The essential guide to being politically correct in public

We learn by watching the world around us. The way we speak and behave is influenced by our peers and the media. All of us act in a way that we think is safe and feels comfortable. But what seems logical in our head can be cruel and unfair. Trends in a world driven by social media are educating us about how harmful stereotyping can be. And those falling foul of a behaviour seemingly ingrained in our DNA are paying the price.

Locker Room Talk looks at the various ways our behaviour can fall foul, why it's so hard to change our mindset and the consequences for us and the brands we represent, if we are politically incorrect in public.

- **Know what to say and when to say it**
- **Understand how to change your mindset in the decision-making process**
- **Explore examples drawn from the author's successful media career**

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Steve Dawson

LOCKER ROOM TALK

Marshall Cavendish Business

"It's our responsibility to treat everyone with the respect they deserve. The language we use is the first step in that direction. Steve's book will get you thinking about the right path."

— **Viv Anderson,** the first black footballer to play for England

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A Guide to Political Correctness in the Public Domain

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From sports TV to a book on political correctness seems like anything but a seamless link; not that I'm unfamiliar with those (I moved from tax accountancy to journalism in the 1990s). But in this case, there actually is a logical connection.

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As I encountered business people who certainly had the potential to do the same, I realised that an explanation of what political correctness is, why we need to be politically correct and how best to achieve it, was becoming an essential part of what I was coaching. Like presentation itself, the range of obstacles is broad, and writing a book that would cover the basics seemed like a good way to approach it. There are ways to limit your exposure to the kind of meltdowns we see in our news feeds almost every day. But the secret to protecting ourselves from toxic fallout is simply to educate ourselves on this ever-changing and extremely complex environment.

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Steve Dawson
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INTRODUCTION

"We used to react to prejudice.
Now we actively seek it out."

— Comedian Tom Walker as 'Jonathan Pie'

If you are a child of the 70s or 80s, you'll be aware that some of what made the icons of that era successful wouldn't get out of the starting blocks today.

Take a trio of British situation comedies, for example: *On the Buses* (1969–1973), *Mind Your Language* (1977–1979), *Porridge* (1974–1977) and frankly most others, all dabbled treacherously in racial stereotypes that would be beaten back by today's politically correct watchdogs, long before they ever got off the ground.

It could be argued that these very successful series should be applauded for including a wider-than-usual racial agenda. *Mind Your Language* certainly explored cultural differences,

while at the same time amusing us with the practical challenges that came as part of the package. It would have been, in a generic way, educational for some. But it is perhaps hard to deny that, much of the time, its stereotyping was gratuitous, with the comic effect more prominent than any role in developing integration.

In Sickness and in Health (1985–1992) and its forerunner *Till Death Do Us Part* (1965–1975) were more sophisticated productions, satirising those whose philosophy was broadly xenophobic. The more popular *Fawlty Towers* (1975 and 1979) examined the inner workings of the less-cosmopolitan Englishman in a memorable episode called *The Germans*. Again, though, the stereotyping (the lead character, Basil, clearly being alarmed by and distrusting of a black doctor) was satirical, shaming Basil for his follies, and thereby asking us to question our own. Whatever their aims, these sitcoms were a sign of the times in the UK, where they were made and set.

In the United States, by the 1990s, the civil rights movement of the 1960s had meant that many Americans might claim to be better educated on matters of racial stereotyping than those in many other parts of the developed world. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement, however, was just gaining a popular footing.

At the same time, *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), a sitcom based in New York and made in Los Angeles, was breaking ground

with a new type of comedy. Its smart writing still resonates today and its re-runs remain popular, entrenched, as it has become, in American popular culture. The main protagonists Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer occasionally found race to be a facet of their lives. Sexuality, however, was a prominent feature. In one episode, *The Outing* (1993), Jerry and George get mistaken for a gay couple. They repeatedly and vociferously deny this, with the postscript, "not that there's anything wrong with that". This phrase also gets used through the episode by other characters, suggesting that one should always add such a proviso even when affirming what has been biologically pre-determined. Was this a dig at the fastidiousness of the politically correct country that America was becoming? Was it a hint at the characters' homophobia?

