



Traffic stops can become dangerous when strangers misunderstand each other.

PSYCHOLOGY

The trouble with face value

Malcolm Gladwell's latest tome probes misunderstandings and violations of trust. **Tim Radford** weighs up its riches.

People, like books, can be difficult to read. Assumed 'universal' grammars of demeanour and facial expression seem not to translate across all cultures. Even within communities, there are individuals who react differently — who might, for instance, look most honest when they are not.

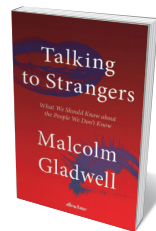
Talking to Strangers, Canadian journalist Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, is a rich, detailed study of the mutual misunderstanding and violations of trust that can occur when we lack the tools to make sense of strangers. As in *The Tipping Point* (2000) and other books, he tests his thesis with topical case studies in areas from diplomacy to espionage, summoning evidence from psychologists, anthropologists, criminologists and economists.

The core of *Talking to Strangers* is an exploration of relatively new thinking about human interaction. For instance, the psychologist Tim Levine proposes that because liars are relatively rare, it's simplest for people

to believe each other. Gladwell examines Charles Darwin's proposition that facial expressions — such as those signalling fear, disgust, hate — are evolutionary signals with universal significance. Psychologist Jennifer Fugate has pinpointed 43 facial-muscle movements that signal emotion. Deciphering them, however, is not always straightforward.

"To assume the best about another is the trait that has created modern society," Gladwell writes. But we often fail to read others correctly. Gladwell demonstrates how this can lead to catastrophe.

In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville



Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know
MALCOLM GLADWELL
Little, Brown (2019)

Chamberlain flew to Germany to meet Adolf Hitler, who was threatening war in Europe. Chamberlain's aim was to exact from Hitler a promise of 'peace for our time'. Later, Chamberlain wrote to his sister: "I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word." In Gladwell's thesis, meeting Hitler face to face was Chamberlain's first mistake: "The people who were right about Hitler were those who knew the least about him personally." In 1939, the Second World War began.

Chamberlain seemed to see in Hitler what he wanted to see. And as Gladwell points out, "the same puzzling pattern crops up everywhere".

It is evident in a tragedy the book turns to repeatedly. In 2015, in Prairie View, Texas, state trooper Brian Encinia stopped driver Sandra Bland, an African American woman, for what may or may not have been a petty traffic offence. There was no suggestion of any crime. In a transcript of the encounter, she admits to being irritated. Gladwell concludes that her manner fitted Encinia's idea of how a potential criminal might behave. Emotions escalated. An argument about a cigarette ended with a drawn taser, and a forcible arrest.

Bland was charged with felony assault. Three days later, she was found hanged in a police cell. Encinia was fired for violating the Texas state trooper manual, and ultimately forbidden from working in law enforcement. "Prejudice and incompetence go a long way toward explaining social dysfunction in the United States," writes Gladwell, with considerable understatement.

The courts, he shows, are rife with misjudgements sparked by close encounters. A study by economist Sendhil Mullainathan and his colleagues looked at 554,689 bail hearings conducted by judges in New York City between 2008 and 2013. Of the more than 400,000 people released, over 40% either failed to appear at their subsequent trials, or were arrested for another crime. Mullainathan applied a machine-learning program to the raw data available to the judges; indifferent to the gaze of the accused, the computer made decisions on whom to detain or release that would have resulted in 25% fewer crimes (J. Kleinberg *et al.* *Q. J. Econ.* **133**, 237–293; 2018).

Even intelligence agencies can be hotbeds of gullibility and bias, Gladwell reveals in two true spy stories. In 1987, Cuban-born Florentino Aspillaga defected from a posting in Eastern Europe, walking into the US embassy in Vienna. He delivered a bombshell, claiming that almost the entire roster of CIA spies in Cuba were double agents working for Havana. It was true: they had video-recorded the US agency's activities for a decade.

Even on home soil, agents have missed evidence. In 1996, an operative in the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) — Ana Belén Montes, known as "the Queen of Cuba"

for her specialist knowledge — was suspected of being a double agent. A counter-intelligence officer, reviewing her file, decided that she had passed the test: “This woman is gonna be the next Director of Intelligence for DIA. She’s just fabulous.” She was arrested in 2001.

