



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

By Malcolm Gladwell, 2019 (Boston, Little Brown and Company)

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From the title of Malcolm Gladwell's new book, one would not guess that criminology was to play a key role in his argument. And indeed, three quarters of the book focuses not on criminology but the psychology of deception. Gladwell, in his usual style, tells a series of fascinating stories that center on the fact that we often misread strangers. And his argument is a convincing one, taking us from such disparate incidents as American spy agencies getting it totally wrong re spies in Cuba (who were actually working for Castro), to Chamberlain misreading Hitler over and over again, to Bernard Madoff's ability to fool lots of savvy people to investing with him, and to Amanda Knox, who was imprisoned for participating in the murder of her roommate (despite an absence of evidence).

What links these stories is that over and over again, smart people were simply not able to get it right. Many times as in the case of Madoff, or Jerry Sandusky (who was found guilty of 45 counts of child molestation), it was that the "offenders" seemed innocent, and despite evidence to the contrary along the way, it took years to bring them to trial. In others, like the case of Amanda Knox, the subject acted guilty, and despite evidence to the contrary, the investigators and the courts took her seemingly "off" behavior as proof that something was wrong and she was guilty.

While there is little criminology in the argument that Gladwell makes here, these chapters are a fantastic read, and they set up what will most likely be the most influential mainstreaming of criminological ideas so far in the twenty-first century.

Gladwell begins his book with Sandra Bland, a young African American woman from Chicago, who had just gotten a job at Prairie View A&M University in Texas. On the afternoon of July 10, 2015, she went out to buy groceries and was pulled over to the side by a 30-year-old white police officer named Brian Encinia. He told her that she had failed to signal a lane change. Their interaction, which was captured by video, represented a series of miscommunications that led eventually to Ms. Bland being

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handcuffed, arrested, and then jailed. Three days later, she committed suicide in custody.

Gladwell is clearly incensed by this story, and he begins by linking it to the broader crisis in the relationships between police and African Americans that was beginning to trouble the nation at the time. He recognizes at the outset that prejudice and racism have a key role to play in these problems, at the same time that he knows that police incompetence in specific cases is also a strong potential cause. But this is where Gladwell departs from the traditional competing arguments to understand policing gone wrong. And this is how talking to the stranger links to his more general argument.

Simply stated, the stories in the earlier sections of the book set up his primary thesis: We are simply going to make a lot of mistakes in assessing strangers. This is true for practiced spies, prosecutors and judges, for the leaders of our financial system, and for the police. And he marshals a good deal of research to show this is true. So in this context, the Sarah Bland case is not an aberration. When police stop strangers, there is a good chance they are going to misunderstand the cues that are given by those stopped—both in terms of innocence and guilt.

Defaults to “Truth”

At the same time, he makes another point that is equally important to his argument. A society in which we did not give strangers the “benefit of the doubt” would have difficulty succeeding. Gladwell relies a good deal on the psychologist, Tim Levine’s work, to make his points about this issue. Levine argues that there is something called “truth-default” which means simply that our natural inclination is to believe people. We only depart from that when the evidence becomes so strong that the default to truth becomes unreasonable. But as Gladwell shows, in many cases, many smart people go a long way before getting to that situation. Gladwell’s point is that society is built on the trust that comes from believing strangers (until you can prove them wrong).

He notes that not everyone defaults to truth, and that some people are much less believing. Harry Markopolos, who identified the Madoff scandal as early as 2000 (Madoff turned himself in in 2009), is the image of someone who bucks the trend and begins suspicious and keeps digging for proof of misbehavior. Markopolos, as Gladwell notes, believed that “dishonesty and stupidity” were everywhere in the system. Going on he notes “(t)here is no high threshold in Markopolos’s mind before doubts turn into disbelief. He has no threshold at all.”(pg. 98).

Is this a good thing for society? Gladwell says no, because the belief that strangers are telling the truth is key to the functioning of the economic system and society more generally. He defines people like Markopolos as “the holy fool”; “a social misfit—eccentric, off-putting, sometimes even crazy” (pgs. 98–99). While they can play a key role in exposing lies and deviance, they do not do well in building up cooperative enterprises and relationships.

In a book on white-collar crime written 30 years ago, my colleagues and I developed a similar theme when thinking about how to control white-collar crime:

Some imply that this is an arena where it is possible to have our cake and eat it too—to encourage competition, achievement, innovation, the development of new

consumer products that make life easier, and simultaneously to reduce the pressures for excessive spending that lead some to the search for a solution through fraud. We disagree. We think it unlikely that a society can maximize both innovation and conformity. Perhaps we have about the rate of white collar crime that we “need” in order to encourage the amount of freedom, aspiration and upward mobility that we seem, as a society, to want. (Weisburd et al. 1991)

Gladwell does not lead us to the correct balance between belief and lack of belief in strangers, but he does note the tension between them, and his stories are if nothing else fascinating and convincing on their face.