Certainly, in *The Wig Master*, Jerry gets testy at the thought that his heterosexuality is too readily assumed. In *The Subway*, Elaine matter-of-factly attends a same-sex wedding (notwithstanding the horror of a fellow commuter), yet in *The Beard*, she tries to 'convert' a gay man to heterosexuality. These are perspectives, conundrums and situations that Americans might have related to at the time, and for some, even today. They proved both thought-provoking and amusing and this was very likely the intention.

At the turn of the century, *The Office* (UK) underscored the role that this genre can play in sending up those without a filter for public consumption. David Brent (played by Ricky

Gervais) was self-absorbed and lacking in social awareness. But it was his political incorrectness, while trying to project the more fashionable, opposite persona, that will endure.

Brent was an office manager who never displayed technical skill but promoted himself as a man of the people and strived for popularity. Adopting the corporate political correctness of his era to underscore his skills was a sound strategy, in theory. In practice, it became the finest example of why we need to understand political correctness rather than just pander to it.

While we might conceivably aspire to live the somewhat self-absorbed lives of a Jerry Seinfeld or an Elaine Benes, it's unthinkable that anybody would want to be a David Brent. No matter what your political leanings or ethical views amount to; no matter how unaccepting you are of a race, sexuality or ability that is not your own; nobody wants to be thought of as unable to represent one's beliefs in such a shambolic and pitiful way.

Satire is by its very nature smart and was brilliantly executed long before the advent of television's attempt to make us laugh. But the sitcom runs parallel to the road we often find ourselves on, one which navigates an emerging world of sometimes extreme and even wayward political correctness. Pertinently, this often happens when we, in our non-sitcom real lives, attempt to make people laugh.

We should probably look upon an overly PC world without too much fervour. It is, after all, society's attempt to do the right thing, to be inclusive, to create equality for anyone hindered in creating it for themselves. But it is an education, as arduous and full of pitfalls as any university curriculum. It is also an examination, which at one time or another, we have probably all failed. It is this failure that provides some of the most enticing fodder for news stories. This is especially so in the modern day, when social media allows news consumers to become reporters, on Twitter and in the comments sections of online news. It also gives loose-tongued celebrities and yet-to-be-infamous people a tool to broadcast their thoughts without the buffer of an editor, producer or public relations specialist.

It is hard to think of anyone who has ridden a storm of alleged political incorrectness and come out the other side with such accomplishment as Donald Trump, president of the United States of America. His now infamous "grab them by the pussy" remark would likely have ruined the career of someone whose fame and success were far less aligned to political correctness than a presidential candidate. The media-consuming public has a remarkable ability to forgive transgressions, particularly if the transgressor shows both ownership of the error in judgement and contrition. In Trump's case, forgiveness apparently came from one simple phrase. Whether it was contrived through a deep-thinking

board of public relations expertise or simply in the moment by the experienced public speaker that Trump surely is, the phrase 'locker room talk' seems now to have been fuelled by genius. It was concise and laced with regret. But most importantly, it struck a chord with everyone, despite the extreme disrespect towards women that his earlier comments had incorporated. If indeed the American public had, at one time or another, failed a PC examination, then the horror of having their transgression catapulted into the public domain was something to which it could relate. 'Locker room talk' was a phrase so blissfully simple that it tapped into the minds of millions. Whether they had sympathy or not, whether they forgave him or not and whether they would ever have uttered the offending phrase themselves, the electorate could at least empathise. In this instance, Trump was not running, defending himself or sidestepping, he had been caught. Another phrase, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone', or something similar, must have passed through the minds of millions.

One month later, the remark that would have ended or severely compromised the career of a sportsman, civil servant or sitcom actor, sat on the shelf of America's conscience, as Trump edged out Hillary Clinton to become 'leader of the free world'.

In the chapters that follow, we'll look more deeply at this anti-PC monster, lying dormant inside some, raging to be

heard in others. We'll examine how it got there; why we need to tame it; what the grey areas are; and how to walk the PC line without stepping on a minefield.

The aim here isn't to brainwash the reader. Mind control is as unpleasant as any of the prejudices discussed in this book. What we can do is help provide the filter that we need to say and do the right thing, so as not to offend others. That aim is laudable in itself. But considering the subject matter here, it will also protect you from the severe recrimination that our vast yet intimately connected world can generate. In doing that, it will also protect your business and your employer, whose well-being your livelihood no doubt depends on. Whenever you converse with a third party, no matter how well you think you know them and how easy your relationship is, the power to offend is still enormous.

