

A warm glow in Bangkok

January 29, 2010

Say you are traveling in a foreign country, trying to find your way through the bustling capital city. Not Paris or London, some place a bit edgier. Bangkok. You don't speak the language, and you're a little frazzled. You walk into a café for some respite, and to your surprise to see a fellow you know from back home sitting at a corner table, sipping coffee. He's hardly a friend, but you know him to say hello. How do you feel? Well, after the initial surprise, you probably feel a warm glow as you walk up and greet him. You're genuinely happy to see his familiar face in this strange place. He's like an old friend.

Now, simply switch cities. You're back at home and the same basic scenario takes place: You walk into a café, and there's the same acquaintance, sitting at a corner table sipping coffee. How do you feel today? Well, if you're like most people, you don't feel much of anything. You recognize him, but no smile comes to your face. You might nod hello, but you're really more focused on getting your morning coffee.

Same face, similar scenario. So what's going on here? Are you a couple of hypocrites? Well, don't feel bad. First of all, he's probably not feeling all that warmly toward you either. And what's more, your own mixed feelings are probably beyond your control. That warm glow of recognition may be hard-wired into your neurons, but it's also tightly entwined with other emotions, notably fears about personal peril and a yearning for safety.

At least that's a theory, which a team of cognitive psychologists have recently been testing in the laboratory. According to Marieke de Vries of Radboud University Nijmegen, in the Netherlands, people naturally feel good when they see something recognizable and familiar. That's because things that are familiar are—generally speaking—less risky. This is the same impulse that makes us buy the same soap or automobile over and over again: It's worked in the past, so it's likely a safe bet again today. With recognizable people, that positive feeling, that sense of comfort, often feels like a warm glow.

But it may not be quite that straightforward. De Vries and her colleagues wondered: Wouldn't the power of familiarity depend somewhat on the context? Specifically, isn't it possible that mood might modify and shape the mind's response to familiar and unfamiliar things? Is that what's occurring when you feel a warm glow in Bangkok and a big yawn back home? They decided to explore this idea experimentally.

Instead of using people's faces, the scientists used abstract patterns of dots. Basically what they did is familiarize volunteers with some patterns and not others; then they measured their responses when they saw the familiar patterns later. But they didn't simply ask them which ones they liked and which ones they didn't; in addition to doing that, they attached electrodes to their faces to detect subtle physiological signs of smiling. In other words, they measured the body's visceral response to familiarity and novelty.

But before doing this, they manipulated each volunteer's mood. They asked some to think of sad events in their lives, and others joyous events; and then they played mood-appropriate music to maintain the gloom or happiness. The idea was that mood "tunes" the mind toward safety concerns. That is, if our mood is good, we assume we must be in a safe place; if we're feeling edgy or down, that must be because we're threatened in some way. The researchers predicted that feeling blue (and therefore unsafe) would make familiarity an especially potent cue; feeling happy (and therefore safe) would make that cue much less significant.

And that's precisely what they found. As reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*, the volunteers who were melancholy smiled much more at the familiar patterns than did those who were upbeat. Think about that: Familiarity wasn't all that important to people who were already feeling secure; they already had the safety of their local coffee shop. But people who were feeling uneasy and threatened experienced familiarity as very comforting—even when the familiar stimuli were nothing more than meaningless abstract patterns of dots. No wonder the face of an "old friend" can seem so welcoming in a Bangkok café.

For more insights into the quirks of human nature, visit the ["Full Frontal Psychology"](#) blog at True/Slant. Excerpts from "We're Only Human" also appear regularly in the magazine *Scientific American Mind*. Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, will be published by Crown in September.