

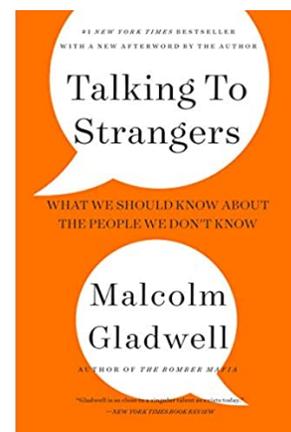


Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know

Malcolm Gladwell

Gladwell unpacks several case studies to illustrate why we are so bad at talking to and confronting strangers. Case studies include:

- The 2015 traffic stop of Sandra Bland
- Diplomats' pre-war interactions with Hitler
- Long-time DIA mole Ana Montes aka the "Queen of Cuba"
- Bernie Madoff
- Jerry Sandusky
- Amanda Knox
- Khalid Sheikh Mohammed aka "KSM" and torture methods
- The suicide of Sylvia Plath
- Interpretation of facial expressions within and outside American culture



Discusses ideas of psychologist [Tim Levine](#) regarding "Truth Default Theory": the idea that when we deal with strangers we automatically default to assuming they are telling the truth (click his hyperlinked name—it's fascinating). This assumption is the foundation of modern society but can lead to catastrophe. That's the paradox: it is a difficult assumption to overcome, especially when the alternative is something awful or destructive.

Puzzle 1: Why can't we tell when someone is lying to our face?

Puzzle 2: Why does meeting a stranger in person often make us worse at understanding them?

We have a default assumption of our own complexity and a stranger's simplicity (i.e., that we can reduce them to their outward demeanor and behavioral cues)

Facial expressions are not universal within American culture; and they are not universal outside the U.S.

People are AWFUL at lie detection, particularly when there is a mis-match (i.e., their demeanor/facial expressions don't align with what a "truthful" person or a "liar" *normally* looks like). In these cases, even trained FBI/CIA/police officers are able to determine if they are telling the truth only about 20% of the time! That should scare us all.

The other major factor we don't often consider is "coupling"—the idea that behavior is connected to a context and that link is what creates the event. He discusses this with suicide (i.e., the mental state is coupled to a context which could be a physical location/method) and crime. He shows crime can be tackled best by focusing on the **places** where it happens and not by increasing overall policing.

When confronting a stranger two things are most important:

1. Where you both are physically and emotionally
2. When you're interacting

As a society we are not equipped to talk to strangers, so when things don't go as expected—we blame the stranger. Instead we need to recognize our own limits to decipher and truly understand strangers and embrace humility and restraint.

Thanks to Jack Kruse (@FAOFUO/<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jack-kruse/> www.BeyondAchebe.com) for contributing their notes. Help other military leaders and contribute on [DODReads](#).