As a general guide in matters of social cohesion, remember, it's about more than just you.

- Be keenly aware of what's around you.
- There is no normal and you certainly aren't it.
- You are you and everyone else is different.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Chapter 1

WHY ARE WE POLITICALLY INCORRECT?

"If you ever find yourself the victim of other people's bitterness, smallness or insecurity; remember, things could be worse. You could be them."

— Anonymous

We are all politically incorrect some of the time and it's quite understandable. Some are less inclined to voice their inappropriate thoughts than others, some are less inclined to think them. But as we roam around the planet, we observe; we learn to protect ourselves from situations we would rather avoid. They might be as dangerous as a physical attack or as trivial as a boring conversation. Every day we pick up lessons on how to sidestep these situations, while also learning how to improve our quality of life. The more we learn, the better equipped we are to make the right decisions, for example:

Should I touch that plant?
Should I sit next to that person?

Should I drink that tea?
Should I walk along that road at night?
Should I buy a laptop of that brand?

Being informed unquestionably helps us to make the right decisions, but what we need to be aware of, in the context of political correctness, is that our decisions often impact others.

Let's say that two people I know, Tommy and Glenn, are at the same party and I'm in a rush to get home. I have the option to ask them for advice. From past experience, I know that Glenn is very familiar with the subway system. He's also very friendly and knows exactly where I live. Tommy on the other hand, while friendly, is a heavy smoker and I don't like the smell of cigarettes. He's also unfamiliar with the transport system, having just moved here from another city. I also know that when you engage him in conversation, he speaks at great length and it's very difficult to draw things to a close. Armed with this information, I can make an informed decision about whom to ask for help, and it's very likely to be Glenn.

What happens if Tommy's and Glenn's livelihood depends upon my decision? Let's say they are Uber drivers and therefore they either will or will not earn money based on my selection. Again, in the absence of other knowledge, I would probably choose Glenn. His car is less likely to smell of cigarettes and he'll have a better understanding of the

optimal route to get me home. We make commercial, social and business decisions based on factors like these all of the time. Society doesn't chastise us for doing so; it accepts that we must make the best choices we can for ourselves, based on the specific knowledge that we have.

Now let's assume that I know nothing about either person; they drive taxis and are both waiting for passengers as I leave the party. All other things being equal, there is just as much chance that I'd take Tommy's taxi as Glenn's. If I do, however, I probably won't enjoy the air quality, might have a longer (and therefore more expensive) ride home and will probably get my ear chewed off in the process.

To avoid picking the less satisfying of the two options, our instinct would be to draw upon general lessons from the past. To do this, we will first need to differentiate one option from the other. Regardless of whether it helps our decision, let's consider first how we might do this. Ten such ways, split into three groups, might be:

(a)
The taxi company

(b)
The brand of the car
The colour of the car
The age of the car

The size of the car
The cleanliness of the car

(c)
The height of the driver
The age of the driver
The race of the driver
The gender of the driver

Let's consider these, category by category.

Category (a) – The Company

Our choice here is based upon numerous aspects. It's reasonable to assume that our perception of each taxi company is determined by a combination of our own experience, that of our friends and the marketing campaign that each company has developed. These may or may not provide a reliable indication of the best service. But given the information at hand, we can at least make a choice based on reasonable grounds. In a free market, we have the right to make that consumer choice. If we were to speak publicly about how we arrived at our decision, we would be on pretty safe ground.

Category (b) – The Car

The brand of the car leads to similar thought processes and results to the consideration of the taxi company as outlined in (a) above.

The colour of the car is unlikely to make any difference to the quality of our journey. To use this as a basis for choice would be considered frivolous, but frankly something we might well do, albeit perhaps subconsciously. If we spoke publicly about this decision, it's hard to see how anyone would be overly concerned, although there might be a few inquisitively raised eyebrows.

Unlike the colour, the age of the car might reasonably have a material impact on our journey. The notion that a newer car will provide a smoother, safer and more reliable ride is an entirely plausible one. Supporting this notion publicly, would likely be met with agreement.

