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The Inscrutable Other: A Review of Talking to Strangers

Donald Roth

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The Inscrutable Other: A Review of Talking to Strangers

Abstract

"I believe that we could benefit from a healthy awareness of the limitations of our ability to perceive the inner workings and motivations of others."

Posting about the book *Talking to Strangers* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

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The Inscrutable Other: A Review of *Talking to Strangers*

Donald Roth

Title: *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know*

Authors: Malcolm Gladwell

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It feels like American society is at a crisis point. Whether it's social polarization or concerns over discrimination, a root problem identified by voices across the political spectrum is our difficulty with "the other." One of the most commonly-prescribed solutions to this problem is an emphasis on empathy; however, in a previous review essay I echoed Paul Bloom's concerns about whether putting ourselves in others' shoes would yield the results we expect. In his most recent book, *Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know*, best-selling public intellectual Malcom Gladwell lays out a number of reasons why our ability to genuinely understand others is so limited. We could all benefit from hearing what Gladwell has to say as a call to be more aware of the limits of our ability to comprehend others, let alone put on their shoes. We must attend to the dangers of blaming others when they don't conform to the expectations we build from these failed attempts at comprehension.

Why We Don't Understand Others

Gladwell breaks down our difficulty in understanding others through a range of different concepts, framing each in a different case study. These case studies are worth the price of admission without their larger context, so while I'm going to spoil the lessons that connect them, I'm leaving some of the best aspects of this book for you to experience yourself.¹ Cumulatively, however, these case studies are exemplars of how we struggle to sort truth from fiction, perceive emotion, and take into account structural and situational factors that may be shaping someone's decisions and perceptions. As a result, our ability to understand others is sharply limited.

Our "default to truth" is an assumption that both holds society together and makes us bad at perceiving deceit. Gladwell uses this concept to frame the work of Tim Levine, one of the nation's foremost experts on deception. Levine's theory is that we assume others are being honest because we use truth as our default state, only switching to believing that someone might be lying once we are presented with sufficient evidence. Generally, this means that we are better at detecting truth than we are at perceiving lies. Gladwell uses this default state as an explanation for how Bernie Madoff and Jerry Sandusky could go undetected for so long.

Further, Gladwell argues that this default to truth is especially blind to the strangers who we nevertheless sort into our own tribe. This is how, in the 1980s, nearly the entire CIA spy network inside Cuba was made up of double agents who were actually working for Castro. At the same time, the top expert on Cuba at the Defense Intelligence Agency in the 1990s was also a Cuban spy. In spite of their mission focus on distinguishing truth from lie among "them," these agencies remained vulnerable to the deceivers among those designated "us."

If the default to truth makes us bad at perceiving deception, we can fool ourselves even more when it comes to perceiving emotion. The root of this difficulty is a persistent belief in emotional transparency, that is, that we can perceive deep truths about people's emotional state through observing subtle clues or tells. One hint at why this belief is unfounded is the research done by Emily Pronin, where subjects completed a quick word association task by filling in blanks in words, such as finishing S ___. While virtually no one believed that filling in those blanks as SAD said anything about them, almost everyone was convinced that such a word completion by someone else was meaningful. Which is it? Do we mask our emotional state, or are we open books?

The answer is more the former than the latter. Further, the cues we look to for evidence of people's emotional state are not universal. Gladwell describes this as people who are "matched" or "mismatched." Again, Gladwell returns to Levine's experiments, this time to a study where students were presented with an opportunity to cheat on a test where they would be paid for correct answers. After this moral test, the students were asked

about whether they cheated. Many people acted as we would expect, speaking confidently when they were telling the truth and acting nervous or avoiding eye contact when they lied. However, there were many who did not give off these tells. When a group of law enforcement professionals were asked to analyze the recordings of these interviews, they nearly flawlessly identified the matched people, but they correctly identified less than 20% of those mismatched people. Gladwell uses this phenomenon to explain why Neville Chamberlain's efforts to personally engage with Hitler led him to a dramatically mistaken assessment of Hitler's intent. It's also why the Italian officials were so sure that the quirky Amanda Knox had something to do with her roommate's murder in 2007. The guilty who act innocent and the innocent who act guilty are nearly impossible for us to decipher.