Coupling Crime Risk and Suspicion

But what of criminology and the Sarah Bland case that begins Gladwell’s book? He calls the final section of the book “coupling.” And here, he begins an investigation that leads him to criminological work that has been led by Ronald V. Clarke, Lawrence Sherman, and myself. I believe the term coupling in this regard was first noted in my book with Elizabeth Groff and SueMing Yang (Weisburd, Groff and Yang 2014), *The Criminology of Place*, where we argued that crime was “coupled to place.” But Gladwell takes a broader view, arguing that coupling lies behind the broader contextual backcloth of understanding strangers.

In some sense, Gladwell departs here from the question of getting strangers right. Having just showed us how often we get strangers wrong, he argues that we need to see strangers in context, and use that contextual information to inform how we will control the problems related to interpreting strangers. So what is the connection to Sarah Bland? Sarah Bland in Gladwell’s view is an example of the fact that police have failed to recognize the coupling of crime to place. And here begins one of the most readable descriptions ever produced of criminological discoveries regarding the importance of situation and place in the production of law-violating behavior.

The Role of “Place” and Opportunity

Gladwell begins with suicide and describes the work of Ronald Clarke showing the importance of “method” in the production of suicide. Clarke found that the replacement of “Town gas” with its high levels of carbon monoxide, with natural gas, led to a large reduction in the suicide rates in the UK. It is important to note that the Stockholm Prize in Criminology Committee, in awarding the prize to Clarke in 2017, focused in particular on this study and its importance in challenging criminological assumptions about criminal motivation. “[Town] gas had unique advantages as a lethal method,” wrote Clarke, in what Gladwell calls the “first sustained argument in favor of coupling” (p. 275). He quotes from an interview with Clarke

They [psychiatrists and social workers] thought it was superficial, that these people were so upset and demoralized that it was sort of insulting to think you

could deal with it by simply making it harder to commit suicide. I got quite a bit of pushback here and there from people about that idea. (pg. 276)

Having begun with situational prevention, speaking also for example of the creation of a barrier to suicide on the Golden Gate bridge and the fact that only 25% of people that had been restrained from jumping off the bridge actually committed suicide later, Gladwell turns to hot spots theory. He begins with my experiences in the 72nd precinct in Brooklyn, in 1985, when I walked the streets with 9 community police officers assigned to beats including 15 to 30 streets. My observations there were to lead to a career of studying hot spots of crime. While the beats were supposed to be bad neighborhoods, I found that the police spent almost all of their time on just one or two streets that had serious crime problems.

Gladwell does a wonderful job of contextualizing and describing my experiences and how they led me to rethink traditional criminological ideas, leading me to a focus on places rather than people. This is certainly a talent of Gladwell's and one that will bring these criminological ideas to a broader public. He writes after noting that I describe traditional criminological ideas about motivation as a "Dracula model" in which people are so highly motivated to commit crime the context does not matter:

Yet if criminals were like Dracula, driven, by an insatiable desire to create mayhem, they should have been roaming throughout the 72nd. The kinds of social conditions that Draculas feed on were everywhere. But the Draculas weren't everywhere. They were only on particular streets. And by streets Weisburd meant a single block—a street segment. You could have one street segment with lots of crime, and the next literally across an intersection, was fine. It was that specific. Didn't criminals have legs? Cars? Subway tokens? "So that begins a rethinking of my idea of criminology," Weisburd said. "Like most other people, my studies were about people, I said, maybe we ought to be more concerned by places." (pg. 282–283)

Gladwell's story gets the message across well, but it is important to note that Gladwell is not a scientist writing for other scientists; he is trying to communicate scientific ideas to a general public. Reading Gladwell's story, a lay person quickly understands the key ideas of this work.

The Law of Crime Concentration

And this leads to what Gladwell calls the "Minneapolis Map" which provided both for Lawrence Sherman and I the first portrait of the distribution of crime across a city. Gladwell notes that Sherman had been thinking about the idea of hot spots, drawing from medical research on AIDs. And he describes how Sherman and I found that we were each exploring the hot spots idea and began working together. What Gladwell misses here is the centrality of the Minneapolis Hot Spots Experiment (Sherman and Weisburd 1995) in the development of place-based criminology and hot spots policing. That may be because he wants to come back to Sarah Bland, and there is a more direct hot spots study that appears to help explain what happened to Sarah Bland.

