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## Seeing and Being Seen: The Moral Order of Celebrity Sightings

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*“Seers must work to identify and interpret the meaning of the celebrity’s presence in their mundane surroundings, and they do so in a variety of ways.”*

## **SEEING AND BEING SEEN:**

The Moral Order  
of Celebrity Sightings

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*This article examines the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary in everyday life by focusing on a particular type of public-place encounter: the celebrity sighting. Data from celebrity sighting narratives reveal a distinctive set of micropolitical troubles for interactants that centers on the question of how to treat the interaction. Is it an ordinary public-place encounter between strangers? Or an extraordinary encounter with a uniquely known other of special status? Through the interactional strategies of "recognition work" and "response work," seers construct an emergent set of norms for these interactions that form the basis for a moral order of celebrity sightings.*

**Keywords:** *celebrity; fame; moral order; public-place interaction; narrative*

This secular world is not so irreligious as we might think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance. He walks with some dignity and is the recipient of many little offerings. He is jealous of the worship due him, yet, approached in the right spirit, he is ready to forgive those who may have offended him. . . . In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest.

—Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (1967, 95)

**T**his article examines the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary in everyday life by focusing on a particular type of encounter: the celebrity sighting. Celebrity sightings can happen anywhere—serendipity and surprise are key features of this type of encounter. But they occur with relative frequency in cities such as Los Angeles and New York, as ordinary citizens encounter television and motion picture actors, rock stars, and other media figures while shopping in the supermarket, dining at restaurants, waiting in ticket lines, or simply walking or driving the streets of the city. Among the definitive features of these encounters is their juxtaposition of ordinary and extraordinary frames of meaning in the everyday routine of the seer; in addition, they highlight distinctive ways of knowing others, throwing conventional definitions of *stranger* and *intimate* into new, mass-mediated light.

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The juncture of the strange and the intimate, the ordinary and the extraordinary, creates a distinctive set of micropolitical troubles for interactants in celebrity sighting encounters. These troubles center on the question of how to treat the interaction—as an ordinary public-place encounter between strangers, or as an extraordinary encounter with a uniquely “known” other of special status? Seers (and celebrities) must answer these questions to manage the dilemmas and potential conflicts that arise from their unanticipated face-to-face contact, and conventions for managing these encounters emerge as the encounters unfold. Celebrity-sighting narratives provide a discrete, empirical window into the dialectic of ordinary and extraordinary, intimate and strange, and the interactional strategies by which these dialectics are reconciled. When examined in the aggregate, these narratives reveal distinctive patterns of conflict management that coalesce into a moral order of celebrity sightings.

**“YOU’LL NEVER GUESS WHO I JUST SAW!”:  
CELEBRITY SIGHTINGS AS  
DISTINCTIVE ENCOUNTERS**

Goffman’s sociology of public-place encounters provides a sophisticated and comprehensive template for understanding the moral order of the street. Even the briefest encounters between strangers are governed by a web of rules, rituals, and interactional imperatives. We adhere to these rules at a less-than-conscious level; yet when they are violated, we hold ourselves and each other accountable. Goffman develops and presents his models as eminently generalizable; however, critics and interpreters have shown that there are a number of significant variations on the rules of public-place encounters. Gardner’s (1995) analysis of gender, status, and “situational disadvantage” is a key example of how Goffman’s ideas provide a jumping-off point for even more nuanced analyses of public-place interaction in a diverse society. While the etiquette of public-place encounters is based on certain central rules and norms (such as the basic public courtesy of civil inattention), it is fluid and mutable as well. Indeed, some rules are suspended in certain situations (i.e., public child punishment [Davis 1991], group dog walking [Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991], and public cell-phone usage [Persson 2001]), and other rules emerge as settings and participants vary (i.e., in public encounters with pregnant women [Longhurst 2001],

the disabled [Lenney and Stercombe 2002], and the homeless [Duneier 1999; Dordick 1997]). These studies remind us that there are different types and categories of strangers and that they can therefore interact in different ways when they encounter one another in public places, spontaneously modifying rules and imperatives in patterned ways. So what are the rules and imperatives governing that rare but exhilarating public-place encounter, the celebrity sighting?

In what Klapp (1949) calls the “paradox of hero worship,” celebrities, heroes, and media figures are technically strangers to their audience, even as those audience members feel they know the celebrity personally, and react accordingly.<sup>1</sup> Our sense that we know celebrities through mediated contact (Ferris 2001; Brown 1999; Gamson 1994; Braudy 1986; Schickel 1985; Caughey 1984; Horton and Wohl 1956) can create a feeling of entitlement—Adler and Adler (1989) observe that those with “gloried selves” are “sought intensely by strangers” (p. 301) and thrust into a one-sided “pseudo-intimacy” with their fans. However, since our “para-social” knowledge of the hero/celebrity is in fact quite limited, the heroic or celebrated image is fragile and can be easily shattered. Celebrity is a master status conferred largely (but not entirely) by the expectations and reactions of others (Adler and Adler 1989, 307-8), making celebrities a distinctive type of stranger in public-place encounters<sup>2</sup> and indicating that distinctive interactional rules—a kind of celebrity etiquette—must be in place for these encounters.

Celebrity etiquette demands respect for the celebrity’s “ideal sphere” (Simmel 1908/1950, 321), the violation of which would “insult [his] honor” (Goffman 1967, 63). Because of celebrities’ special status, their ideal spheres differ from those of ordinary persons and may be better sheltered from trespass. However, because of the paradox of familiarity noted above, celebrities are also “open” persons and hence cannot guarantee that they will remain unmolested while navigating public space. Penetrating ideal spheres is usually a privilege of familiarity, while nonfamiliarity compels respect of the sphere through either “avoidance rituals” (Goffman 1967, 62) or “presentation rituals,” in which the approached person’s status is attested to overtly through the salutations of the approaching person (Goffman 1967, 72). These deference rituals preserve the status of those who are deferred to, status that, in interactional situations, must be conferred through the actions of others. Individuals, however high their status, cannot give deference to themselves.