The size of the car will logically determine the amount of room in the back seat and this should impact the level of comfort. Again, the public perception of our choice is likely to be acceptance. A choice based upon cleanliness would be received in a comparable way.

Category (c) – The Driver

The height of the driver would generally be thought of as having no effect on the quality of our journey. In this regard, it might fall into the same basket as the colour of the car. Importantly, though, the public perception would be very different. So, what are the factors which determine that?

Firstly, the driver has no control over his height, so it seems unfair that he is denied the fare based on a combination of (i) something he can't control; and (ii) something that shouldn't have any bearing on the quality of the service offered. He may well have had some control over the colour of his car, and society is far more willing to punish poor choices than poor luck (for example, the phrase 'bad luck' is sympathetic; the phrase 'bad choice' is critical). This combination of a choice based on weak logic and a lack of empathy wouldn't sit well with purveyors of political correctness. However, as tall people aren't overly penalised for their height (indeed, there are suggestions that tall people benefit from third-party perceptions, compared to their shorter counterparts), our decision is likely to either fall under the radar or merely be viewed as a mild curiosity.

While height seems irrelevant, some will see a driver's age as more pertinent. Based on our past observations, there may be concern that a young driver lacks experience, knowledge of the route and enjoys high speeds, which might border upon danger. Indeed, some of these characteristics come into play when determining the rate of premium for a given driver's car insurance. Conversely, an old driver may stoke concerns about reaction time, hearing, eyesight and energy levels. On the face of it, these concerns seem reasonable. These age-related characteristics and their perceived implications, if tested on a given population, may indeed be shown to have some causal relationship. Nonetheless,

while the chances of an older driver having poor hearing are greater than that of a younger driver, it doesn't mean that every older driver should be tarred with the same brush. Assigning that trait to an older driver because he is old and not because we have tested his auditory skills is called stereotyping.

By its own definition, stereotyping is an error. It is the process of drawing an oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person. To make decisions based upon stereotyping is therefore fraught with inaccuracy. It may lead to us making the wrong decision in terms of the quality of our journey home, but it will also inevitably deny someone the chance to make a living, based upon metrics that are inherently unfair. This would be an example of prejudice.

Mature societies take age-related prejudice seriously. Legislation prevents certain forms of it, particularly in the realm of employment opportunities. But while protection against age discrimination is on the rise, the obvious causal relationship discussed above means that it hasn't captured the imagination as much as gender and racial discrimination.

Measurable differences between genders and races clearly exist (medical examinations employ these known differences frequently in administering healthcare) but their impact on, say, providing a taxi journey home, would generally be thought of as zero. In the modern day, public perception

of a decision based upon race or gender would likely have extremely damaging consequences on the decision maker.

Why then, are such decisions made?

a) Convenience

We don't have the time to conduct a hearing test on every elderly taxi driver that we encounter. Instead, we might make a decision based on the knowledge that there's a greater chance of hearing ailments among the old than there is within a younger population. What we are doing is protecting ourselves from perceived danger by playing the percentages or working within the odds.

It's this process, logical but flawed, that provides us with one of the biggest social paradoxes of our time. As we look out for ourselves, developed and socially mature societies look out for everyone else. As we make a decision to improve the safety of our cab ride, society protects the livelihood and social position of the driver we shun. The more society becomes cognizant of its role here, the more it chastises us for not taking a personal responsibility in it. We are therefore faced with a personal choice.

Stereotyping and prejudice can be the initial steps towards discrimination, which in turn manifests itself in racism, sexism, and an increasing number of other 'isms' that challenge our notions of self within society and provide

minefields, each of which we would be ill-advised to approach publicly, without having a sense of where we might blow ourselves up.

b) Ignorance

If the thought processes discussed above seem familiar to you, there is cause for celebration. We all make mistakes and we all occasionally fall foul of what we know to be ethically right, given the paradoxes we're tasked to contend with. But at least you've considered them and perhaps even made an attempt to traverse them.

Undoubtedly, though, some people aren't as fortunate. Due to a lack of education, integration and misinformation, a combination of the following can prevail:

(a) actual belief that a given population wholly conforms to a given stereotype; and
(b) an unwillingness to examine the extent to which it does.

