

RACISM & HOMOPHOBIA IN GLADWELL'S 'TIPPING POINT'.
Revisiting Malcolm Gladwell's 'The Tipping Point'.

By Dapo Ladimeji
MARCH 2015

Malcolm Gladwell describes the theme of his book as:

'The Tipping Point is the autobiography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread just like viruses do.' (p.7)

Fashion, crime waves and best sellers all explained by one factor? His book has achieved world wide renown. It may be useful to examine the evidence supporting his views.

Let us start with the expression 'tipping point'. Despite Gladwell's statements the best explanation of this concept is from dynamics.

For a yacht there is a righting moment (<http://marine.marsh-design.com/content/understanding-monohull-sailboat-stability-curves>) ...

If a yacht is heeled to the right where the centre of gravity A is to the left of the Centre of bouyancy B there is a force of gravity pulling the boat back against the force of wind heeling the boat. However if the point A moves to the right of point B then the force of gravity now adds to the force of the wind! There will be a point where the two forces almost equal each other which we can call a 'tipping point'.

Lets consider a glass of water. After a small tilt and release of the glass to the right it will fall back to its original position. This is a reflection of the stability of the glass design. However there will be a point where the centre of gravity is almost on top of the centre of volume. If we call this is a tipping point it is because a small force could move the centre of gravity over to left side and the glass will now tip over as with each tilt the amount of gravity pushing it to the right will increase thus accelerating the speed of tipping.

To put this simply, any homeostatic system will have a point where the homeostasis is about to break. A small amount of energy to the right will lead to increasing instability. Where Gladwell has misled everyone is that at this point a small amount of energy to the left would restore stability. In Gladwell's world a tipping point allows small changes to create large effects (mostly unstable) whereas in reality this angles of moments could go either way with a small amount of energy i.e restoring original stability or going towards rapidly increasing instability – the glass of water begins to fall with accelerating speed or it simply rocks back to its original stability in a more gentle manner.

There is another reason to choose dynamics to explain the meaning of 'tipping point' rather than Gladwell's preferred epidemiology. In the world of epidemiology from which he claims the core concept of tipping point arises the term is no where to be found as a key concept and in fact it cannot be found at all in the CDC standard text book ... 'Principles of epidemiology in public health practice'.

<http://www.cdc.gov/ophss/csels/dsepd/ss1978/index.html>

CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is the world's leading body on epidemics and how to control them. If one searches the Centre for Disease Control website for 'tipping point' one gets referred to Gladwell (and other texts with comments implying that this is not a scientific concept at all and may be synonymous with 'turning point').

If one reads the standard texts on epidemiology (<http://www.cdc.gov/ophss/csels/dsepd/ss1978/index.html>) a far broader scenario emerges.

“**Epidemics** occur when an agent and susceptible hosts are present in adequate numbers, and the agent can be effectively conveyed from a source to the susceptible hosts. More specifically, an epidemic may result from:

- A recent increase in amount or virulence of the agent,
- The recent introduction of the agent into a setting where it has not been before,
- An enhanced mode of transmission so that more susceptible persons are exposed,
- A change in the susceptibility of the host response to the agent, and/or
- Factors that increase host exposure or involve introduction through new portals of entry.(47)”

Gladwell states 'Ideas and products and message and behaviours spread like viruses do.' (p.7)

He identifies epidemics with 'when everything can change all at once'.

But this is simply not supported by the evidence. Changes in host susceptibility could be crucial but may take considerable time to occur. Until that change in host susceptibility occurs it may be that no epidemic would occur. In terms of social theory the theory of reception would emphasise the changes in the audience's response to a work. Here a work may have been available for a long period but suddenly becomes fashionable ... and the explanation would be in terms of the changes in the receptivity of the audience, the meanings which the audience would now put on the work. An evangelist may hold a meeting about the work but in the absence of changes in reception his efforts would go to waste. Attributing the sudden change in response to the one event held by the evangelist is absurd on this view.

He says that his stories about Hush Puppies and New York crime waves '... Are textbook examples of epidemics in action'. (p.7) '.. they are clear examples of contagious behaviour'. This is simply untrue.

Definition of contagion: 'the communication of disease from one person or organism to another by close contact.'