As part of the Minneapolis experiment, my assistants and I (including Lisa Mayer and Anthony Petrosino) took crime data on addresses in Minneapolis and placed them on a map. While Gladwell does not make the connection to the Minneapolis Hot Spots Experiment itself, he has it right that the map that we placed on the wall of my office at Rutgers was to have an enduring impact on our sense of the idea that crime is concentrated at a small number of crime hot spots across a city, and that those hot spots were spread throughout the city. And importantly, confirming my experiences in New York, that most streets in the “bad parts of town” were not crime hot spots. This earlier study was to lead to what Gladwell calls the Seattle Map (which he reproduces, see pg. 369).

Gladwell goes from the Minneapolis Map to the developing evidence base on crime concentrations in cities. There are many more studies he could have noted, and I suspect that one reason for some academic criticism of Gladwell is that he develops his interpretations of science in relationship to key studies and does not attempt to describe or cite the broader scientific literature. But this is a book that seeks to interest large numbers of people and is not an article in a scientific journal. And importantly, he again gets the story right as he describes the development of a “law of crime concentration” at places (Weisburd et al. 2012; Weisburd 2015):

Weisburd’s experiences in the 72nd Precinct and Minneapolis are not idiosyncratic. They capture something that is close to a fundamental truth about human behavior. And that means that when you confront the stranger, you have to ask yourself where and when you’re confronting the stranger—because those two things powerfully influence your interpretation of who the stranger is. (pg. 285).

Why Crime Does not Just “Move Around the Corner”

In trying to understand why “crime does not just move around the corner,” Gladwell discusses the Jersey City Displacement and Diffusion Study (Weisburd et al. 2006). That study provides Gladwell with a way of telling an understandable story about the idea of coupling of crime to place. The Jersey City study was an attempt to create a controlled environment for tracking displacement of prostitutes, drug dealers, and violent offenders around two clustered crime hot spots. After a high-dosage police intervention, including social as well as deterrence efforts, there was little displacement to areas nearby observed. Gladwell writes regarding the sex workers:

When the police cracked down, did the sex workers simply move one or two streets over.... Was there displacement? There was not. It turns out that most would rather try something else—leave the field entirely, change their behavior—than shift their location. They weren’t just coupled to place they were anchored to place.

And having established the coupling idea, Gladwell returns to policing directly. He begins with the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (Kelling et al. 1974). George

Kelling, who led this study, and a number of other important studies by the Police Foundation in the 1970s, is a key part of this story, and he produces some important interview material from Kelling—perhaps some of the last such materials before Kelling passed away. These materials like many of the other interviews give the reader a sense of these key studies in the words of their originators. This is very valuable and is one way in which Gladwell's book provides important new information to the criminologist, police practitioners, and others interested in the development of these ideas. Gladwell tells the story of criminology in a way that scientists fail to. That story can be important in understanding the development of key scientific ideas.

The first Kansas City experiment showed that police patrol, as conventionally applied, does not prevent crime. And it is the backdrop for the integration of the criminological materials presented earlier. Gladwell does not describe here criticisms of Kansas City's methods nor does he note more recent debate about the effectiveness of random police patrol. For him, Kansas City is simply the backdrop for the introduction of the Kansas City Gun Experiment (Sherman et al. 1995).

The Kansas City Gun Experiment and Aggressive Police Stops

The detailed story of the second Kansas City (Gun) Experiment is again an important intellectual contribution, one that is aided by Gladwell's interviews with Lawrence Sherman, and others. While Kansas City is one of the early important quasi-experimental studies of hot spots policing, it takes on a more central role for Gladwell's story because it focused in on whether gun violence could be prevented by police stops in a defined hot spot area. There is much detail here provided in part by James Shaw's descriptions of the study in his dissertation. (Unfortunately, Shaw died a few years after the study was completed).

For Gladwell, Sherman's Kansas City study provided the backdrop for the large increase in aggressive proactive policing at the turn of the century. The study showed that shootings, murders, and woundings were halved in the treatment as compared with control areas. As Gladwell writes:

The first Kansas City experiment said that preventive patrol was useless, that having more police cars driving around made no difference. The second Kansas City experiment amended that position. Actually, extra patrol cars did make a difference—so long as officers took the initiative and stopped anyone that they thought was suspicious, got out of their cars as much as possible, and went out of their way to look for weapons. (pg. 307)

Gladwell argues that the bible for “post-Kansas City policing” is a book called *Tactics for Patrol* by Charles Remsberg. It calls for officers to “go beyond the ticket” to identify anomalies in the behavior of potential wrongdoers. As noted by Gladwell, Remsberg calls for the “new breed of officers to be alert to the tiniest clues” (pg. 322). In the end, Gladwell sees this book as reinforcing one aspect of Sherman's study—the use of stops to confiscate guns and decrease crime, though he argues that police and others neglected the second element of the study—that it was focused on hot spots.

