

# *The Familiar Stranger: An Aspect of Urban Anonymity*



Nothing is more characteristic of urban life than the fact that we often gain extreme familiarity with the faces of a number of persons, yet never interact with them. At my railroad station, for example, I have stood at a commuter station for several years, often in the company of people whom I have never gotten to know. The faces and the people are treated as part of the environment, equivalent to the scenery, rather than persons with whom one talks, exchanges greetings.

Harry From, one of my students, wrote that the familiar stranger is the end product of a process, which like friendship, takes time. Moreover, it is a covert process and often leads to a frozen relationship. To become a familiar stranger a person (1) has to be observed, (2) repeatedly for a certain time period, and (3) without any interaction.

There is a powerful rule at work among familiar strangers; the further away from the scene of their routine encounter, the more likely they will interact with each other. Thus if they encounter each other in a faraway country, they are most likely to acknowledge each other, engage in conversation, and even experience a warm surge of familiarity and friendship. Why is it that people who have not in

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several years spoken to each other, while standing in each other's presence, are in a distant setting moved to address each other as persons?

Barriers build up between familiar strangers which become difficult to surmount, so that when the familiar stranger needs to make a request, he prefers to make it to a total stranger rather than a familiar though hitherto unacknowledged face.

Extraordinary incidents, such as a flood, help move people out of their impersonal relations. The incident itself is temporary, and thus involves not an extended commitment, but only one that lasts as long as the temporary disruption of routine.

A few years ago several students at The City University of New York attempted to study the phenomenon of the familiar stranger. They got up early in the morning, and went out to the commuter stations that feed into New York City. They photographed large clusters of commuters, many standing back to back at the station, or staring straight ahead (see Figure 6.1). Each figure in the photograph was numbered, the photographs were duplicated, and the students returned the next week distributing the photographs to the commuters, with a cover letter explaining our purposes, and a questionnaire dealing with the phenomenon of the familiar stranger. We found that 89.5 percent of those questioned reported at least one familiar stranger. The average commuter claimed 4.0 individuals at the station whom he recognized but never spoke to, compared to a mean of 1.5 individuals with whom he conversed. Some familiar strangers turn out to be "socio-metric stars" in that they are recognized by a large proportion of commuters at their station, even if never spoken to.

Many passengers told us they often think about their fellow commuters, trying to figure out what kind of lives they lead, what their jobs are like, etc. They have a fantasy relationship to familiar strangers that may never eventuate in action. But it is a real relationship, in which both parties have agreed to mutually ignore each other, without any implication of hostility. Indeed, sometimes only the right circumstance is needed to change the relationship. Consider this: A woman collapsed on the streets of Brooklyn, not far from her apartment house. She had been a familiar stranger to another resident of the street for years. The resident immediately took responsibility for the unconscious woman, not only calling an ambulance, but riding with her to the hospital to make certain she was treated properly, and to assure that her possessions were not stolen by ambulance attendants. She said later that she had felt a special responsibility for the woman, because they had seen each other for years, even if they had never spoken. The familiar stranger status is not the absence of a relationship, but a special form of relationship, that has properties and consequences of its own.

Why do familiar strangers exist? It is a response to overload: in order to handle all the possible inputs from the environment we filter out inputs so that we allow only diluted forms of interaction. In the case of the



(a)



(b)

FIGURE 6.1  
Typical photographs distributed to commuters, used in the study of the familiar stranger.

familiar stranger, we permit a person to impinge on us perceptually, but close off any further interaction. In part this is because perceptual processing of a person takes considerably less time than social processing. We can see a person at a glance, but it takes more time to sustain social involvement. If the temporal relations were reversed, that is, if perception took a longer amount of time than social communication, a quite different phenomenon would result: We would typically talk with people whom we did not have time to visually perceive.