

STRANGERS ARE HUMANS

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Communication Studies



HUMANS OF NEW YORK



© Brandon Stanton (HONY Website)

Humans of New York is a photo project that was started in 2010 by Brandon Stanton. The purpose of the project is to take photographs of the inhabitants of and visitors to New York, showcasing the unique diversity of one of the biggest cities in the United States. *Humans of New York* connects people from all around the world and breaks the stereotype that “strangers” have by featuring them as regular people. Everyone has a story, and are not as alone in the world as they sometimes feel that they are.



© Brandon Stanton (HONY tumblr)

“I’d always been an overachiever. I graduated at the top of my class in high school. I got straight A’s. I got accepted into 14 of the 17 colleges that I applied to. But when I got to Harvard, everyone around me was just as smart or smarter. My grades fell, and suddenly I was no longer exceeding expectations. All that external validation that I’d become accustomed to suddenly stopped. And I crumbled. I felt lost. I learned that I hadn’t formed an identity beyond making people proud of me. So I left school for a while and took a hard look at my life. I learned to cope with failure. I learned that it was OK to rely on other people and ask for help. Eventually I went back and graduated. I’m still not exactly sure who I am. But I’m working on it.”



© Jorge Quinteros (Huffington Post)

Brandon Stanton is a 32 year-old American photographer who began his photoblog, *Humans of New York*, after leaving his job as a bond trader in Chicago. An amateur photographer, Stanton began taking photos of anything that caught his interest. After a while, he decided that photos of people were his favorite to take. As he continued to capture more & more photographs of people and then post them online, Stanton started to engage in conversation with his subjects. He used quotes from his conversations as the captions for his photographs, and this ignited his followers to create a community of support for the strangers he was presenting to the public.

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THESIS

From a young age, we are socialized to believe that strangers are people we need to avoid. While there is validity behind the reasoning of “stranger danger,” it is easy to forget that not all strangers are bad people. Often, they are people like us with families, pets, jobs, hobbies, dreams, fears, and everyday lives.

The purpose of this study was to take a look at the socially established stereotypes of strangers and how, through communication, we can break the negative stigma that shrouds the collective group. The photoblog *Humans of New York* demonstrates to the world how simple conversations can change a stranger into a person we can relate to.

Thesis: The negative connotation surrounding the idea of a “stranger” can be surpassed by interpersonal interaction and the process of communication, transforming the unknown stranger into a relatable human being.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Who Is A Stranger?

Any dictionary will define a stranger as someone that is unknown to us or with whom one is unacquainted. Generally, most people we encounter on a daily basis are strangers. It is easy to become accustomed to encountering strangers; in fact, we are more surprised to run into someone that we do know during our day than someone with whom we are unfamiliar or unacquainted.

Why Do We Avoid Strangers?

From a young age, we are warned against the dangers that “strangers” possess. The idea of a stranger has the reputation of being:

- ❖ dangerous
- ❖ threatening
- ❖ a trouble maker
- ❖ a bad influence
- ❖ a kidnapper
- ❖ a druggie
- ❖ a gang member
- ❖ a “weirdo” or “crazy” person
- ❖ a liar
- ❖ someone who wants money
- ❖ someone lesser than “I”
- ❖ and so much more

Such ideas cause us to fear for our safety and well-being, or to feel disgust and annoyance. We do not even know these people that we so easily fear.

What Can We Do To Break The Negative Stereotype?

The stigma we assign to the strangers in our lives can be diminished by communicating and interacting with the people we have so often avoided. As demonstrated by *Humans of New York*, strangers are people, too. It is easy to avoid them when we have an agenda, or do not want to be bothered...but by doing so, we miss out on rewarding experiences that can help us create community.

How Can We Initiate A Conversation?

Approaching a stranger is intimidating, especially when there are years of apprehension to dispel. A good recommendation is to begin with individuals or groups who have a similar interest as us. For example, if you are a dog-lover, begin a conversation with a fellow dog-walker. Or, if someone is wearing a band t-shirt, strike up a conversation about music. Remembering that others are people like us makes interactions less daunting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his book *The Necessity of Strangers*¹, Alan Gregerman mentions that engaging with strangers makes us more complete, compelling, innovative, and successful. Strangers are objective to our problems, and are more willing to challenge us with honest feedback. Gregerman attests that while it is important to interact with strangers from different cultures, we often forget to interact with the people around us in our own environments.

Gregerman states that our aversion to strangers stems not only from a fear of danger, but also a fear of difference. Strangers are assumed to be different from us, which triggers us to stay away from them...but strangers are important to our growth as individuals.

SIGNIFICANCE

Viewing strangers in a positive light is important because too often, our stereotypes and prejudices hinder us from living a full life, one filled with experiences only gained by interacting with other people.

It is also important to interact with strangers because at times, we feel as if the problems that we face are ours alone, and that no one truly understands what we are enduring. Communicating with strangers gives us the opportunity to meet new people, and can remind us that:

- 1) Other people face problems, too.
- 2) There are people who care about us.

Humans of New York has inspired a virtual community of people who support one another without negativity or regard to one’s race, class, gender, age, job, or situation. This project inspires people from all over the United States, and all over the world for that matter, to see people as they are: human.

Imagine what a different world we would live in if we moved our positive support from the computer screen and into our communities. Talk to a stranger today!

SELECT REFERENCES

- ¹Gregerman, A. S. (2013). *The Necessity of Strangers: The Intriguing Truth About Insight, Innovation, and Success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand.
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