

Talking to strangers

What we should know about the people we don't know

Malcolm Gladwell

This book is about encounters and misunderstandings, examples of famous historical events, legal cases, sports cases, etc. Simply put it is about the darker side of human behavior and how misreading strangers can have consequences.

In the sixteenth century, there were close to seventy wars involving the nations and states of Europe.

The pattern of these endless conflict showed that it was overwhelmingly between neighbors.

Throughout human history, encounters hostile or otherwise were rarely between strangers.

In the 80s, the Cubans fooled the whole of CIA by turning every CIA agent into a double agent. The CIA came to know this when one of the Cuban officials defected.

The best of CIA people could not read the double agents despite many signals.

**Puzzle : Why cant we tell when the stranger
in front of us is lying to our face?**

In 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the Pm of UK did something which was unthinkable. He decided to go and meet Hitler to get a sense whether Hitler would invade Europe.

Hitler was a mystery to all the world leaders and Chamberlains move was seen as bold.

Chamberlain came back from the meeting convinced that Hitler wanted only Sudetenland and nothing else.

Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler are seen as one of the war's follies. Chamberlain came under the Hitler spell and didn't really read the signals that Hitler was sending.

This is because each of us believes that the information we gather from a personal interaction is uniquely valuable.

We look people in the eye, observe their demeanor and behavior and draw conclusions.

A Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan developed a computer model for bail applications. They looked at 554,689 cases between 2008 and 2013. the findings were amazing

The computer did a significantly better job of arriving at who should be given bail and who should be denied just based on case history. The computer never saw the person.

The computer flagged off 1 per cent of the list as high risk and signaled that they should not be released on bail. The judges however released 48.5 % of that list !!

When judges make bail decisions – they have access to three sources – the defendants record, previous offences and they get to see the defendant.

So the extra information the judge has vs the computer is seeing the real person, and that actually contributes most to the wrong decision.

Puzzle: how is it that meeting a stranger can sometimes make us worse at making sense of that person than not meeting them?

Psychologist Tim Levine of the University of Alabama did a lot of work in addressing one question ...

The question...

Why are we so bad at detecting lies??

Everyone is terrible at detecting lies .. Police officers, judges, therapists, CIA officers, everyone . WHY?

Tim Levine's answer based on his extensive research – 'Truth Default Theory or TDT'

We are good at identifying people who tell the truth. We have a default to truth, our operating assumption is that the people we are dealing with are honest.

You believe someone not because you have no doubts about them. Belief is not the absence of doubt. You believe someone because you don't have enough doubts about them.

Harry Markopolos was the one who cracked the Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme. He had doubts for a long time, but no one believed him.

Markopolos is a Greek immigrant. He says that people have too much faith in large organizations, and he feels that most large organizations are incompetent to tell the truth.

In Russian folklore there is an archetype – the holy fool. These holy fools are truth tellers because they are outcasts. The boy who told the king has no clothes is a holy fool. Whistle blowers are holy fools.

Markopolos worked in a trading firm and the rule stated that every trade had to be recorded in ninety seconds, none of his bosses were doing it, so Markopolos reported them to the SEC.

Doubts are not the enemy of belief, they are its companion.

Default to truth becomes an issue when we are forced to choose between two alternatives – one which is likely and the other which is impossible to imagine.

Transparency is the idea that peoples behavior and demeanor they way they represent themselves on the outside, provides an authentic and reliable window into the way they feel inside.

When we don't know someone or haven't understood them properly, we believe we can make sense of them through their demeanor.

The idea of transparency goes back to 1872 and Charles Darwin !!

In his book, The expressions of the emotions in Man and animals, he argues that smiling and frowning and wrinkling our noses were things we did as part of evolutionary adaptation.

**We think that liars in real life behave like liars on TV serials like Friends !!
Levine's point is that our stubborn belief in some set of non verbal behaviors associated with deception explains the patterns.**

When a liar acts like a honest person, or a honest person acts like a liar, we are flummoxed.

Bernie Madoff was a liar with the demeanor of an honest man. That's why people didn't latch onto him.

The myopia theory was first suggested by psychologists Claude steel and Robert Josephs.

It says that alcohol's principal effect is to narrow our emotional and mental fields of vision.

Alcohol makes the thing in the foreground more salient and the thing in the background less salient.

It makes short term considerations loom large and more cognitively demanding, longer term considerations fade away.

Lots of people drink when they are feeling down because they think it will chase their troubles away. That's inhibition thinking – alcohol will unlock my good mood.

But that's not what happens. Sometimes alcohol cheers you up, but at other times when an anxious person drink, they just get more anxious.

Drinking puts you at the mercy of your environment. It crowds out everything except the most immediate experiences.

Alcohol is not an agent of revelation, it is an agent of transformation.

The harder we work at getting strangers to reveal themselves, the more elusive they become.

In western culture, mutual gaze, that is maintaining eye contact represents openness, candor and trust. This is not necessarily the same in eastern cultures.