"You're Very Nice But Get Away From Me, Weirdo"

On Sunday, after an hour of taking in the sights, sounds, and scents of a local farmers market, I felt the unmistakable pang of hunger in my belly. I decided to grab a late lunch at a nearby patio eating spot.

Eyes hidden behind a pair of dark sunglasses, I was casually strolling the half mile to my intended destination while studying the young professionals, hipsters, families, and (confession) the attractive women that peppered downtown on this beautiful spring day. Smiles were abundant and everyone seemed in high spirits.

"Hi!" I hear someone say to my right. I turn and see an average-sized man that I didn't recognize wearing orange shorts, sneakers, and a gray t-shirt. He beamed a smile that I could only interpret as either a sincere expression of the pure joy he was feeling at being in my presence or a hint that he might be a little weird.

Not wanting to seem impolite, I returned a smile and said "Hey man, enjoying the day?"

Without breaking pace, I shook his extended hand as he responded: "WOW it's just beautiful isn't it? Amazing-sauce!" I could feel his shirt brushing past my arm as he walked next to me with his body slightly turned towards me at a 45-degree angle. He seemed to be talking loudly and the proximity of his face made me uncomfortable.

"Yeah. Is there something I can help you with?" I asked. I veered slightly to the left trying to buy myself a little distance, but this dude was velcro.

"No, you just seem like a good guy. I'm Dan! Dan the Man!," he responded.

"Thanks, I'm Steve, nice to meet you Dan, have a great day, see you later," I said as I picked up the pace. I gave an awkward space constrained wave to my new friend but he apparently didn't get the hint.

"Hi Steve what do you?" It felt like he was even closer to me. I could feel his musty breath hitting my face every time he spoke. I could feel my heart beating faster and my breathing become constricted. The pangs of hunger had been replaced by the pangs of nerves.

"Dan, it was nice meeting you, and not to be rude but I'd like to finish my walk on my own now," I said stiffly.

"Yeah yeah I'll leave you to enjoy your day I just want to talk to you a few more minutes, you're a good guy Steve. Do you like jokes?" he replied cheerfully.

"Dan, seriously, please leave me alone."

"Steve, I'm just being friendly on this beautiful day. Life is good!!"

"I understand that Dan, but I'd like you to go away now, please."

"Awww come on Steve, I'm a nice guy! You'll see! I really am! Let's get coffee!"

He started to put his arm around me.

Seinfeld's infamous "close-talker" might be considered a violator of social norms

People regulate their behavior according to certain rules defined by society. These rules form the social norms by which people are expected to conduct themselves during social interactions. An individual's violation of these social norms will usually cause confusion and unpredictable reactions by other individuals as a result of unmet expectations.

In other words, things had gotten *weird*. Dan's method of interacting was creepy compared to how I had learned that interactions with strangers generally go in this society. I was confused and uncomfortable. I needed to figure out how to best respond to Dan in a way that would make my world normal again.

Violations of social norms often (though not always) lead to negative consequences that can range from mild to severe. In the table on the following page, I've listed several possible consequences (negative and positive) for both Dan and I that could occur based on my responses to Dan's violations of norms. There are probably an unlimited number of actual possible consequences, but these struck me as obvious.

"You're Very Nice But Get Away From Me, Weirdo"

My Response	Possible Consequences for Dan		Possible Consequences for Me	
	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
A. Let Dan put his arm around me and invite him to lunch.	I'm a serial killer and I kill Dan.	I'm a nice guy and we become good friends. I explain to Dan why he can't go around acting like he did, and he gets it.	I explain to Dan why he can't go around acting like he did, and he freaks out and hurts or kills me. Dan's a serial killer and he kills me.	Dan's a nice guy and we become good friends.
B. Brush Dan's arm aside and elevate my voice to indicate that I was serious	Dan goes away with hurt feelings.	Dan leaves me alone with no further escalation. Dan learns not to act that way with strangers.	I feel bad for hurting Dan's feelings. Dan gets angry and situation escalates. Dan kills me.	Dan leaves me alone with no further escalation.
C. Take out my phone and call the police.	Dan goes away with hurt feelings. Dan goes to jail for a few days.	Dan leaves me alone with no further escalation. Dan learns not to act that way with strangers.	I feel bad for hurting Dan's feelings. Dan gets angry and situation escalates. Dan kills me.	Dan leaves me alone with no further escalation.
D. Punch Dan in the face.	Dan goes away with a black eye. My Mike Tyson wallop puts Dan in a coma.	Dan files and wins a lawsuit. Dan learns not to act that way with strangers.	I feel bad for giving Dan a black eye. Dan sues me and wins. Dan kills me.	Dan leaves me alone with no further escalation.
E. Take out a gun and shoot him.	Dan gets killed. I miss and Dan kills me and goes to jail.	Dan only gets injured, sues me and wins.	I go to jail for a long time. I miss and Dan kills me.	I somehow get away with it.