Beyond these perceptive difficulties, our ability to understand others is often sharply affected by situational or structural factors. Gladwell addresses this by looking at the social scripts that surround drinking, a practice that lessens the pull of long-term considerations on our decision-making. Among the Camba people of Eastern Bolivia, drinking 180-proof alcohol in social gatherings every weekend resulted in little more than impromptu naps. Among American young people, however, alcohol is often the lens through which they seek to read other people's emotional cues to judge sexual consent, and the effects are devastating.

Further, Gladwell considers the interrogation of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the purported mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Where the terrorist easily resisted most interrogation techniques, waterboarding was able to break him. The problem is, psychological studies of interrogations show that even fifteen minutes of harsh interrogation can scramble someone's memory. After weeks of the most extreme interrogation allowed by the U.S., Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's testimony was filled with a mixed bag of possible truths and clear fabrications. He claimed credit for plans he couldn't have made and operations he couldn't have been involved in. The CIA desperately wanted to mine the truth from their prisoner, but he likely couldn't have totally distinguished fact from fiction himself by the time he started talking. Ultimately, when strangers hide their emotions or intentions out of fear, anxiety, or out of oppositional impulses, we are almost powerless to discern them.

What Do We Do About It?

So what do we do about these limitations? We struggle to read other people because we are generally limited to judging from appearances, and Gladwell's book is ample evidence that appearances can be deceiving. We can make genuine efforts to get to know other people by spending time with those who we sharply disagree with, but this is exactly what led Neville Chamberlain to so badly misjudge Hitler. We could rely on

generalizations and think about what we'd do in that situation, but this is what led the police to misjudge Amanda Knox. It's the same reason why so many people believe that interrogation works. We think we'd be committed to the truth, but we don't realize that our grip on reality would slip with enough trauma. We think that we would show concern for our slain roommate, but our ways of displaying concern are not universal.

Similarly, we can try to lower our threshold for abandoning our default to truth, but that comes with serious costs as well. Gladwell profiles Harry Markopolos, an eccentric financial analyst who argued that Bernie Madoff was a fraud years before Madoff was exposed. Markopolos' insight came because of his inherently suspicious personality and his complete lack of trust that the heavily regulated financial system could be trusted to catch someone like Madoff. As a result, while Markopolos was right about Madoff, he also believed that the government would send assassins after him for uncovering their incompetence, and he lives at home, huddled with his gas mask and firearms, ready to defend himself against the murderers that he knows are just around the corner.

So what do we do? One option is to very carefully consider situations where it would be worth the tradeoff to abandon the default to truth. Gladwell describes the application (and misapplication) of this process in what is called "hot spots" policing. This approach is rooted in the observation that a tiny proportion of streets (around 3%) generate more than 50% of total urban crime. Targeting these high crime areas for more aggressive policing, that is, policing that does not default to truth, has the effect of driving out the crime in those areas, and it doesn't just move a block over because crime seems to be coupled with geography. In these focused applications, hot spot policing has a huge effect on crime. When applied indiscriminately, these tough tactics lead to a spike in police misconduct and a suspicion of anyone who "doesn't look right" that inevitably sweeps up those "mismatched" by quirks of personality or color of skin.

I believe that we could benefit from a healthy awareness of the limitations of our ability to perceive the inner workings and motivations of others. Ultimately, we don't think more clearly when we substitute the pursuit of objective assessment for subjective understanding. We get further with an attitude of "trust, but verify" than a hard default to truth or persistent suspicion. Ultimately, the words of 1 Samuel 16:7 ring true: "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Outward appearances often differ from the heart of things, and when we inevitably judge the heart wrongly, we would do better to look at our own shortcomings and limitations than to blame the other for our inability to understand them.

FOOTNOTES

1. Incidentally, I highly recommend the audiobook version of this book. Rather than quotes, Gladwell uses original recordings, and the book feels more like an extended version of one of Gladwell's podcasts than just another audiobook.