So the celebrity sighting as a type of public-place encounter holds out particular dilemmas of status and relatedness. In addition, given the special status of the celebrity, questions of deference also come into play. Ordinary folks who recognize celebrities in public must decide whether to treat the meeting as a stranger encounter or an encounter with a known other and must then decide how to demonstrate deference to the celebrity's special status. Each type of encounter features different interactional rules, and using the wrong set of rules can be risky for both the seer and the celebrity.

### **EXTRAORDINARY VERSUS ORDINARY: COMPETING FRAMES OF MEANING**

In addition to the intersection of intimacy and strangeness, celebrity sightings create a tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary. This tension produces its own potential conflicts and dilemmas and contributes to the distinctive moral order of these encounters.

Scholars have theorized the extraordinary in a variety of ways (cf. Weber 1921/1968; Sacks 1970/1992; J. Emerson 1970; Baudrillard 1988); they have also contemplated the ordinary (cf. Schutz 1964; Garfinkel 1967/1984; Sacks 1970/1992; J. Emerson 1970). But few have examined the situational and interactional juxtaposition of the two (Emerson being a notable exception). The common thread in these analyses, though, is the identification of a fundamental tension between the ordinary (variously labeled as natural, routine, usual, disenchanted, mundane) and the extraordinary (uncommon, unusual, enchanted, storyable, hyperreal). J. Emerson (1970) in particular addresses the interactional processes by which individuals work to resolve this tension. She notes that the ordinary or "nothing unusual is happening" stance is particularly powerful by virtue of a kind of interactional inertia—it is simply more work to make the extraordinary or "something unusual is happening" definition of the situation stick, and the risks associated with failing in this regard are prohibitive. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) also address the collision between the extraordinary and the ordinary in their classic study of a millennial group whose divinely ordained day of reckoning never arrived. Mundanity and divinity, the ordinary and the extraordinary—the two states cannot comfortably coexist. Either the extraordinary happening has occurred or it has not and must be explained in a mundane context.<sup>3</sup>

Shifting from the “nothing unusual” stance to the “something unusual” stance is a taxing interactional accomplishment that involves the precarious process of changing the frame of meaning in a given situation. If we take these stances to correlate with “ordinary” and “extraordinary” frames of meaning, respectively, each frame has rules of conduct and status rituals attached to it, and when the frames overlap or collide, the everyday actor can find himself in trouble. Both maintaining and changing frames requires interactional labor, entails interactional risks, and involves the interactional cooperation of others. While Goffman (1974/1986, 561) notes that any given strip of activity can contain multiple, overlapping frames within it, and none may be any more “real” or “fantastic” than the other, the presence of a celebrity in an ordinary situation may be experienced as an “out of frame” activity. Even for residents of cities in which media and entertainment industries dominate, the appearance of a famous person in an ordinary public setting is unexpected. When a media figure is encountered in public, a layer of “lamination” is removed from the seer’s usual way of encountering the celebrity on screen or in a magazine or newspaper photo (Goffman 1974/1986, 82).

And as fascinating as it is to see a movie star waiting on a subway platform, it is also problematic for the observer. We are conditioned to look for and find pleasure in the knowledge that the extraordinary star experiences ordinary trials, and celebrity stories are usually constructed to reveal that fame and fortune do not necessarily smooth over the problems of everyday life (Dugdale 2000). But we are also disturbed by the collision of the ideal with the real: when celebrities undergo the mundane ordeals of real life, fans must reevaluate their idealized image of celebrity life.<sup>4</sup> Intense emotion can be generated in this collision of frames: excitement, disappointment, exhilaration, risk, superiority, and shame—all while standing silently on that subway platform, bound by the interactional imperatives of the setting.

## MORAL ORDERS

At its Durkheimian roots, the moral order is a shared set of values and norms, prescriptions and proscriptions, punishments and rewards that create and maintain social cohesion, community, and solidarity. Later interpretations of the moral order, however, paint it as nowhere near so monolithic: just as there are any number of cultures, sub-

cultures, and social settings, so is there a distinctive moral order for each (cf. Anderson [1990], Baumgartner [1988], and Ellis [1986] on the moral orders of inner city, suburban, and rural community life, respectively). The specific values and norms of any particular moral order may be very different from those of another—when Baumgartner’s suburban “moral minimalism” is compared with the more strenuous involvements of Ellis’s fisher folk, we see that where intimacy is greater, so is open conflict. But in all of these cases, the more generic functions of the moral order remain: it facilitates social cohesion, provides a form of social control, offers a set of rules for behavior for which persons are held accountable, and furnishes guidelines for managing conflicts when they arise.

There are countless moral orders that make up the larger social order, and every sector of society has its distinctive moral order. This is especially important to remember in emerging sectors of social life. Despite the obvious differences, we should assume that moral expectations and rules for behavior exist in all types of emergent, non-face-to-face relations as well as more traditional interactions. Recent research has shown that conflict, competition, and cooperation are all visible in online communities (Smith 1999; Kollock 1999), for example, and that social order, social control, and social cohesion are all achievable in Web-based group interactions (Reid 1999). Other types of mass-mediated interactions should be assumed to have moral orders as well.

Media-facilitated fan-celebrity relations qualify here as a region of interaction that has yet to be comprehensively mapped, and there is every reason to presume that celebrity sightings have their own distinctive moral order. Gitlin (1998) has argued that contemporary celebrity “dissolves values in an acid bath of fame” (p. 83). But fame, and the intersection of fame and mundanity, generates its own values. My analysis will show that the moral order of celebrity sightings appears informal, spontaneous, and naturally occurring, but it is clearly patterned, and its patterns are visible in participants’ accounts.

Why spend time parsing out the moral order of celebrity sightings? How could this tiny strip of social interaction be important? Celebrity sightings highlight a more and more common type of social relationship: weak ties based on mass-mediated interactions. They feature a unique tension between stranger (for whom approach is prohibited) and intimate (for whom approach is required). They are also marked by major status differentials as fame meets obscurity and the extra-



ordinary and ordinary collide. The presence of a celebrity in an ordinary setting provides an extreme example of “situational impropriety” and an equally radical example of how such impropriety is dealt with (Goffman 1963). Ethnographers are often attracted to unique cases, sometimes with the goal of debunking the differences between unique cases and more mundane realities (Katz 1997).