"You're Very Nice But Get Away From Me, Weirdo"

Clearly, some of the responses I could have made would be considered more appropriate according to social norms than others. The potential consequences reflect that. (I could go to jail for violating social norms which say you don't kill people for being weird.)

Dan and I were both being friendly. Dan, however, was not being socially appropriate. There is a major difference. Initially, I was friendly too. When Dan became more insistent, I felt social norms were being violated. Being a violation of expected behavior, I did not have a response to Dan's behavior that could complete this interaction loop easily. Yet I needed to instantly formulate a response that was not only socially appropriate but also effective in discouraging Dan from continuing his behavior.

So what does all this have to do with dogs?

The same principles apply. Social norms exist in the dog world just as they do in the human world.

Cammie's new parents had read about how important it was to socialize puppies. So once she had received all her vaccinations at the far too advanced age of 4 months, Cammie was enrolled in a puppy socialization class. During the 6-week puppy class, she played with all kinds of puppies. They also started bringing her to a local dog daycare four times a week, where she got lots of experience playing in "puppy groups" with other dogs her age. By the age of 6 months, Cammie just loved other dogs. But she would often find herself at the receiving end of growling and snapping when excitedly greeting other dogs. While extremely friendly, Cammie did not have adequate social skills.

Why not? Cammie's behavior was stunted. She had not been given the opportunity to learn about the social norms that govern the lives of adult dogs. She was the equivalent of a human teenager who had been isolated with 5-year old children her entire life and was therefore completely unaware that her 'normal' behavior was inappropriate for an adult dinner party. I don't know Dan's history, but either he had not developed basic social skills, or somewhere along the line, his understanding had been disrupted.

In no way do I intend to undermine the importance of a **well-run** puppy class. Puppy class had taught Cammie about bite inhibition, built her confidence, and helped developed motor skills. She had been introduced to multiple surfaces, strange noises, and a variety of people. Puppy class had been great for her. But due to the nature of puppy classes being *for puppies*, they tend to be unable to provide an environment where they can learn, for example, that bum rushing and jumping on a strange dog's head is not the best way to introduce themselves. Dan was

not necessarily dangerous. He may not have been dangerous at all. Cammie certainly wasn't dangerous. But they both lacked certain social skills.

Therefore, we need to give puppies additional opportunities to develop these skills. A number of options are generally available. The point of this article is that puppy parents need to be made more aware that their puppies need to not only be friendly, they also need to be well-socialized.

A few ideas of how to accomplish this:

- arrange play-dates with well-socialized adult dogs belonging to friends
- send your puppy to a dog daycare that understands this concept or are at least willing to safely socialize your puppy with adults (shameless plug for Howl n' Woof Daycare)
- schedule one of my Training Hikes* (shameless plug for me)
- attend my mixed age group classes** (a second shameless plug for me)

In conclusion, don't let your puppy be a Dan
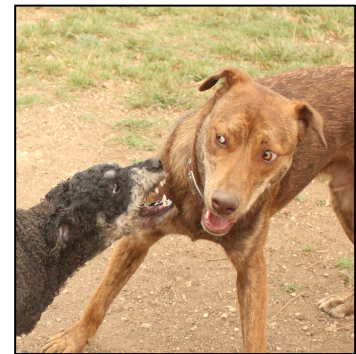
"Back off, Dan!"

* hiking with dogs is a much different way to socialize than taking your dog to an enclosed dog park. I *generally* do not recommend enclosed dog parks for socialization. Explaining why would require its own article.

** not necessarily as a substitute for a well-run puppy class however.