

THE TIPPING OF AMERICA

Malcolm Gladwell makes sociology fun again.

BY DENNIS JARRETT

THE TIPPING POINT: HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

By Malcolm Gladwell
Little, Brown
2000
279 pages

I've always felt something in common with New Yorker writer Malcolm Gladwell. It's not that we're black and that we're former Canadian track and field stars. (That's just him.) But we write about the same kinds of things. When I finish one of his articles, I often immediately start to write something. I read Gladwell like a hawk.

In 1996, he published a piece called "The Tipping Point," which had a profound effect on me, mainly because it introduced me to an idea I needed badly. It solved a major problem in my book about alcoholism. I found that I could just lay Gladwell's insight over my own manuscript like an intellectual transparency.

Normally, a Tipping Point governs the behavior of groups, thus falling within the field of sociology. For most of its academic life, sociology has been low on the social science totem pole—easy to learn because there was nothing much there. That's why your football coach doubled as a sociology professor.

But beginning with the fascinating work of Erving Goffman (e.g., *The*

Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life), sociology got legs. Goffman, incidentally, once visited Santa Fe to attend a conference at La Fonda. One of my linguistics professors at Berkeley told me that one afternoon he returned to his room to find Goffman on his knees in front of a chest of drawers, madly shuffling through my teacher's stuff. Caught in the act, Goffman simply looked up and said, "You can learn a lot about people by looking through their drawers." And completely unperturbed, he got up and left the room.

The Tipping Point is at the cutting edge of the new sociology. Malcolm Gladwell has just published a book of essays which, in one way or another, illustrate the Tipping Point—which is, in fact, the title of his book. The idea itself is a bit spooky, since, like the theories of quantum physics, it holds true but

resists full understanding. It begins with the "fact" that certain social trends do not just resemble epidemics, they are epidemics. As Gladwell says, "they spread just like viruses do."

Here's the underlying pattern: First, social epidemics are contagious. A fad or idea that becomes popular with a very small group of people begins rapidly, and exponentially, to infect others. Second, little changes result in big—sometimes

very big—effects. And finally, the change in behavior happens rapidly, in one dramatic moment. This third principle, a major change at lightning speed, is the actual Tipping Point.

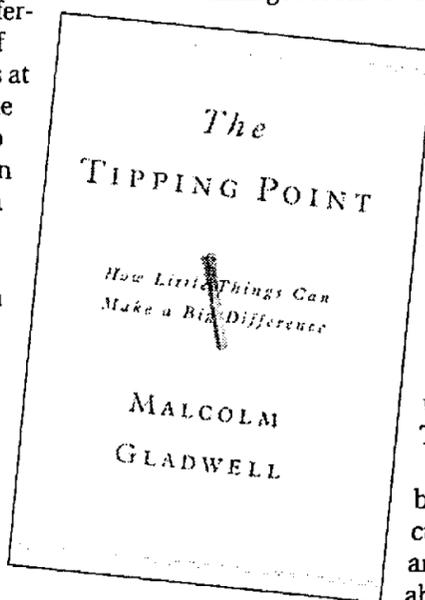
Gladwell begins with a curious, but amazing, example about shoes: Hush Puppies, those soft,

suede shoes with light, crepe soles. They "tipped" between late 1994 and early 1995. The brand had almost died after a long illness. The Wolverine Company was phasing them out; you could only buy them in small family stores.

Then the contagion struck, like the West Nile Virus. A few kids who hung out in clubs in downtown New York began wearing Hush Puppies. Suddenly, they were hip within a tiny subculture. Possibly one person (as perhaps in the case of AIDS) got it started. After a few months, the Hush Puppy craze was out of hand. From sales of 30,000 pairs a year, they went to 430,000 pairs within 10 months, and then, by mid-1996, that figure had quadrupled. No advertising. All word-of-mouth.

That's a trivial example. Crime in New York is Gladwell's most interesting and important case in point. In 1992 there were 2,154 murders in New York, and 626,182 serious crimes. Then, "at some mysterious and critical point," the crime rate plummeted. It tipped: "Within five years, murders had dropped 63.3% (!) to 770" in 1997 and total crime had been cut in half. What happened is that a very small number of thieves, killers and sleazeballs got infected with an anti-crime "virus" and their bizarre choice to stop killing, raping, mugging and stealing hit thousands and thousands of their colleagues like the flu.

Gladwell details the process of the Tipping Point according to three rules: his explanation, the quality of his writing and the idea itself are fascinating. This is one of the best non-fiction books I've ever read.



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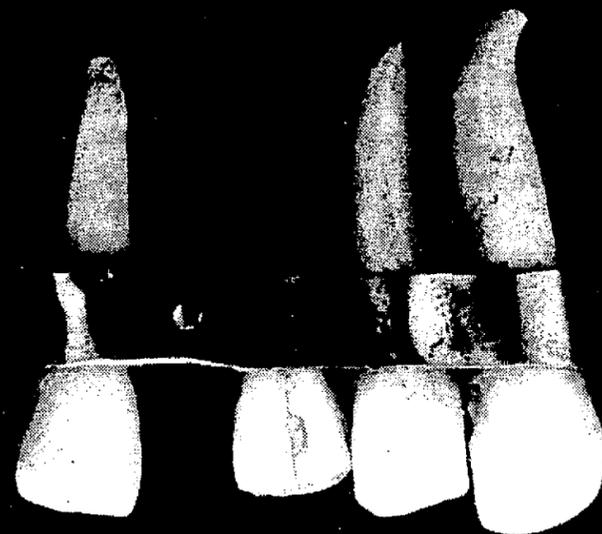


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