

2-1 Hug, Hit, or Ignore? Cultural Differences in Dealing with Strangers by Erin B. Taylor

London. The subway. My train suddenly stops in the middle of nowhere. A few minutes pass with no announcement. Time drags until, finally, I catch the eye of the girl sitting next to me and we exchange a few words. Then I notice two young, well-dressed men smirking at us from the other end of the carriage. Have I done something wrong?

I realize that I have broken the golden social rule: never talk to strangers, even if out-of-the-ordinary events are occurring. It strikes me as quite perverse. City dwellers everywhere go to great lengths to protect their personal space. But in the case of a possible emergency, isn't this going a little too far?

Last year, back in Sydney, I had the opposite experience. Having just flown in after an absence of six months, I was stunned to notice how friendly people were to strangers. Everywhere I went, I spied people striking up conversations with people whom they evidently didn't know. These weren't just vague, impersonal conversations, either. Names, dates, places, hopes, and dreams were all revealed in the space of approximately five minutes. (I'm told that Australian men will even talk to strangers while peeing into a urinal - an expression of intimacy if ever I've heard one.)

The contrast with my experience on the London underground was striking. In fact, I was rather confused, because I know that Sydney isn't always as friendly a place as my observations suggested. Just as in any other city, most people ignore each other as much as possible. Moreover, people seem as equally ready to throw insults and punches at each other as they do to compare lottery results or buy a stranger a drink. A night out on the town in Sydney might result in a new best friend for life, or a black eye for a week.

Like a good social scientist, I developed a theory to explain this behavior. I call it the “hug or hit” rule of social engagement. This rule states that Sydneysiders (and possibly all Australians) feel that we have the right to interact with strangers if we feel like it, and the obligation to respond if people interact with us. We feel that we should be able to treat each other as intimate friends, even if we have never met before in our lives. However, we also feel that we have the right to reprimand other people if they don’t behave in accordance with our social rules. In other words, our claim to intimacy makes us social and antisocial at the same time.

The English have exactly the opposite rule. Indeed, not only should you never talk to strangers; you aren’t even allowed to give away the most basic information to people you meet in private. Standing next to a stranger at a party? You can talk about the weather as a way to break the ice, but you don’t dare to offer your name, or ask the other person what they do for a living. In her hilarious book *Watching the English*, Kate Fox explains that if you want to get to know someone, you must trick them into giving you information by asking indirect questions. “Nosy parker” is the worst insult that someone can throw at you.

So, why the difference? It may have a lot to do with what we think constitutes an ideal society. In Australia, we believe that egalitarianism and “mateship” are at the core of our identity. To refuse to talk to other people is to treat them as inferior. In England, Fox tells us, many of the rules about privacy are set up to maintain the class system: “keeping to yourself” means that it will be difficult to get to know members of another class.

The problem with this theory of difference is that it only tells us what people think should be done, not what they actually do. In reality, Australia is also a classed society, and the English also have many ways of maintaining egalitarianism. Plus, both societies are changing. As Australia becomes wealthier, the gap between rich and poor increases. It seems that our new hobby is to buy into exclusive suburbs, build high walls around our houses, and drive to work. Conversely, as English people travel more and their society becomes increasingly multicultural, people are questioning the class system and rules about privacy are losing their attraction.

Could it be that we will eventually develop the same rules of social interaction? If so, I'm going to seek out those two young men on the train and make them talk with me. If they talk, I will give them a hug. If they refuse, then I can seek comfort in the fact that I have the right to hit them for their social transgression.