One of my favorite walks in Washington, D.C., is from my basement apartment north of H Street NE through the Capitol Hill neighborhood to Eastern Market, the oldest continually operated fresh food public market in D.C. It's a 1.5 mile walk, but a peaceful one, through a mostly residential neighborhood with plenty of dog walkers and stroller pushers.

Its vibe makes me want to say "hello" to everyone I pass on the sidewalk or sitting on their front porch. Not everyone, however, feels the same way.
I started walking to Eastern Market on a sunny, humid early Sunday afternoon when, less than a block from my door, I passed by a boisterous man on the sidewalk and gave him a smile. He stopped his conversation, turned to me and said "hello, sir, how are you doing today?" That interaction was in sharp contrast with the remainder of my walk. Despite my effort to acknowledge the people I passed, not one met my eyes for a simple head nod or "hello." (We're not in Times Square, people!) I was disappointed.

On my way back I decided to count how many people would acknowledge me when I passed them on the sidewalk. I tried to make eye contact with anyone who passed me, along with anyone on their front lawn or porch. I gave an "acknowledgement point" to anyone who met my gaze, and tracked how many people made eye contact, said hello (even with no eye contact), or waved. Shoot, I would even count it if someone yelled at me for staring at them too much (that didn't happen).

All told, I passed 24 people or groups. Want to guess how many of them got acknowledgement points? ... 3, or 12.5 percent. To put it another way, a higher percentage of American males have strokes than acknowledged me on the sidewalk last weekend. Bummer.

I put the findings of my quasi-research project in the back of my mind until I happened to come across a study that might explain why I was so interested in people acknowledging me during my walk. It comes from a simple human need to feel included.

In the study "To Be Looked at as Though Air: Civil Attention Matters," published earlier this year in Psychological Science, the lead author Eric D. Wesselmann, a psychology professor at Purdue University, explains: "Because social connections are fundamental to survival, researchers argue that humans evolved systems to detect the slightest cues of inclusion or exclusion. For example, simple eye contact is sufficient to convey inclusion. In contrast, withholding eye contact can signal exclusion. ... Even though one person looks in the general direction of another, no eye contact is made, and the latter feels invisible." Similar to my feelings when I went unnoticed.

To measure how people feel when they are acknowledged by others, the researchers had a college-aged woman walk around a well-trafficked college campus of about 40,000 students. The woman randomly chose 282 people and did one of three gestures: looked through them (without making eye contact), acknowledged them with eye contact, or acknowledged them with eye contact and a smile. After the passing, a colleague trailing behind the woman stopped the person...
she acknowledged (or didn't) and asked two questions: "Within the last minute, how disconnected do you feel from others?" (on a scale of 1-5) and "Within the last minute, have you experienced acknowledgment from a stranger?" (yes/no). This is all without the person knowing that the woman and her colleague are working together. The graph below from the study shows the results:

The people who were given an "air gaze" (or no eye contact) felt the most disconnected. On the other hand, the people who received eye contact and a smile felt the least disconnected of anyone studied. I wonder if you add a "hello" to the smile if it would lower the feeling of disconnection even more. Either way, it seems that even the smallest gestures to connect toward strangers can bring about a sense of community. And that's good for human health.

As Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary established in a 1995 study humans have a "need to belong." As they explain: "Both psychological and physical health problems are more common among people who lack social attachments. Behavioral pathologies, ranging from eating disorders to suicide, are more common among people who are unattached." Much of his comes from the quality of long-term relationships, but I'm curious whether seeing people often in a city setting and not feeling connected could contribute to this as well.

But the role place plays in the feelings of disconnection is not clear. If the same study was conducted in Times Square, for example, would the results be different? The research isn't there yet, but Wesselmann offers a hypothesis.

"It is reasonable to assume that context may influence the effects of both acknowledgment and being given the "air-gaze" (looked at as if one doesn't exist)," said Wesselmann. "If one is in a community where the social norm is to politely greet everyone, then these effects may be intensified. In large cities where these interactions are less common, the effects may be tempered."

Even within big cities there's surely some variation. How would the results of a similar study in Times Square differ from a residential street in New York?

Big cities have bustling corridors where saying "hello" would be out of place. But there are plenty of places, even within the most densely packed city, which lend themselves to neighborly acknowledgement: an apartment building, an office, a quieter residential street. Afterall, the feeling of connectedness is one of the benefits of living in a city. Let's make sure to utilize it. It's good for us.

Top image: InspirationDC/Flickr

Keywords: Washington, DC, Psychology, Sidewalks, Research
I retired a couple of years back and walk Wollaston Beach about 5 times a week. This area has changed a lot over the years and now is about 40% Asian. I say good morning to people walking towards me and I would say about 25% respond and most of them are Asian and are not fluent in English. Occasionally I get a gruff response but the overwhelming majority are very cordial.

People are all different and are all experiencing life differently at any given moment. Some may be extroverts, some introverts, some happy, many are depressed, some angry, some oblivious to their surroundings, some want random human acknowledgement, some just want to be left alone. And most are preoccupied with their own thoughts, issues and problems.

As long as there is no interference with others, people should behave on the street in a manner that is natural and comfortable for themselves.

I live in a busy, congested, fast paced area of a major city. It would be impossible to acknowledge people as we pass.
on the street.

As long as someone is not overtly unfriendly or outright rude or nasty, I don’t think there should be a judgmental political correctness that dictates it is necessary or beneficial to acknowledge every stranger one passes on the street.

1 hour ago

1 hour ago in reply to TENMM

“Jarring” probably wasn’t the right word (in case my post was one of the ones you were referring to). It’s just surprising and catches my attention more often than when someone does speak, smile or nod. And that’s only because it’s SO common here, it’s practically an unconscious reflex. But no judgement intended.