Importantly, Sherman's study had gotten a good deal of media attention, including a front-page story in the *New York Times*. And this brings us back to Sandra Bland. Gladwell sees Officer Encinia's behavior as resulting directly from this new brand of policing, encouraged by the Kansas City Gun Experiment and by Remsberg.

And here, scholars are likely to raise specific questions about Gladwell's thesis. It is true that the Kansas City Gun Experiment was part of a group of studies that challenged the standard model of policing (Weisburd and Eck 2004). But it was not a test of the effectiveness of the preventive patrol idea. It is generally agreed that the Minneapolis Hot Spots Experiment (Sherman and Weisburd 1995) was the key experimental study to upend the findings of the Kelling et al. Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment. Nor is it certain that Remsberg's book was as influential as Gladwell suggests. Renee Mitchell did me the favor of contacting members of the American Society of Evidence Based Policing about this issue, and a number responded. And though a number had heard of the book, they did not see it as central to policing tactics as Gladwell suggests.

Of course, this does not mean that Gladwell is wrong. And he captures a very important trend in American policing at the turn of the century. Police agencies began to use more aggressive patrol strategies including traffic stops and stop, question, and frisk. He notes, for example, that the North Carolina Highway Patrol went from 400,000 to 800,000 traffic stops a year over a 7-year period. The rise in SQFs in New York during the same period, and in many other places, shows that whatever the direct cause, Gladwell is right about a change in the way officers behaved at the turn of the century. Perhaps his story oversimplifies a phenomenon that has a complex group of causes, but he is on to something, and he provides a readable and interesting argument setting the stage for what happened to Sarah Bland.

What Happened to Sandra Bland: Policing Uncoupled from Risk

Importantly, Gladwell now brings the story full circle. And in doing, so he makes an insightful contribution to our understanding of the development of ideas in criminology. Gladwell now identifies the human connections in the developing of what he sees as the idea of coupling:

The Lawrence Sherman who went to Kansas City is the same Larry Sherman who had worked with David Weisburd in Minneapolis a few years earlier, establishing the Law of Crime Concentration. They were friends. They taught together for a time at Rutgers, where their department chairman was none other than Ronald Clarke, who had done the pioneering work on suicide. Clarke, Weisburd, and Sherman—with their separate interests in English town gas, the crime map in Minneapolis and guns in Kansas City, were all pursuing the same revolutionary idea of coupling. (pg. 309)

It seems to me that we should do more “sociology of science” in criminology. John Laub is one of the important exceptions to this failure to engage with our history (see Laub 1984). Gladwell deserves tremendous credit for putting this history together for

this key set of ideas. Perhaps this will encourage criminologists to do some similar work.

And with this statement about coupling, he provides what is one of the best summaries of the policy implications of this work that I have seen:

And what was the principal implication of coupling? That law enforcement didn't need to be bigger, it needed to be more focused. If criminals operated overwhelmingly in a few concentrated hot spots, those crucial parts of the city should be more heavily policed than anywhere else, and the kinds of crime-fighting strategies used by police in those areas ought to be very different from those used in the vast stretches of the city with virtually no crime at all.

Sarah Bland, in this perspective, should never have been stopped. The area where she was driving had not had a crime reported in the period close to when she was stopped, and it was certainly not a hot spot. In the 26 min before he stopped Sandra Bland, he stopped three other people.

Gladwell argues that the tragedy of Sarah Bland could have been prevented if police began to recognize that they are not very good, like others, in assessing strangers, and that in that context, they should be focusing their preventive behaviors in places where crime is prevalent. In some sense, Gladwell strengthens the idea of hot spots policing. He brings to the story a concern that intrusive policing strategies can cause harm, and in this case, we want to reduce that harm by focusing police where they are critically needed. And we want to restrict such strategies to places where crime is concentrated.

Malcolm Gladwell is one of the most influential writers of non-fiction in our generation. His books are read by millions, and it looks like this work will be as popular as many of his earlier works. In this sense, his use of criminology will help to bring recent criminological ideas to a much wider audience than traditional scientific outlets.

But more than this, Gladwell has provided a thoughtful set of ideas about the limits of policing and the importance of recognizing the idea of coupling in the police mission. This book is an important read for police, and for police scholars. It is not a comprehensive survey of this area of work, and it is not intended to be. And it is not simply a translation of scientific ideas. It is also an interesting argument about policing that will lead to a good deal of discussion of how the police should be allocated, and what they should be doing.

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