In this article, celebrity and celebrity sightings are narrowly framed to include only mostly those who are widely recognizable because of mass-media exposure. However, if recognizability is the central element of celebrity status, then the category of celebrity may be expanded considerably, and celebrity may be understood as a continuous variable rather than a categorical one. If this is the case, then encounters with far more minor players may be defined as celebrity sightings. Local newscasters, minor league athletes, professors, politicians, and pastors—encounters with all of these recognizable individuals share the dynamics of more exalted celebrity sightings. Celebrity—and the extraordinary in all its incarnations—exists on a continuum and impacts all our lives, and a broader view of celebrity increases the applicability of its analysis.

The celebrity sighting creates a distinctive kind of trouble in everyday interaction: How should participants treat this encounter? Continue to treat the encounter within an ordinary frame? Or to shift out of that frame and into another frame that acknowledges the extraordinary status of the celebrity? To act as a stranger or as an intimate? To abide by the rules or to violate them (with an account)? Participants must make on-the-spot calculations of risk versus reward. In making these calculations and deciding how to treat these encounters, seers and celebrities create an emergent moral order, which can then serve as a guide to their actions, either in the moment or in retrospect.

## DATA AND METHOD

I gathered these data in the spring of 2000 by asking a convenience sample of seventy-five acquaintances, colleagues, and students in Los Angeles to recount in as much detail as possible their most recent celebrity sighting. I define a celebrity sighting as a serendipitous encounter with any recognizably famous person in the course of ordinary daily rounds (see Ferris 2001). Encounters that involved paid admission or

events specifically designed to put celebrities and noncelebrities into contact with one another were excluded, and none of the respondents was involved in occupations that featured routine contact with famous persons. The respondents either wrote down their own accounts or their accounts were recorded in a brief interview and then transcribed for analysis. Some of the accounts were solicited for extra credit in the classroom of a colleague in social psychology. Respondents provided detailed descriptions of the setting, the actions and interactions of others, and their own thoughts, feelings, words, and actions during the encounter. Some respondents provided other artifacts along with their narratives, such as copies of autographs or photos of themselves with the celebrity.

Analysis of these narratives began early in the collection process—in fact, I did not begin systematically collecting celebrity-sighting stories until after I had begun to discern patterns in the haphazard, naturally occurring celebrity-sighting tales that were part of everyday conversation in the culture of Los Angeles's Westside. After noting some of these apparent patterns, I began to solicit and collect the stories in less ephemeral, more easily analyzable forms, as described above. I analyzed the interview transcripts and the written narratives using grounded theory methods (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Through analytic induction, the textual data were coded to identify themes and patterns in the respondents' accounts. Those themes and patterns were then further specified and developed, with categories and linkages forming the framework for an understanding of the celebrity sighting as a distinctive type of interactional encounter. More focused coding identified the specific rules of conduct attended to by participants in such encounters and allowed me to address the larger concept of moral order.

This "ethnography by delegation" provides the only effective method of accessing what are fundamentally chance encounters; there is no reliable way to guarantee that a third-party observer would be able to witness these encounters as they occurred naturally. In addition, this methodology also provides access to the thoughts and feelings of the seer about the encounter as it takes place, something that would not be available to a third-party observer. The weakness of these accounts is, obviously, the converse of their strength: while they do provide details about the seer's experience of the encounter, they do not provide paral-

lel details from the celebrity's perspective. Future research will remedy this asymmetry.

My use of stories told by others locates this project in the borderlands between ethnography and narrative analysis, a borderland explored by Gubrium and Holstein (1999). They note that the boundary between narrative analysis and ethnography is blurred by the increasing involvement of "natives" in telling their own stories, even as those stories are also part of an ethnographer's interpretation of the social setting. Though "narratives are best conveyed by those whose experiences they reflect, storytellers do not always recognize or know that what they describe is patterned" (p. 561). Ethnographers take the liberty, then, of teasing out, developing, and ultimately exploiting the patterns and meanings we identify in the stories of others.

The context of storytelling is key to the meaning of narratives. Group membership, for example, can provide a socially structured template for the narratives of members—a collectively recognized formula for storytelling (cf. Pollner and Stein 1996; Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Because the bulk of the narratives gathered for this project are not naturally occurring and were collected outside of an identifiable group culture, it is difficult to say that my respondents have that kind of group-structured and enforced formula in mind as they tell their stories. However, despite the fact that most of these narratives were solicited for research purposes, they do reveal patterns. Where those patterns come from is difficult to say, given the lack of an organized group context such as a support group or twelve-step program. But it may be that the structure of celebrity-sighting narratives is present in so many elements of popular culture (magazines such as *People* and *Us*, for example, and tabloid television programs such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *E! True Hollywood Stories*) that it has permeated the individual storytelling of all those who see celebrities in their daily lives. In addition, to the extent that celebrity sightings are related to more ordinary public-place encounters, celebrity-sighting narratives are related to more ordinary forms of storytelling and hence have a familiar structure for all of us.

Finally, a note on privacy issues: in this project, all of the celebrities mentioned were openly utilizing public space when they were recognized by observers. For this reason, I have taken no steps to disguise the identities of the celebrities involved.

## THE INTERPRETIVE WORK OF CELEBRITY-SIGHTING ENCOUNTERS

In this article, I examine two types of interpretive work revealed in seers' accounts of celebrity sightings: *recognition work*, in which seers struggle to define and comprehend the presence of a celebrity in their mundane world, and *response work*, in which seers present themselves to the celebrity in distinctive ways, engineering the encounter to create a particular definition of the situation. As seers accomplish each of these types of interactional work, the moral order of celebrity sightings emerges, and the unwritten rules that govern these unique encounters and their participants become clear.

### RECOGNITION WORK

It is in some ways self-evident that recognition would be the critical element of a celebrity sighting. The seer cannot identify an encounter as a celebrity sighting unless she comes to recognize that she is in the presence of a celebrity. Seers' tales indicate that recognition is not automatic and that the process of recognition is problematic specifically because the presence of the extraordinary challenges routine assumptions about ordinary experience. Seers must work to identify and interpret the meaning of the celebrity's presence in their mundane surroundings, and they do so in a variety of ways.