Let's look at the Hush Puppies example: the shoes were taken up by leading fashion icons who seriously influenced fashion trends. The idea of contagion is certainly not appropriate to the spread of an idea by influential endorsement. The idea of contagion and epidemic is that everyone in the affected population has an equal chance of being infected. What we have here is a metaphor masquerading as scientific expression.

Most human systems that are stable have homeostatic mechanisms. For the examples that Gladwell uses these systems must have failed. Now we could easily have another explanation for great and sudden change – whatever it takes to break the homeostatic mechanism. Now it is no longer the 'straw that broke the camel's back' but the straw that broke the homeostatic mechanism and that led to change getting out of control...

Gladwell repeats again and again that it took only the smallest changes to start an epidemic which simply is not supported by the evidence. At some point homeostasis breaks down but that point simply does not fit the model of his explanation. At some point water turns to ice, and at some point water turns to steam ...but it takes much energy to get water up to 99 degrees C or down to 1 degrees C.

Hush Puppies:

Gladwell's first case study if we can call it that is about Hush Puppies. Gladwell attributes the start of this renewed fashion to 'a handful of kids in the East Village and Soho' (p.4). This however is entirely circular reasoning. According to his theory there should have been some individuals who started it so he posits that they existed. No evidence is actually presented. There are serious counterfactual issues at stake. These shoes may have been worn by one or two kids throughout the decade so that nothing new happened in terms of kids wearing the shoes. For his theory to be credible we have to assume that no kids had been wearing these shoes ever in the past decades, a huge assumption for which there is no evidence. In fact no evidence is presented that the fashion designers came across the shoes from the kids. What we do know of fashion designers is that they have independent access to the history of clothes styles and hardly needed kids on the block to allow them to see hush puppies. Fashion designers forever forage the past for ideas that can be 'reinvented', updated or adapted. Curiously he appears to have never asked the fashion designers where they found their inspiration. By p.139 what had been earlier 'these first few kids, whoever they were ..'(p.4) had now become hardened fact..'Hush puppies took off because they were being worn by kids in the cutting-edge precincts of the East Village – an environment that helped others to look at the shoes in a new light.'(p.139) That for which there was no evidence now becomes hard established fact.

He states 'No one was trying to make Hush Puppies a trend.' This is extraordinary. He quotes Isaac Mizrahi, Anna Sui, and Joel Fitzgerald as all putting hush puppies on their shows and collections... frankly, if that is not trying to start a trend what would ever count as such!

Racism and Homophobia

We have quickly shown that the main ideas behind Gladwell's book are false; that the idea was never a mainstream idea of epidemiology, that epidemiology has different and better explanations, that there was no actual evidence to back up his theories about hush puppies. If all this was easily available how did the book achieve such renown? The answer lies in the receptivity of the audience. This book we will show is thoroughly but subtly laced with racism and homophobia and apparently provides support for such points of view using science and the most fashionable social theory i.e. this book in an almost subliminal manner makes racism and homophobia *hip* and it is that which has led to its acceptability and the reluctance of serious academics to expose it. From available evidence the book has been used in courses at Stanford and Harvard. Some may be surprised by this allegation so let us show it in detail.

STD epidemic in Baltimore:

Gladwell explains that a syphilis epidemic in Baltimore was basically started by one or two highly promiscuous men. In order to maintain the genteel racism he identifies them in a light code. His prime suspect is a man whose girl-friends 'braid his long hair' and who 'host all-night marijuana and malt-liquor-fueled orgies ..' or more prosaically a typical white person's stereo-type of a drug addicted sex crazed rasta man. He then refers to some serious academic studies such as the Potterat study of STD epidemic in Colorado Springs (http://journals.lww.com/stdjournal/Abstract/1985/01000/Gonorrhoea_as_a_Social_Disease_.6.aspx) where Gladwell claims Potterat identified the cause of the epidemic there as a special group of 168 people : 'Who were those 168 people? They aren't like you or me. They are people who go out every night, people who have vastly more sexual partners than the norm people whose lives and behaviour are well outside of the ordinary.' (p.20)

However what the Potterat report actually says is:

'...promiscuity itself is not sufficient for transmission of disease.' and on transmitters - 'As compared with non-transmitters, they have fewer total positive contacts...' (p.8) and many (over 45%) had known each other over 2 months before first sexual contact and 18% more than a year. In fact the main people infected were members of the military which hardly counts as a way of life 'well outside of the ordinary'.

