Review of Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter … But Really Do.

Reviewed By: Daniel Perlman

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Abstract:

A review of Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter … But Really Do. Melinda Blau and Karen L. Fingerman. New York: Norton. 2009.

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Article:

Consequential Strangers is a well-selected title. It is catchy and paradoxical: We don't usually expect strangers to be significant in our lives. It also signals the volume's thesis, namely that peripheral network members are important.

Who are consequential strangers and why are they key in our lives? Blau and Fingerman see relationships as forming a continuum of intimacy and contact. “Consequential strangers occupy the broad region between complete strangers on the far left and intimates—our strongest connections—on the far right” (p. 6). Consequential strangers (CSs) are people about whom you know something. They are “resources,” “people who help you get through the day and make life more interesting” (pp. 8–9). Many CS relationships develop over time and involve repeated interaction but are restricted to a particular place or activity. Thus, they often have a compartmentalized function in our lives, and the ties our CSs have with one another may be low. Scholars have distinguished between intimate versus nonintimate, core versus peripheral, primary versus secondary, and strong versus weak relationships. Consequential strangers lean toward the weaker, less intense side of such distinctions. They typically come and go in our lives; we aren't highly committed to them, and they are replaceable. In everyday parlance, we might refer to CSs by their role (e.g., my hairdresser) or by such terms as *acquaintance*, *pal*, or*mate*. Consequential strangers are consequential, but they aren't really total strangers in the way that concept is commonly used.

This volume is replete with specific illustrations of the importance of CSs. Three general reasons include the following:

1. Consequential strangers constitute a large, growing portion of our network ties: humans rarely report more than 10 intimate relationships, but they can often list hundreds of peripheral network members. Since the mid-20th century, family size has declined but modern technology (e.g., travel, communications technology) has precipitated a surge in peripheral relations.

2. We spend a lot of time with CSs (e.g., “People who work full-time … are likely to spend more time with acquaintances than with their closest relations” [p. 15]).

3. Relationships with CSs play key functions in our lives. For example, they help integrate us into society, provide information, help us define our identities, provide emergency support, assist with family tasks, offer diversity and novelty, and so on.

Consequential Strangers has seven chapters. In Chapter 1, the authors describe what they mean by the concept of consequential strangers. They note that scholars and laypersons have largely ignored such relations and argue that readers need to expand their relationship vocabulary to better acknowledge such people in their lives. The authors also contend that we live in a society of continual CS connections. Chapter 2 focuses on social networks. It introduces Antonucci's idea of three circles of convoys varying in closeness to us in our lives and covers such network concepts as density. The latter part of the chapter discusses how having diverse networks can contribute to effective leadership and innovation. Chapter 3 gets into the functions that CSs play in our lives, looking at how CSs broaden our sense of self, link us to information, help us to get resources, add novelty, and so on. Chapter 4 focuses on well-being. The authors acknowledge that intimate ties are important but argue that peripheral ties add to our health: the healthiest individuals have both types of connections. Chapter 5 is titled “Being Places” in reference to its examination of the settings in which CSs first develop and flourish. Chapter 6 covers the downside of CSs, how they can be irritating and detrimental. Think of rejection, stress, jealousy, bullying, lying, ostracizing others, service providers who don't do their jobs, miscommunication, and so on. Although Chapter 3 emphasizes the value of networks that are diverse with regard to occupation and socioeconomic status, Chapter 6 discusses the difficulties of crossing some social divides (e.g., race and class). It advances an idea for fostering interracial CSs: approach them in terms of seeking positive intercultural exchanges rather than in terms of being politically correct or avoiding being prejudiced. In Chapter 7, the authors look to the future and predict that CSs will continue becoming more important.

Consequential Strangers is the product of collaboration between the journalist Melinda Blau and the academic Karen Fingerman. The book is written primarily for the general public. Such books can do a service to both their readers and social scientists. For readers, the genre is stimulating and informative. In some cases, popularized books offer readers ways to alleviate problems and live more successful lives, although in this case, the emphasis is largely on the description and analysis of CSs. For social scientists, such volumes disseminate knowledge and garner public support for their endeavors.

Blau and Fingerman's collaboration builds on Fingerman's scholarly work, including her 2009 article “Consequential Strangers and Peripheral Ties: The Importance of Unimportant

Relationships," in *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. One might ask, "Which should I read—the book or the review article?" My answer is that you might want to read both, but you will get a somewhat different treatment in each.

The *JFTR* follows the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association [APA], 2003). It is fair to say that APA style is not simply a set of rules about the mechanics of manuscript presentation. Instead, it has an underlying epistemological view associated with a specific genre of writing (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). The popular writing manifest in the book is different in many ways from the kind of writing found in social science journals.

What are a few of these differences? In general, as a journalist, Blau is more concerned with the style of her writing. For example, each chapter of *Consequential Strangers* starts with a pithy quote and has catchy headings. In contrast, in APA style manuscripts,

> words are implicitly assumed to function as simple transmitters of information from the writer to the reader. … Colorful language or attention-getting metaphors are rare because they give prominence to the vehicle rather than the content. In APA style, language use is not allowed to call attention to itself. (Madigan et al., 1995, p. 433)

Complementing greater concern with style, Blau and Fingerman make extensive use of specific examples, compared to the more general, quantitative approach of most social science writing. For instance, they discuss the noted family scholar and Penn State President Graham Spanier. Readers learn that he grew up in a working-class family, he is a good racquetball player, he plays the washboard with the band Deacons of Dixieland, and first-year students have described him as "some weird old guy" living in a dorm room down the hall from them during Penn State's orientation week. Readers get three pages of Spanier's story with two footnotes, neither of them to scientific sources. The point of this section is that Spanier's ability to keep in touch with a wide range of CSs contributes to his success as an administrator. Such vivid, concrete information has been shown to have more impact than statistical summaries (Borgida & Nisbett, 1977). As a final example of differences in style, social science writing is known for its use of hedge words (e.g., *suggest*, *it may be*,*perhaps*) that give scientific expression a tentative, cautious tone. Blau and Fingerman are less prone to qualifying their statements.

Consequential Strangers and much of good social science writing share a desire to get across a thesis. The way journalists and social scientists build a case for that thesis differs some. Although I would not want to ignore the role of intimate ties, the thesis that Fingerman and Blau offer is a valuable one that the personal relationships literature has largely neglected. If you want a briefer, more traditionally buttressed presentation of their thesis, then you can read Fingerman's scholarly publications. If you want a more leisurely presentation with more color but less scientific content, then you can read Blau and Fingerman's book. Each succeeds in its own goals. I recommend both.

Daniel Perlman