*Double take.* The recognition process may begin only with a sense of *familiarity*: a sense that the person is recognizable in some way, although not always or immediately as a celebrity. In these tales, seers recount their struggles to figure out who it is they are looking at and how they come to recognize these people as known others of some sort.

In this account, for example, the respondent caught the gaze of someone who looked familiar as she sat in a restaurant:

I went to Jerry's Famous Deli late at night one night with my boyfriend. The place was packed for it being kind of late. Anyway, we were seated and after we had ordered, I looked around the place for want of anything better to do and I caught the glance of a white guy. I just looked away not really looking at him. But something about him seemed familiar, so when I had the chance I looked his way again . . .

While she initially accords the other restaurant patron an ordinary bit of civil inattention, something about this person warrants a second glance. The respondent is unable to verbalize the reason for her double take beyond the fact that “he seemed familiar.” But it is that sense of familiarity that compels her to take a second glance and see that the familiar man was comedian Adam Sandler.

Sometimes, there is something about the familiarity that signals celebrity status in particular, even if the celebrity’s individual identity is not immediately discernable. In this account, the seer senses that the person is famous, even before she is able to identify him.

We were at a stoplight. Going in the opposite direction on the other side of the small intersection was [a man] sitting in an old black convertible—I don’t know what kind of car it was. I was staring right at him, but I couldn’t figure out who he was, although I *knew* he was a celebrity.

Once again, the respondent recognizes the more generic quality of “celebrity” before she grasps the specific identity of the man in the black convertible. In this case, she knew that the feeling of familiarity was the effect of the man’s public persona rather than a more reciprocal or personal relationship (in other words, he was not a friend of a friend or a student in her dance class). Once the recognition of “celebrity” is made, the respondent then had to figure out which celebrity he was (and he was Bruce Willis, as will be discussed below).

In a final example, one respondent tells of visiting a restaurant and noticing that a man at another table looked very much like actor Rod Steiger, but neither she nor the members of her dining party could be sure. “We talked about it all night long, and we were never sure one way or the other.” They spent their evening discussing the mere possibility that the man was Steiger but could not reach a definitive resolution. In this case, their recognition was complicated by yet another factor: they were unsure whether Steiger was dead or alive at the time!

There is nothing extraordinary about this type of recognition work per se—in all face-to-face encounters, we may need a few extra moments before we realize who the familiar face is. But in most of our mundane encounters, we do not have to contend with the startling prospect that the familiar face is also a famous one. In these double takes, seers must uproot the ordinary attitude to acknowledge the presence of

the extraordinary, something which is often quite difficult (J. Emerson 1970).

*Great expectations.* As illustrated in the above section, the recognition process in celebrity sightings is not automatic. Seers must work to identify the familiar face in front of them and do not always immediately recognize celebrities as celebrities. An additional part of the recognition process that seers cite as confounding is that celebrities often do not look the way we expect them to look. Celebrity-sighting narratives often include the observation that the celebrity is shorter, balder, plainer, more ordinary, or in some other way less spectacular than the respondent may have hoped. These unmet expectations contribute to the recognition conundrum.

Celebrities are not presumed to be ordinary or to appear ordinary, so when they do, seers are surprised. This male respondent who encountered former *Melrose Place* actress Marcia Cross at an outdoor mall noted the following:

She looked quite plain-Jane and it took me a bit to place her. She looked at me like she knew me and then passed by. She was with ordinary-looking-people friends.

This account reveals the expectation of extraordinariness by noting ordinariness: not only did the actress herself look more ordinary than expected, but her friends did as well. A “plain-Jane” visiting the mall with her “ordinary-looking-people” friends confounds the seer’s sense that a media figure should appear extraordinary, as should the people who surround her. It was this ordinariness that made it harder for the respondent to recognize Cross as a celebrity.

Even in a case where celebrity status has already been confirmed, it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the presence of an extraordinary celebrity in an ordinary setting. This respondent had already been alerted to the fact that the tall, well-dressed man at the newsstand was actor Nicolas Cage—but she still had her doubts:

On our way out I glanced over and saw a blond man, much balder than I expected, wearing mostly black I believe, who I assumed to be Nicolas Cage . . . and it *did* look like him. At the same time, I probably wouldn’t have noticed or recognized him if my friend hadn’t first pointed him out.

This respondent acknowledges that she would not have noted the balding blond man as extraordinary if she had not already been alerted to his celebrity status. In fact, even after being told who the celebrity was and seeing him standing in front of her, she was not fully persuaded that he was Nicolas Cage.<sup>5</sup> The presence of a celebrity in her everyday rounds is so unusual that even when the celebrity's identity is preverified and he is standing right in front of her, she still experiences disbelief.

In addition to disbelief, seers may also feel disappointment when they realize that the celebrity's appearance does not meet their expectations. This respondent recognized *ER* actress Ming Na's voice in a crowded take-out restaurant before she turned around to see the actress up close:

It struck me that she sounded exactly the same in person as she did on TV and in the movies. What shocked me was her size. She was teeny tiny, and when I walked by her, I felt that she should be much taller. She left at the same time we did, and we glanced over as she got in a mid-sized family car. I said, "Boring car."

This account does not merely make the observation that Na is short; there is a clear comparison made between expectation and reality. The seer asserts that she already knows what Na should look and sound like, and while the voice meets her expectations, the physical appearance does not. In this respondent's opinion, Na should not only have been taller, but she should also have driven a more glamorous car. These comments reveal that as audience members, we develop expectations that celebrities should be "larger than life," both figuratively and literally, and that these expectations can be dashed when we encounter celebrities in person.

On the other hand, at least one seer indicated that the celebrity she encountered looked exactly as expected. In this case, it was the setting of the encounter that seemed too ordinary:

I was in Payless Shoe Source. . . . I walked to the counter to pay for my shoes when I saw Camryn Manheim (*The Practice*) walking to the counter with about four or five pairs of black shoes. . . . There was no mistaking her as she looks exactly as she does on TV (twelve earrings and all). However, right away I thought, "What is a celebrity doing in Payless Shoes?" But then I thought "That's really awesome that a celebrity buys cheap shoes."