What Gladwell fails to link together is that:

1. There was a major decline in health services provision for those with STD's in the target area in Baltimore . A decline of 33% in number of publicly funded physicians available.
2. There had been a rapid rise of crack cocaine addiction in the previous three years leading among other things to the increase in the exchange of sex for drugs

He takes each item by itself e.g. item A and says that item A alone cannot explain the epidemic as if that proves that item A was not relevant, and then if not Item A , then Item B alone, etc cannot explain it we are left with his explanation as the only viable alternative. This is of course a non sequitur. Even if the existing theories are wrong his theory could also be wrong.

Lets quote Gladwell on CDC: 'What they were saying is that there was a subtle increase in the severity of the crack problem in the mid-1990s, and that change was enough to set off the syphilis epidemic.' (p.17) This is a straw man exercise. What CDC actually said is that the increase in crack related deaths was 737% , perhaps not very subtle as an increase.

Mortality And Morbidity Report for March 1996 which Gladwell refers to actually gives a scientifically reasonable explanation for the epidemic in Baltimore: these source documents (Mortality And Morbidity Report for March 1996) actually tell a different story...that the rise in syphilis rather than being a result of one persons erratic behaviour was a direct consequence of the rise in crack addiction (crack is differentially addictive for Black people) and the increase in crack related emergency admissions in Baltimore rose from 3023 to 10243, an increase of 239% whilst the number of drug abuse related deaths increased by 737% between 1990 and 1994,.

The report's actual wording is :

'A community wide expansion in crack cocaine use preceded the increase (...in STD infections) in Baltimore City and most likely was the primary contributing factor. In addition, a decline in clinical and partner-notification service staffing may have limited the public health response to the increase in cases ...'

There is a serious question that arises and needs answering. **Given that crack addiction had been rising for several years and was known to be associated with risky sexual behaviour how did the medical and political authorities decide that this was the time to reduce staffing for STD's in the high risk areas**

when a large scale outbreak could be predicted? Given Gary Webb's allegations about government/official involvement in crack cocaine distribution (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marc-levin/gary-webb-was-right_b_6024530.html) this should have been a red flag requiring further and serious investigation. Instead Gladwell promotes a distraction – it was all the fault of one or two members of the Black community (i.e. it was your own fault) and falsely claims scientific backing for this lie.

While he is about it Gladwell throws in the patient zero case for AIDS.' ...the French Canadian flight attendant Gaetan Dugas, who claimed to have 2,500 sexual partners all over North America.... These are the kinds of people who make epidemics of disease tip.' (p.21) As Gladwell so gently put it: 'They aren't like you or me.' They are poor, ill-educated, unemployed, Black and/or homosexual! This is Gladwell's social message and why he is so popular, the lack of scientific evidence and openly falsified claims not withstanding. In regards to the patient zero, this story is known to be false and the author now calls his own behaviour 'yellow journalism'. By the time of Gladwell's book the slightest research or contact with the author would have found that out. But why bother? Why let the truth spoil a good story? (http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/05/06/aids_the_truth_about_patient_zero.html)

CRIME

Gladwell makes a major play with his story of the New York vigilante, Bernhard Goetz who shot four unarmed Black teenagers on the subway. According to Gladwell this action led to serious drop in the crime rate in New York. Before discussing some serious distortions in Gladwells' account some simple facts need to be presented. Goetz incident occurred in 1984, the crime rate had been rising in previous years and continued to rise in subsequent years and only began a sharp decline in 1990? If Goetz shooting was a significant event or 'tipping point' why did crime rise in many subsequent years? This is clearly shoddy research but we are familiar with Gladwell's standards by now. (see paper by Dr Langan of Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/322928/Langan-rel>)

A tactic of Gladwell's is to redescribe events: Goertz, an emotionally unstable man, becomes a 'professional' and the four teenagers asking for \$5 become 'hoodlums', 'thugs' or even 'gangsters,' (p.147.). The word 'professional' summons up images of lawyers and doctors. Goertz was a self employed small time minor electronics specialist. (<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/01/01/nyregion/man-tells-police-he-shot-youths-in-subway-train.html>)

Gladwell states: 'White professionals do not, as a rule, shoot young Black men on the subway.' (p.147) He could have added that white professionals do not as a rule travel on subways with illegal Smith & Wessons .38 weapons loaded with illegal dum dum bullets or express themselves in openly racist language such as 'spics and niggers'(p148).