She was not even a particularly accomplished spy, Gladwell notes. Her secret codes from Havana were in her purse, her short-wave radio in a shoebox in her cupboard. “The issue with spies is not that there is something brilliant about them,” Gladwell writes. “It is that there is something wrong with us.” Further crisply told case studies amplify his argument, from a bleak account of ‘enhanced interrogation’ techniques used to extract dubious confessions from al-Qaeda operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, to readings of coded facial expression in the US television series *Friends*.

In addition, Gladwell discusses a bias towards default-to-truth. This is beautifully explicated in the case of the more than US\$50-billion fraud by financier Bernard Madoff, made public in 2008. (Madoff is currently serving a 150-year sentence.)

People repressed suspicions about the schemer because they trusted the regulatory system. Few believed fund manager Harry Markopolos, who identified the fraud around 2000 and repeatedly reported it to the Securities and Exchange Commission. However, as Gladwell points out, if we had too low a trust threshold, we’d never commit to anything and would forever be suspicious. But that is just part of Gladwell’s story.

He explores, for instance, the sociological concept of coupling: how aspects of place can affect the outcome of close encounters and related decisions. A 1988 study, for instance, showed how the removal of carbon monoxide from the public gas supply in England and Wales led to a steep decline in the number of people taking their own lives between 1963 and 1975 (R. V. Clarke and P. Mayhew *Crime Justice* 10, 79–116; 1988). And US criminologists have found that for better overall crime prevention, police patrols should focus on urban crime hotspots (D. Weisburd *Criminology* 17, 5–25; 2018).

These findings, Gladwell asserts, have relevance for the tragic outcome of the

incident in Texas. He does note that African American drivers are more likely to be stopped than white ones. But he persuades us to reconsider the episode as a misunderstanding between an over-zealous traffic cop in the wrong place and a motorist who should never have been stopped. It remains hard, however, to imagine that it would have ended so badly had Bland been white. Ultimately, Gladwell delivers analysis, but not much in the way of answers.

In close encounters with those we don’t know, Gladwell recommends “restraint and humility”. His examples of what happens without that have immediate and obvious political resonance. Perhaps wisely, he declines to make the connection. “Those occasions when our trusting nature is violated are tragic,” Gladwell writes. “But the alternative — to abandon trust as a defense against predation and deception — is worse.” ■

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BARBARA ALPER/GETTY



Staying active into old age can extend health.

GERONTOLOGY

The enlightenment of age

Toren Finkel lauds two books outlining very different ways of boosting ‘healthspan’ — through drugs or care.

This year, people over 65 began to outnumber those under 5 for the first time in history. Like climate change, the ageing of humanity is indisputable. Yet the implications of that, and remedies for it,

are subject to considerable debate. Now, two books with very different perspectives seek to address how to prepare for this ‘grey tsunami’.

Lifespan, by geneticist David Sinclair and journalist Matthew LaPlante, provides a

vision of a not-too-distant future in which living beyond 120 will be commonplace. Physician Louise Aronson’s *Elderhood* focuses, by contrast, on the often bewildering and sometimes dehumanizing landscape of current geriatric care. Both books wrestle with the complexities of the coming demographic shift. Countries such as the United States — already devoting more than one-third of its health-care dollars to people over 65 — will have to come to terms with an iller, older population. But their solutions are distinct. For Sinclair and LaPlante, the answer lies in understanding and leveraging why we age; for Aronson, in re-evaluating and re-orienting how we view and treat older people.

AGE AS DISEASE

Lifespan is entertaining and fast-paced — a whirlwind tour of the recent past and a near future that will see 90 become the new 70. In a succession of colourfully titled chapters (‘The demented pianist’, ‘A better pill to swallow’), Sinclair and LaPlante weave a masterful narrative of how we arrived at this crucial inflection point. Among the historical figures evoked are a sixteenth-century Venetian proponent of caloric restriction, Luigi Cornaro, and the twentieth-century ‘father of information theory’, Claude Shannon.

The authors detail how we might alter the trajectory of human ageing by extrapolating from Sinclair’s own research on key signalling molecules such as NAD⁺ and the proteins called sirtuins, which alter the lifespans of yeast, certain worms and mice. They predict the emergence of drugs that will modulate these and other molecules known to be ▶