The trait in (a) is ignorance – a lack of knowledge and understanding of what brings about stereotyping, its flaws as a means of drawing conclusions and the problems that arise.

This and the traits in (b) can manifest in fear or phobia of people who are different or unfamiliar. This is how we get the terms 'homophobic' and 'xenophobic'.

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— Comedian Tom Walker as 'Jonathan Pie'

If you are a child of the 70s or 80s, you'll be aware that some of what made the icons of that era successful wouldn't get out of the starting blocks today.

Take a trio of British situation comedies, for example: *On the Buses* (1969–1973), *Mind Your Language* (1977–1979), *Porridge* (1974–1977) and frankly most others, all dabbled treacherously in racial stereotypes that would be beaten back by today's politically correct watchdogs, long before they ever got off the ground.

It could be argued that these very successful series should be applauded for including a wider-than-usual racial agenda. *Mind Your Language* certainly explored cultural differences,

while at the same time amusing us with the practical challenges that came as part of the package. It would have been, in a generic way, educational for some. But it is perhaps hard to deny that, much of the time, its stereotyping was gratuitous, with the comic effect more prominent than any role in developing integration.

In Sickness and in Health (1985–1992) and its forerunner *Till Death Do Us Part* (1965–1975) were more sophisticated productions, satirising those whose philosophy was broadly xenophobic. The more popular *Fawlty Towers* (1975 and 1979) examined the inner workings of the less-cosmopolitan Englishman in a memorable episode called *The Germans*. Again, though, the stereotyping (the lead character, Basil, clearly being alarmed by and distrusting of a black doctor) was satirical, shaming Basil for his follies, and thereby asking us to question our own. Whatever their aims, these sitcoms were a sign of the times in the UK, where they were made and set.

In the United States, by the 1990s, the civil rights movement of the 1960s had meant that many Americans might claim to be better educated on matters of racial stereotyping than those in many other parts of the developed world. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement, however, was just gaining a popular footing.

At the same time, *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), a sitcom based in New York and made in Los Angeles, was breaking ground

with a new type of comedy. Its smart writing still resonates today and its re-runs remain popular, entrenched, as it has become, in American popular culture. The main protagonists Jerry, Elaine, George and Kramer occasionally found race to be a facet of their lives. Sexuality, however, was a prominent feature. In one episode, *The Outing* (1993), Jerry and George get mistaken for a gay couple. They repeatedly and vociferously deny this, with the postscript, "not that there's anything wrong with that". This phrase also gets used through the episode by other characters, suggesting that one should always add such a proviso even when affirming what has been biologically pre-determined. Was this a dig at the fastidiousness of the politically correct country that America was becoming? Was it a hint at the characters' homophobia?

Certainly, in *The Wig Master*, Jerry gets testy at the thought that his heterosexuality is too readily assumed. In *The Subway*, Elaine matter-of-factly attends a same-sex wedding (notwithstanding the horror of a fellow commuter), yet in *The Beard*, she tries to 'convert' a gay man to heterosexuality. These are perspectives, conundrums and situations that Americans might have related to at the time, and for some, even today. They proved both thought-provoking and amusing and this was very likely the intention.

At the turn of the century, *The Office* (UK) underscored the role that this genre can play in sending up those without a filter for public consumption. David Brent (played by Ricky

Gervais) was self-absorbed and lacking in social awareness. But it was his political incorrectness, while trying to project the more fashionable, opposite persona, that will endure.

Brent was an office manager who never displayed technical skill but promoted himself as a man of the people and strived for popularity. Adopting the corporate political correctness of his era to underscore his skills was a sound strategy, in theory. In practice, it became the finest example of why we need to understand political correctness rather than just pander to it.

While we might conceivably aspire to live the somewhat self-absorbed lives of a Jerry Seinfeld or an Elaine Benes, it's unthinkable that anybody would want to be a David Brent. No matter what your political leanings or ethical views amount to; no matter how unaccepting you are of a race, sexuality or ability that is not your own; nobody wants to be thought of as unable to represent one's beliefs in such a shambolic and pitiful way.

