which a person’s snap judgment was correct and yielded more accurate results than the decision made with careful deliberation and thought. As accurate as our instincts may be, however, they can also have a tendency to be misleading and prejudiced. Gladwell acknowledges this but insists that although our instincts are not always correct, humans are obligated to take them seriously and “acknowledge that they’re playing a role” in our decision making (Morris). Numerous conducted studies have shown how snap judgments affect our interactions with strangers. In a recent Princeton University study, for example, psychologist Alex Todorov found that people respond rapidly and intuitively to the faces of strangers they see and, based on the person’s appearance, immediately come to conclusions regarding the stranger’s character. Todorov concludes, “We decide very quickly whether a person possesses many of the traits we feel are important, such as likeability and competence, even though we have not exchanged a single word with them. It appears that we are hard-wired to draw these inferences in a fast, unreflective way” (Boutin). In interactions with strangers, it appears that our instincts take control and trump any deliberate, careful, rational thought.

So many elements of the way we treat strangers are caused by human instincts. We label those we do not know as “strangers” because we need to feel like we are a part of something, and excluding strangers and labeling them as “the Other” helps to further solidify our own membership in these social tribes. The fear of strangers is incredibly common because it was once safest to be wary of the likely dangerous strangers we encountered. Although once an important safety measure, immediately deeming a stranger “the Other” and someone to be feared often does more harm than good in our current society. By grouping together everyone that we do not know, we have begun to judge and classify people negatively (or at the very least, two-dimensionally) based only on the fact that they are unknown to us. Labeling everyone we do not know in the same way has led to a general fear of millions of harmless people and has also caused unnecessary prejudice, exclusion, and incorrect and hurtful assumptions. Because of these misunderstandings, assumptions, and fears, certain customs have formed regarding the way strangers should be (and are) treated.

When I walked past the mother and child on the street, I wasn’t sure whether it was more socially acceptable to avoid or make eye contact and greet the woman. Eye contact represents a multitude of different concepts or states of being and has various implications in different cultures. In Western culture, looking someone in the eye signifies honesty and avoiding or veiling eye contact implies deceit or mystery. In Eastern culture, on the other hand, avoiding eye contact or obscuring the eyes is a sign of modesty and respect. Eyes are also often associated with truth or the gateway into one’s soul, but also represent judgment or authority (Eyes). In avoiding eye contact with a stranger on the street, was I trying to avoid confrontation, judgment, and honesty, or was I trying to be polite and respectful to the mother and her child? I have

noticed it is often the case that people do not want to get “too (emotionally) close” to strangers for some reason. Perhaps it simplifies things; strangers are strangers and should stay that way so that their place in our life is stationary and uncomplicated. In avoiding eye contact, was I trying to distance myself from this woman, to never allow her to become more than a stranger to me? In his PsychCentral article “Connecting Through Eye Contact,” John Amodeo, PhD., an author and family therapist, explains his theory as to why we avoid eye contact in interactions. “If we quickly look away, we don’t have to bear the brunt of any possible negative perceptions of us” (Amodeo). The way that we treat strangers seems to have more to do with our perceptions of ourselves than it does with the way we see others (we want to belong so we exclude strangers, for example, and a fear of strangers says far more about ourselves than it says about those we are scared of). Because we know nothing about them, strangers become our mirrors; these two-dimensional “blank slates” can tell us nothing about the person we see- instead they reflect back at us and reveal more about ourselves through the way we view and treat those unknown to us. Encountering a stranger therefore becomes an encounter with the self. Is this why we look away?

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