Manheim has a formidable physical presence and did not disappoint the seer's expectations in this regard. Instead, the seer fixated on the mundane setting: the celebrity and the respondent are both buying "cheap shoes," something that ordinary folk do all the time but that television stars are apparently not expected to do.<sup>6</sup> In this moment, in the ordinary setting, the differences between seer and celebrity are minimized.

Great expectations are encouraged by a variety of forces—the aggrandizements of celebrity journalism and elements of hero worship chief among them (Klapp 1949; Adler and Adler 1989; Dugdale 2000). It seems clear that encountering an actual celebrity, especially in an ordinary setting, would present the risk of having these expectations go unmet. However, even if it means that their great expectations are dashed, seers search for and note the ordinary aspects of the extraordinary person in these encounters, as if to rein in the extraordinariness, to make it more manageable in its mundane context.

*Proof positive.* When recognition is made, seers confirm the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary by searching for some trait or characteristic they see as authenticating—some piece of evidence that will allow them to present with certainty their celebrity-sighting tale. The clincher is usually some trademark visual or verbal cue that allows the seer to be certain that he is in fact in the presence of a specific celebrity.

In some cases, the celebrity does something that fits easily into the seer's perception of the celebrity's public image. Here, Bruce Willis's hallmark smirk made him identifiable to the woman who saw him while stopped at a traffic light:

He must have noticed that I was staring at him, 'cause he took off his sunglasses, and stared right back at me. Then I realized that it was Bruce Willis, and he knew that I knew, and he gave me that sly look he always does and nodded his head, then the light turned green and he put his glasses back on.

Willis acted in such a way as to become more identifiable to the seer—he unmasked himself by removing his glasses and then delivered a hallmark facial expression as a sort of confirmation. Indeed, the seer attributes his change in expression to a sense of mutual recognition—she perceives that Willis reacted the way he did because he recognized that



he had been recognized. In this way, the narrative injects mutuality into what had been a more asymmetrical episode of gaze work.

Celebrities can reveal identifying attributes to alert seers in apparently unself-conscious ways as well. Here, it was a different action hero's foreign accent that gave him away to this respondent:

I was on the bike path in Santa Monica when I passed Maria Shriver and Arnold Schwarzenegger . . . towing their son Patrick. The reason I know . . . is because as I passed them Arnold asked [*respondent speaks in a deep voice with an exaggerated Austrian accent*], "Patrick, is dis where you want to stop?"

Schwarzenegger's accent is as recognizable as Willis's grin but is more involuntary and hence subject to different attributions by seers (or in this case, hearers). Schwarzenegger did not produce this utterance to confirm the respondent's recognition of him as a celebrity, but it served this purpose nonetheless.

Recognition of celebrities in public-place encounters is not automatic. Celebrity seers engage in recognition work as they attempt to acknowledge and reconcile the presence of the extraordinary in their ordinary worlds. After an initial double take or moment of disbelief, seers search for both the ordinary features of the celebrity in their midst and the trademark traits that provide proof of the celebrity's extraordinary identity.

These features of recognition work reveal expectations about celebrities as being outside the bounds of normalcy in a variety of ways—the way they look, the things they do, the places they go, the cars they drive, the people they associate with—none of these ought to overlap with ordinary "civilian" lifestyles. When they do, the response is often a version of Emerson's "something unusual" stance. Confounded by the presence of a star in their mundane world, seers work out a number of different questions in the interactional moment—is that really her or him? How can I be sure? What is she or he doing here? And how should I respond?

## RESPONSE WORK

In response work, the seer no longer focuses only on the presence of the celebrity in an ordinary setting. The seer himself now becomes an actor—or at least a potential actor—in the scenario. In response work,

the seer attends to issues that surround the presentation of his ordinary self in the presence of the extraordinary star. How should he react now that he has recognized the celebrity? What are the potential consequences of each possible line of action? In response work, the seer contemplates possibilities and rationales, looking for ways of interfacing with the extraordinary.

*Staying cool.* Seers' accounts indicate that the most common post-recognition response is to feign nonrecognition: to deliberately avoid giving any open indication that the celebrity has been recognized qua celebrity. Feigning nonrecognition offers protection against the risks associated with the collision of the extraordinary and the ordinary in the everyday world—it is, as J. Emerson (1970) notes, the easiest course of action to take. It can also be interpreted as a version of Goffman's "parade-ground decorum" (1974/1986, 204), in which out-of-frame activity is disattended to avoid the collapse of the entire frame. Some seers orient to it as a service or gift they provide for the celebrity. Most important, feigning nonrecognition sets the standard for ceremonial conduct in celebrity-sighting encounters. This becomes the rule, and exceptions to it must be accounted for.

In this excerpt, the respondent who is waiting for the valet to arrive with her car realizes that she is standing at the curb with a well-known comedian:

When I looked over, I realized that it was David Spade and two other ladies waiting for their cars. . . . When I first figured out that it was him, I had a difficult time not staring at him and the girls he was with. I tried to play it cool, and not make a big deal of the situation.

The respondent later says that she thinks about Spade's television appearances and remembers favorite performances the entire time she waits for her valet but never approaches Spade, doing her best to pretend that she has not recognized him as a person of special status.

Feigning nonrecognition is done even in cases when it seems quite clear that recognition has occurred. This respondent is in a checkout line at a home-improvement store when he sees a celebrity who notices himself being seen:

In the next aisle, a man was talking with a young boy, presumably his son, who was cranky-whiney about something or another. As we looked

over, we met the eyes of John DeLancie [*Star Trek: The Next Generation*]. We recognized him. He saw us recognize him. Everyone looked away.

In this account, the seer believes that the celebrity has recognized that he has been recognized—and that when the seer pretends not to have recognized him, the celebrity recognizes this as well. The seer's sense that the celebrity knows he has been recognized is important here, for it is a component of response work. Each participant is assumed to be following a script of sorts, but a script that is different from that of ordinary public-place interactions. Under ordinary circumstances, some interaction might have ensued, either because of the recognition itself or because of the particular activity that DeLancie was engaged in (Davis 1991); however, because DeLancie is a celebrity, further interaction is curtailed ("everyone looked away").