Satire is by its very nature smart and was brilliantly executed long before the advent of television's attempt to make us laugh. But the sitcom runs parallel to the road we often find ourselves on, one which navigates an emerging world of sometimes extreme and even wayward political correctness. Pertinently, this often happens when we, in our non-sitcom real lives, attempt to make people laugh.

We should probably look upon an overly PC world without too much fervour. It is, after all, society's attempt to do the right thing, to be inclusive, to create equality for anyone hindered in creating it for themselves. But it is an education, as arduous and full of pitfalls as any university curriculum. It is also an examination, which at one time or another, we have probably all failed. It is this failure that provides some of the most enticing fodder for news stories. This is especially so in the modern day, when social media allows news consumers to become reporters, on Twitter and in the comments sections of online news. It also gives loose-tongued celebrities and yet-to-be-infamous people a tool to broadcast their thoughts without the buffer of an editor, producer or public relations specialist.

It is hard to think of anyone who has ridden a storm of alleged political incorrectness and come out the other side with such accomplishment as Donald Trump, president of the United States of America. His now infamous "grab them by the pussy" remark would likely have ruined the career of someone whose fame and success were far less aligned to political correctness than a presidential candidate. The media-consuming public has a remarkable ability to forgive transgressions, particularly if the transgressor shows both ownership of the error in judgement and contrition. In Trump's case, forgiveness apparently came from one simple phrase. Whether it was contrived through a deep-thinking

board of public relations expertise or simply in the moment by the experienced public speaker that Trump surely is, the phrase 'locker room talk' seems now to have been fuelled by genius. It was concise and laced with regret. But most importantly, it struck a chord with everyone, despite the extreme disrespect towards women that his earlier comments had incorporated. If indeed the American public had, at one time or another, failed a PC examination, then the horror of having their transgression catapulted into the public domain was something to which it could relate. 'Locker room talk' was a phrase so blissfully simple that it tapped into the minds of millions. Whether they had sympathy or not, whether they forgave him or not and whether they would ever have uttered the offending phrase themselves, the electorate could at least empathise. In this instance, Trump was not running, defending himself or sidestepping, he had been caught. Another phrase, 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone', or something similar, must have passed through the minds of millions.

One month later, the remark that would have ended or severely compromised the career of a sportsman, civil servant or sitcom actor, sat on the shelf of America's conscience, as Trump edged out Hillary Clinton to become 'leader of the free world'.

In the chapters that follow, we'll look more deeply at this anti-PC monster, lying dormant inside some, raging to be

heard in others. We'll examine how it got there; why we need to tame it; what the grey areas are; and how to walk the PC line without stepping on a minefield.

The aim here isn't to brainwash the reader. Mind control is as unpleasant as any of the prejudices discussed in this book. What we can do is help provide the filter that we need to say and do the right thing, so as not to offend others. That aim is laudable in itself. But considering the subject matter here, it will also protect you from the severe recrimination that our vast yet intimately connected world can generate. In doing that, it will also protect your business and your employer, whose well-being your livelihood no doubt depends on. Whenever you converse with a third party, no matter how well you think you know them and how easy your relationship is, the power to offend is still enormous.

As a general guide in matters of social cohesion, remember, it's about more than just you.

- Be keenly aware of what's around you.
- There is no normal and you certainly aren't it.
- You are you and everyone else is different.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

Chapter 1

WHY ARE WE POLITICALLY INCORRECT?

"If you ever find yourself the victim of other people's bitterness, smallness or insecurity; remember, things could be worse. You could be them."

— Anonymous

We are all politically incorrect some of the time and it's quite understandable. Some are less inclined to voice their inappropriate thoughts than others, some are less inclined to think them. But as we roam around the planet, we observe; we learn to protect ourselves from situations we would rather avoid. They might be as dangerous as a physical attack or as trivial as a boring conversation. Every day we pick up lessons on how to sidestep these situations, while also learning how to improve our quality of life. The more we learn, the better equipped we are to make the right decisions, for example:

Should I touch that plant?
Should I sit next to that person?

Should I drink that tea?
Should I walk along that road at night?
Should I buy a laptop of that brand?

Being informed unquestionably helps us to make the right decisions, but what we need to be aware of, in the context of political correctness, is that our decisions often impact others.