1 hour ago

Even though I was born and raised in the midwest, my parents are both southerners and taught me to speak to passersby, or at least give what we called "the Black people head nod" (I guess because it was more common among Black people). As an adult, I now live in Atlanta and find that many people, regardless of race, do the same and I love it. I used to love working in my vegetable garden on the side of my house that was adjacent to a street/sidewalk (I lived on a corner). People not only smiled or said hello, they often stopped and had full fledged conversations with me. I miss that in my new house where he garden is in the backyard. But in my evening and weekend walks with my husband and daughter, it’s rare (and a bit jarring) when someone does NOT speak.

1 hour ago

My experience in DC has been that persons of color usually respond to eye contact and will say, "How’re you doing today". Those, like me, who are Caucasian will, more often than not, say hello in response to a smile and eye contact. I attribute it somewhat to my age (70's) and respect for elders, and/or Southern Hospitality. My walking area has been a few blocks South and East of Eastern Market.

2 hours ago 1 Like

I grew up in the DC and go back to visit often. The lack of interaction and low level of overall friendliness of people on the street rings true to me. There is one palace in the DC area where this is not true - walking along the C&O Canal towpath, where virtually everyone is friendly in my experience.

I live in Boston now. Up until a few years ago this type of approach to a stranger on the street might led to a fight - really!

2 hours ago

When I lived in DC, I always wondered why people seemed to be so unfriendly. Even if I was sitting on the front steps
of my apartment, people would come into the building with their heads down, avoiding interaction as much as possible. I found it to be a problem more with younger people closer to my age (late 20s). Older folks, especially seniors, were more likely to say hello. Maybe people think too highly of themselves, that they are too important? Or maybe it's just because it's a transient city, where people grew up somewhere else, may only live in DC for a few years and then leave again, so they feel no need to make connections with and invest in their community?

mikeham2231

Try this experiment in Chicago and watch the percentages rise. The advantage of living in close, friendly neighborhoods is that we almost all speak to each other or at least nod in passing. Tourists asking for directions will find themselves bombarded by helpful persons..

Daniel Kim

This is why men should wear hats. A hat is a useful prop that allows a man a physical gesture to give a friendly and brief acknowledgement of others that is recognizable and easily interpreted. A hat tip does not indicate anything more than 'I see you and pay friendly respect s a person.'

OK, I probably ascribe too much to this gesture, but it's a nice sentiment.

Andrew Freeman

One of my favorite things about living in New Orleans is the way people greet each other on the street. New Orleans is very racially and socio-economically diverse and the simple act of acknowledgement is an incredibly humanizing common denominator.

There is a community activist and elder in the Treme neighborhood named Jerome Smith. One of the lessons he imparts to youth in his economically depressed and dangerous neighborhood is greeting people on the way to school with, "Good Morning!"

Fleabell

Living in the Chicago area, I have noticed that the only people who have social manners such as saying hello are African Americans. White people never say hello or good morning, although they do make eye contact (if they are not texting) but it doesn't feel friendly.

redrum21

Well, I'm black and I live downtown and would have to say that I completely disagree with your ignorant comment.
As a student of infrastructure and urban planning, this is definitely a field that intrigues me. It doesn't seem there is ever enough focus on the social interactions that can describe a place. We know cultured and social areas are intrinsic to a good sense of place, but it's studies like these that help us get there more organically in the future.

And being a fan of a certain popular internet phenomenon, it would be remiss of me to not share this fun video in this very related subject.

Keep an open mind and light heart and I know you'll have fun with it. ;)

And even if you don't want to interact with everyone on the street, at least always remember to smile, smile, smile.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...
It's all about rush hour(s) Edward! I should have clarified that. At other times, it's more relaxed.

47 minutes ago  in reply to Edward Patrick Vogel

gringo_locodc

I try to make eye-contact with everyone I pass as a way to be friendly and “inclusive” as you say. There's a woman at my work here in DC who, every time I pass her in the hallways, she seems to intentionally look down at the floor and not even acknowledge my presence (we have no history of relationship to give her cause for her to not acknowledge me, it just seems to be her norm). It drives me crazy! Hello! I'm a human being who works 30 feet from you! Acknowledge me! It's always baffled me.

2 days ago  3 Likes

Jon Harris

Agreed. Many (most?!) people, such as this woman, actually take more effort not to acknowledge their fellow beings then it would take to simply nod, smile, greet, or otherwise act in a pleasant manner.

1 day ago  in reply to gringo_locodc  1 Like

resaurus

The first time I went to Louisiana, I was stunned by how friendly people were. Where I'm from, you don't encounter too many strangers greeting you. It wasn't just a nod, grunt, eye contact or muttered “hello” that I got either in LA, but a clear and ringing "morning" or "good morning" from pretty much everyone I passed while walking in the mornings in that southern state. As a visitor, it made me feel welcome. It immediately gave me a good opinion of the place I was in, and lifted my mood as well.

2 days ago  3 Likes

danielklotz, Keeping a finger on the pulse of Lancaster, PA, its economy, and its creative populace. Strategist for @YDOP.

Inspiring article, thank you. The question that has been bothering me for years is, what is the appropriate time/distance to acknowledge another pedestrian? I have an automatic sense of how far to stand from someone when we're talking, but I don't have that same sense for greeting others on the street. What's the culturally accepted distance? 30 feet? 5? I'd like to see a study on that. Because I don't want to stare at someone from the time they're 50 feet away until after they pass me.

3 days ago  4 Likes