

**Book Review: Consequential Strangers**  
Lori Higginbotham 1/27/10

Although Melinda Blau's *Consequential Strangers* won't be found on the self-help shelves, one can't help but feel while reading it that its message will somehow lead to improved quality of life.

Consequential strangers are casual acquaintances—those people one interacts with on some kind of regular basis who are not intimate family and friends. Intimates include a spouse, mother, sister or longtime best friend, while a consequential stranger might be a hairdresser, favorite waitress at a local café, fellow Hemingway lover in book club. Blau's point is that these people are important, more important than sociologists thought.

The book is co-authored by Blau, a successful journalist, and Dr. Karen L. Fingerman, a psychologist whose academic work focuses on relationships. Intertwined throughout the book are anecdotes, the result of hundreds of Blau's interviews, and Fingerman's research. The voices blend together perfectly—the people in the book each represent ways consequential strangers have somehow enriched their lives.

Blau admits that when she told her own network—what she dubs her “convoy”—about the idea *Consequential Strangers*, people expressed surprise that she'd be able to write an entire book on the topic. It is, however, refreshingly unrepititive, as each anecdote is so unique. A bus driver from New York City climbs the social ladder through a web of contacts and a wealth of cultural smarts. The wife of a former football player now suffering from dementia finds support not from her own family but from other caregivers. While it might be common sense that support

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groups are helpful for some, what's surprising is the extent consequential strangers benefit these people.

What's also surprising is how much can be learned from these consequential strangers. While a family member might tend to spout the same old advice, a consequential stranger—someone removed from the situation—often has a totally different viewpoint and advice. And there's the amazing influence the mind has over the body. One person in the book actually lived seven months longer than expected, possibly due to his network of consequential strangers. It's not hard and fast science, but it's certainly inspiring.

Heralded as a sociological study, *Consequential Strangers* is a series of narratives that lacks the academic density of most sociology books, making it more appealing and digestible to a wide audience. It's one part narrative and one part research, with just a hint of self-help.

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