Gladwells suggests the teenagers were threatening Goertz. However Goertz stated:“He said he did not feel threatened when Mr. Canty approached him and asked for \$5. "He said it with a smile and his eyes were bright," Mr. Goetz said. “ (<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/22/nyregion/the-goetz-defense-overcome-taped-statement-and-eyewitness-testimony.html?pagewanted=all>)

As the New York Times put it: 'If they heed the facts as they are now known to the public, the cheering should stop. According to the report of a statement Mr. Goetz made to the police, the four young men displayed no weapons and made no overtly threatening gestures....’ (<http://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/01/opinion/you-don-t-look-so-bad-if-criminal-justice-system-can-t-protect-new-yorkers-why.html>)

An indication of Goetz state of mind can be seen from his confession to police:

“If I had more bullets, I would have shot 'em all again and again,” Goetz said on the tape,

played in a darkened Manhattan courtroom. "My problem was I ran out of bullets. And I was gonna, I was gonna gouge one of the guy's eyes out with my keys afterwards."
(<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-1322122.html>)

Given that there was no statistical or other meaningful connection between Goertz's shooting and the fall in crime many years later one wonders why Gladwell makes such a play of it other than pandering to a prejudiced audience assuring them that vigilante feelings if acted out would actually have a good effect!

Gladwell also mentions that Goertz gave himself up in a context that suggest he did this voluntarily out of remorse. This was not the case. The police had his name and photo and had visited his flat. He knew this as his friends had tipped him off. It was merely a matter of time before the police arrested him as he had hidden himself in a nearby city.

Before summing up there are other examples of Gladwell's shoddy workmanship that can be selected out of the may pages that any researcher could list.

Mavens

Gladwell has a section on Mavens.

According to a standard investor definition a maven is:

'An individual that is considered **investing** savvy and well aware of the **positive trends** in the **market**. This status is usually based on the individual past **performance** in the market. A **person** that always seem to **pick** the right **investments** and as a **result** has become very wealthy may be considered a market maven. Warren Buffet is one example of a person that is considered to be a market maven. A market maven is not free from **experience** losses, but they typically have more wins than losses in investing. '

http://www.investorwords.com/8637/market_maven.html

However Gladwell unilaterally alters this to say:

'What sets maven apart is not so much what they know but how they pass it along. The fact that Mavens want to help...' (p.67)

This is patent nonsense. The world is full of ill informed people who want to help and who are happy to sound off about their opinion. Generally we learn to ignore them. We listen to some because they have been proven to be correct not because they wish to be helpful.

Connectors:

He writes 'I once met a classic connector in Chicago ...' (p.49) however though her profile fits his theory NO evidence was presented that she was in fact in any practical way a connector! This was a purely circular argument .. 'she is a connector because she fits my profile of a connector!' The example he gives of her meeting with Arthur C Carke has too many unstated assumptions. He suggests that connectors naturally attract people to them. We have to assume she was the only person Clarke called when he visited Chicago because for Gladwell's theory that is what makes her a connector. If he called everyone he knew in Chicago, which is at least as likely, Gladwell's theory would fall apart. Do we know if Clarke actually called everyone he knew in Chicago? No. Gladwell makes an astonishing assumption.

Racism

Racism can be evidenced by positively including matters and negatively by excluding matters. The only examples of Black people in *The Tipping Point* are associated with STD and crime. However if ever there was an example of a social tipping point then the famous case of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott should come to mind, but this positive case about Black people is not included. To include examples of crime and disease and leave out civil rights protests reveals a patent prejudice. It is also the case that having this written (or ghosted for) a person of Black heritage would diffuse allegations of racism, but in fact many Black people have discovered that there is considerable personal reward from expressing views that whites are reluctant to openly express. Henry Louis Gates comes to mind as another example. This negativity may also apply to gay writers. Gladwells' book exhibits both racism and homophobia and its lack of scholarly basis has been overlooked. It is hard not to feel that both statements are related.

Dapo Ladimeji

A Cambridge University graduate who has published articles in philosophy journals, and written reviews for *New Society*. He has been a member of the Editorial Board of *Transition*, and *Race & Class*. He is a chartered accountant and was previously partner in a major City firm. He has been on the main Board of one of UK's largest housing associations, and been a trustee of many charities, including chairing the largest charity housing homeless people in London.