Seers frequently feign nonrecognition initially, then comment post hoc. Seers often tell of making explicit verbal recognition of the sighting only after the celebrity is no longer present or is out of verbal and visual range, as this respondent does:

Once when I was at the airport, Snoop Doggy Dogg walked down the hallway towards me with his entourage. I just looked at him, then when he left, I made a remark to my friend with whom I was there . . . but I waited so that it wasn't obvious.

The activity channel within which the celebrity operates is disattended only until the celebrity has passed through the immediate setting. Then, special attention can be given, and the frame shifts in a more manageable way. That the recognition of a famous person in public should not be openly noted is an interesting pattern in these data and is an important rule of response work, even when it is violated. Many respondents invoke what they think are important reasons for feigning nonrecognition and commenting post hoc:

When I ran into [*General Hospital's*] Wally Kurth, even though I am a huge fan, I never said anything to him, because I didn't want to bother him. When I told my dad, who was there with me, I told him in a manner that it wouldn't be obvious. . . . I just didn't want to bother him, or disturb him in his personal life.

The celebrity encountered in an ordinary setting is seen by observers as being “in his personal life,” and this status somehow creates a social shield for him that is to be breached only under particular circumstances. To these observers, the privacy of a media figure in a public place becomes their responsibility, hence the tales of looking away or commenting to others after the celebrity has safely passed by. In this unique type of encounter, propriety and deference require that special status remain unmarked—but the unmarking is obvious in itself, given the extraordinary circumstances.

Seers make reference to preserving privacy or normalcy for the star as their reason for feigning nonrecognition and commenting post hoc. This observer, upon seeing comedian Adam Sandler in a restaurant, notes that all the other patrons are also looking at Sandler without commenting openly. She expresses concern that the celebrity himself must be aware of—and uncomfortable with—the situation:

He was sitting at a small table with just one other male friend. He looked kind of tense, but maybe because he was uncomfortable with the knowledge that hundreds of little eyes were sneaking glances at him and then pretending to ignore him.

Seers’ narratives reveal a sense of being charged with preserving celebrities’ privacy, even in public places where recognition is clear. Preserving the celebrity’s privacy here seems no more than a ruse to this respondent, who feels that everyone involved must be aware of the furtive glances and stifled comments. This is the dilemma and discomfort of recognition for the fan—it is clear to all that Sandler has been recognized and that everyone is “pretending to ignore him.”

Some seers express not only sympathy for but empathy with the celebrity’s plight, as does this respondent who worked as a lifeguard and swim instructor at the public pool in a small city:

The entire city knew me ’cause I worked with all the residents, but I didn’t know all of them. I am not trying to say that I was a celebrity or anything, but I always hated it when parents or students of mine . . . came up to me and talked to me or said “Hi” to me like I knew them. Then I would have to pretend that I knew them and it was so annoying. Even the students I did know I couldn’t recognize without their swim caps and goggles.

While the respondent here is reluctant to compare herself to a celebrity, she recognizes the parallels that can be drawn between her experience and those of famous media figures: many more people recognize her than she is able to recognize, and this makes her vulnerable in public places. This explains her response to seeing her favorite television star in public: "I just wanted to give this guy some space since I really don't know him, and he certainly doesn't know me." The normalcy of feigned nonrecognition is like a gift the seer gives to the celebrity—the gift of ordinariness, an ironic gift, given the obvious familiarity of many of these celebrities.

Preserving the celebrity's privacy is only one part of the moral order here: the seer avoids embarrassment for herself by sticking to these situational rules. This respondent protects both Baby Spice (Emma Lee Bunton) and herself by removing herself from the situation as a friend openly gawks at the celebrity:

When I was at a tattoo parlor on Sunset, Baby Spice of the Spice Girls showed up with her boyfriend. They were hanging around, and I was there with my two friends, one of which was saying stuff out loud like, "Isn't that Baby Spice?" So I went outside 'cause I was embarrassed, and didn't want her to think that we recognized her so that she can act like a normal person and not have to worry about her public self.

In their reactions, seers acknowledge that they hold the key to allowing a high-profile public figure to "act like a normal person" in public. Failing to do so can create embarrassment for both the celebrity and the seer because the unspoken rules of the encounter are violated. Said another respondent about her realization that she was standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles with *Friends* actor David Schwimmer, "I wanted to jump up and down joyfully and hug and kiss him, but of course I couldn't because he would think I'm some kind of psycho or something."

Celebrities, as the objects of so many asymmetrical, media-facilitated relationships with audience members, are vulnerable in public to the recognition and approach of strangers. Among the respondents in this study, the vast consensus seems to be that acknowledging the recognizability of a celebrity in public is to be avoided: "I just took a glance and kept on walking. I hate 'star gawking,'" said one respondent. This particular postrecognition response is central to the moral order of

celebrity sightings: seers orient to an imperative that requires them to protect the celebrity from open recognition or risk their own embarrassment (and that of the star) if they do otherwise. In this way, the rule itself is no different from ordinary public-place interactions between strangers—civil inattention requires that we take no special notice of others when we pass them on the street. The problem with celebrity-sighting encounters is that recognition of fame has already complicated the deployment of this particular rule. Special notice has been taken; special status has been detected. Ordinary observers must now disattend these phenomena to reconcile contradictory interactional imperatives.

*Your biggest fan.* Despite the imperative revealed above, some seers do approach celebrities when they recognize them in public. Seeking interaction with the celebrity in a celebrity-sighting encounter is an attempt to make contact with the extraordinary individual as he or she appears in the ordinary world. Doing this violates rules of public-place behavior between strangers and leaves the seer vulnerable to judgment, embarrassment, and criticism; seers' tales reflect this. Those who approach celebrities in public must offer an account for why they do so, either in the moment or in their retrospective narratives.

The following narrative involves the fan who encountered Camryn Manheim at the shoe store and reveals her concerns about interacting with the actress:

[Manheim] waited as the cashier rang her up. She was very smiley and appeared friendly so I said to her, "I watch *The Practice*, it's a great show." She smiled very broadly and said, "Thank you. It's great to hear feedback about the show." . . . Overall, she seemed pleasant enough, and I didn't get the feeling she was bothered by my talking to her. I've never actually said anything to a celebrity before, and was a little nervous doing it. I assume they would get tired of [it]. I also wouldn't want to appear as a star-struck get-a-life fan.

In this account, the fan notes her awareness of the reputational risks associated with talking to a celebrity in public and an orientation to the comfort of the celebrity. Her narrative is constructed to paint Manheim as open to approach—she implies that she would not have spoken to her but for the apparent invitation of "smiley"-ness. She then justifies her interactional gambit after the fact by noting that Manheim "wasn't bothered" by it.

A young woman who encountered movie heartthrob Vince Vaughan at a restaurant happened to have her camera with her and framed her request for a photograph in language that reveals these same concerns:

I walked up to Vince and said, "Would it be not normal if I took a picture with you now?" He said, "Yeah, sure, no problem." I turned bright red when I realized how idiotic I must have sounded, but at least I got the picture. I said, "Sorry, you are probably really sick of this, but no one would believe me if I told them I met you!"

Again, the fan's concerns are both for her own reputation and for Vaughan's comfort level. Violating the unstated rules of this encounter jeopardizes both, risking the label of "not normal" or even "idiotic," but she's willing to violate these rules (with accompanying justification) to come away from the encounter with proof.<sup>7</sup>

Not every celebrity encountered in public is directly open or vulnerable to approach. Entourages provide buffers of sorts, both for the celebrity and for the seer who wants to approach the celebrity in public. A fan's weight-room encounter with athlete Magic Johnson through his personal trainer illustrates this:

I asked the trainer working with him if Magic minded if I said "hello." He told me that it would be all right just as long as I didn't ask for his autograph. I completely understood why, and promised that I wouldn't. Magic just kept treading away on the treadmill as he politely responded. . . . I told him I couldn't leave without saying hello and telling him how much of a fan I am. . . . He shook my hand and asked me to give him a high five!

Here, the trainer gives permission and clarifies the parameters for the encounter, which can then proceed smoothly. The trainer's role as an interactional broker ratifies and legitimizes the encounter and, more important, makes the rules of the encounter explicit, smoothing it over for everyone. The fan can have his moment of contact, within agreed-upon limits, and Johnson can continue his workout with minimal disruption. Note that in this account, no mention is made of embarrassment, idiocy, or abnormality, as in so many others. The trainer's facilitation is critical to this apparent increase in all participants' comfort levels.

When a person of special status is encountered in an ordinary public place, deference to that special status is a key feature of the prevailing moral order. In the case of ordinary persons' encounters with celebrities, avoidance rituals prevail—the celebrity's "ideal sphere" should not be violated, verbally or visually. The person who does so risks his own embarrassment and the aggravation of the celebrity. But these norms of avoidance are violated regularly, despite their force.

When civilians approach celebrities in public, their accounts reveal an orientation to a set of unspoken rules about how to do this. They fear loss of face, either by approaching the celebrity in the wrong way or by approaching the celebrity at all.<sup>8</sup> They also fear some violation of the celebrity's "right" to be a private person in public, despite the fact that most of the celebrities encountered by these respondents are widely recognizable and cannot have a reasonable expectation of remaining anonymous in a public setting. Seers' accounts reveal an orientation to a moral order of celebrity sightings, a code of behavior to which they are held accountable.

*Two thumbs down.* When celebrities encounter noncelebrities in public, they are themselves expected to do their part in upholding the moral order of the situation. The final type of response work in celebrity-sighting tales involves the seers' evaluations of the behavior of celebrities as either appropriate or inappropriate to their extraordinary status.

Those who seem too interested in drawing the attention of others are seen in an unsavory light, as in this account of a fan who encounters a high-profile male model at a Hollywood shop:

Tyson [Beckford] the supermodel showed up. I pretended that he was just another person and didn't pay too much attention to him . . . though I think he wanted the attention 'cause he was loud and showed up in a limo, and was coming and going, in and out with his entourage.

This respondent seemed intent on deliberately withholding attention from Tyson, who by her reckoning was trying too hard to gain it. This punitive orientation indicates that in addition to rules for seers, there are lines that celebrities ought not to cross when they appear in public. The loudness, the limousine, and the entourage, as well as the repeated entrances and exits, all are taken as evidence by the seer that Tyson wants to be seen. He violates the unspoken arrangement by which seers



should at least affect nonrecognition, with his antics making it impossible for her to abide by the rules.

On the other hand, celebrities who try too hard to conceal their recognizability are also seen as strange or disagreeable. This respondent encountered actor Alec Baldwin at the supermarket:

When I was in the checkout line, I noticed a strange man in the next line. Keep in mind that this was in the middle of June. The man was wearing tattered jeans, an old T-shirt, a detective hat (you know), a trench coat, sunglasses, and had lots of stubble beard. Well, I recognized him, and kept looking back over my shoulder to make sure, and it was him, I knew it when I heard him ask the cashier "How much?" Well, in the parking lot he got into a BMW and drove away.

Baldwin, dressed like a pulp-fiction private eye, draws attention because he is too obviously incognito, defeating the purpose of the disguise by increasing the curiosity of passersby like this respondent. The disguise invites attention, almost as obviously as a limousine and an entourage, and in fact has lured the seer into making the very recognition the disguise may have been designed to avoid. Once again, the celebrity is now seen as being in violation of the moral order, by manipulating his recognizability. Despite the celebrity's extraordinary status and power in our media-saturated society, when he appears in public places, his fates, metaphoric and literal, are in the hands of his observers.

## DISCUSSION

Major rituals and ceremonial occasions are widely recognized as opportunities to affirm, replicate, or even challenge the moral order of a civilization; Goffman urges us to see this moral order (and its affirmations, replications, and challenges) in everyday interactional ritual and ceremony as well. The moral order is performed in every social interaction, common or uncommon, ordinary or extraordinary. The "minor ceremonies" (Goffman 1967, 91) of celebrity sightings underscore and reproduce the contemporary secular moral orders of status, fame, and reputation in everyday life. The celebrity sighting is a special kind of public-place encounter, featuring its own codes of behavior for participants and its own principles of moral accountability for both seers and

celebrities. Seers' tales of recognition work and response work demonstrate the presence of a moral order in celebrity sightings. This particular moral order revolves around the special status of the celebrity, and the clashing frames of meaning that occur in celebrity-sighting encounters.

Despite the indisputably public face of the contemporary media figure, those who encounter celebrities in public tell of feeling compelled to keep private their recognition of these public figures. Feigning non-recognition is a service seers perform for celebrities, and by their own accounts, providing this service earns seers a certain virtue or moral integrity. But restraint and empathy must also be demonstrated when the code is broken. Those who do approach celebrities in public work to mitigate this violation in their accounts, expressing awareness of or sympathy for the plight of the public figure. And celebrities who either seem too interested in drawing the attention of onlookers in public or seem to try too hard to conceal their identities in public are the objects of disdain in seers' accounts, as this upsets the delicate balance of recognition and recognizability in these encounters.

The emergent rules of conduct revealed in celebrity-sighting narratives constitute a moral order in large part because they serve to maintain and police various status boundaries: ordinary versus extraordinary, obscurity versus fame, stranger versus intimate. The celebrity sighting is an encounter that endangers these distinctions: the presence of the extraordinary person in the ordinary setting threatens to disorganize the seer's social world. The distinctive moral order of celebrity sightings responds to and helps contain that threat and manages the clashing frames of meaning through ritualized rules of conduct.

When the extraordinary and the ordinary intersect in everyday life, as they do in celebrity sightings, the stakes are high and so are the potential rewards. If the seer comports herself properly, she comes away with at least an exciting story to tell about her encounter with fame and at most a picture or autograph as a trophy of that encounter. But if the seer falters or fails to behave properly, he may have only the embarrassment of rejection to show for his serendipitous brush with greatness. The dynamics of celebrity sightings feature a moral order laden with risk and reward, and the accounts of the seers reveal a clear orientation toward reaping rewards while reducing risks.

If media figures are the contemporary equivalent of heroes and gods (Caughey 1984), then a parallel can be drawn between celebrity-

sighting encounters and the fateful encounters between gods and mortals. Such encounters are fraught with wonder and with risk: the prospects are either richly rewarding or viciously devastating (and sometimes both). Celebrity-sighting accounts reveal these themes as well: it is true that Magic Johnson is unlikely to lash out at a fan in the weight room at the gym, but any celebrity could refuse or reject the advances of an adoring fan. One would think that these risks would guarantee that the practices of feigning nonrecognition and disattending the presence of a celebrity in public would override all desire to make contact with media figures. But they do not. Would mere mortals be so foolish as to approach the gods? They do so every day.

## NOTES

1. Celebrity and hero are not completely interchangeable statuses, although they can and often do overlap. While Boorstin (1977) claims that celebrities do not qualify as heroes, Browne and Fishwick (1983) argue that hero status is in the eye of the beholder, and Stever (1991) finds that fans may ascribe numerous heroic qualities to their favored celebrity, making that particular celebrity a hero to that particular fan.

2. Simmel's (1908/1950) consideration of the relational qualities of the stranger is useful to consider here, as he contends that all social relationships feature some combination of the strange and the familiar. For ordinary citizens, celebrities embody a unique combination of strangeness and familiarity: while they are generally unknown others in the sense of mutual, reciprocal, face-to-face relations (R. M. Emerson, Ferris, and Gardner 1998), there is a fundamentally asymmetrical brand of intimacy between media figures and their audiences, even if they never meet one another face-to-face. Celebrities, in this way of thinking, are distinctive types of strangers when they are encountered in ordinary public-place settings, combining in their personae elements of the familiar and the unknown, the open and the unapproachable.

3. Believers' shock and disappointment at the persistence of the mundane required an account, and they were eventually able to come up with one that both preserved their extraordinary beliefs and explained the mundane outcome: the catastrophe had been called off because of their faith and devotion. Their commitment to these prophecies had in fact saved the world from the disaster foretold in them. The believers themselves had "spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction" (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956, 169).

4. Elliott (1998) argues this, using the death of John Lennon as an example of the way that reality intrudes on idealization: even the musical superstar could not avoid the indignity of assassination, and fans must come to grips with death as the ultimate mundane reality that not even a beloved celebrity can escape.

5. Nicolas Cage might be perplexed to know that he does not look convincingly like himself!

6. It is also possible that what is unexpected here is not just that Manheim is buying shoes at Payless but that she is buying her own shoes at all.

7. Proof is another celebrity-sighting-specific phenomenon, as proof is not generally necessary to authenticate an ordinary encounter. Indeed, the story would not even get told at all, much less require supporting photographic evidence. Sacks (1970/1992) notes this in his comparison of the "storyability" of Elizabeth Taylor's turning around versus the turning around of one's own mother. Some events are storyable simply because of who is involved, and in extraordinary circumstances, a token or artifact from that event will help support its storyability—and its veracity. In addition, as Fisher (1984) models "homo narrans," he argues that storytelling is an integral and unavoidable aspects of human nature and that narratives that have "fidelity" (the quality of being faithful to lived experience) are most successful at providing moral and rational frameworks for that experience. This perspective suggests that the imperative of narrative fidelity may shape both recognition and response as they happen.

8. Risks to fans from celebrity encounters are not merely reputational. In 2001, a fan sued actor Don Johnson for sexual battery, assault, and emotional distress (*Los Angeles Times* 2001, F2). The petitioner claimed that she noticed Johnson in a San Francisco sushi bar and approached him, intending to introduce herself as a fan. Upon making her introduction, the fan claims Johnson accosted her, groping her and making lewd comments (no information on this case's disposition is available). In addition, paparazzi, who may not be fans but who by virtue of their occupation are professional celebrity stalkers, have been battered by celebrities who feel their privacy is invaded by photographers, even when they are in public places. These assaults are regularly broadcast on E! Television's new program *Celebrities Uncensored*.

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