Let's say that two people I know, Tommy and Glenn, are at the same party and I'm in a rush to get home. I have the option to ask them for advice. From past experience, I know that Glenn is very familiar with the subway system. He's also very friendly and knows exactly where I live. Tommy on the other hand, while friendly, is a heavy smoker and I don't like the smell of cigarettes. He's also unfamiliar with the transport system, having just moved here from another city. I also know that when you engage him in conversation, he speaks at great length and it's very difficult to draw things to a close. Armed with this information, I can make an informed decision about whom to ask for help, and it's very likely to be Glenn.

What happens if Tommy's and Glenn's livelihood depends upon my decision? Let's say they are Uber drivers and therefore they either will or will not earn money based on my selection. Again, in the absence of other knowledge, I would probably choose Glenn. His car is less likely to smell of cigarettes and he'll have a better understanding of the

optimal route to get me home. We make commercial, social and business decisions based on factors like these all of the time. Society doesn't chastise us for doing so; it accepts that we must make the best choices we can for ourselves, based on the specific knowledge that we have.

Now let's assume that I know nothing about either person; they drive taxis and are both waiting for passengers as I leave the party. All other things being equal, there is just as much chance that I'd take Tommy's taxi as Glenn's. If I do, however, I probably won't enjoy the air quality, might have a longer (and therefore more expensive) ride home and will probably get my ear chewed off in the process.

To avoid picking the less satisfying of the two options, our instinct would be to draw upon general lessons from the past. To do this, we will first need to differentiate one option from the other. Regardless of whether it helps our decision, let's consider first how we might do this. Ten such ways, split into three groups, might be:

(a)
The taxi company

(b)
The brand of the car
The colour of the car
The age of the car

The size of the car
The cleanliness of the car

(c)
The height of the driver
The age of the driver
The race of the driver
The gender of the driver

Let's consider these, category by category.

Category (a) – The Company

Our choice here is based upon numerous aspects. It's reasonable to assume that our perception of each taxi company is determined by a combination of our own experience, that of our friends and the marketing campaign that each company has developed. These may or may not provide a reliable indication of the best service. But given the information at hand, we can at least make a choice based on reasonable grounds. In a free market, we have the right to make that consumer choice. If we were to speak publicly about how we arrived at our decision, we would be on pretty safe ground.

Category (b) – The Car

The brand of the car leads to similar thought processes and results to the consideration of the taxi company as outlined in (a) above.

The colour of the car is unlikely to make any difference to the quality of our journey. To use this as a basis for choice would be considered frivolous, but frankly something we might well do, albeit perhaps subconsciously. If we spoke publicly about this decision, it's hard to see how anyone would be overly concerned, although there might be a few inquisitively raised eyebrows.

Unlike the colour, the age of the car might reasonably have a material impact on our journey. The notion that a newer car will provide a smoother, safer and more reliable ride is an entirely plausible one. Supporting this notion publicly, would likely be met with agreement.

The size of the car will logically determine the amount of room in the back seat and this should impact the level of comfort. Again, the public perception of our choice is likely to be acceptance. A choice based upon cleanliness would be received in a comparable way.

Category (c) – The Driver

The height of the driver would generally be thought of as having no effect on the quality of our journey. In this regard, it might fall into the same basket as the colour of the car. Importantly, though, the public perception would be very different. So, what are the factors which determine that?

Firstly, the driver has no control over his height, so it seems unfair that he is denied the fare based on a combination of (i) something he can't control; and (ii) something that shouldn't have any bearing on the quality of the service offered. He may well have had some control over the colour of his car, and society is far more willing to punish poor choices than poor luck (for example, the phrase 'bad luck' is sympathetic; the phrase 'bad choice' is critical). This combination of a choice based on weak logic and a lack of empathy wouldn't sit well with purveyors of political correctness. However, as tall people aren't overly penalised for their height (indeed, there are suggestions that tall people benefit from third-party perceptions, compared to their shorter counterparts), our decision is likely to either fall under the radar or merely be viewed as a mild curiosity.

While height seems irrelevant, some will see a driver's age as more pertinent. Based on our past observations, there may be concern that a young driver lacks experience, knowledge of the route and enjoys high speeds, which might border upon danger. Indeed, some of these characteristics come into play when determining the rate of premium for a given driver's car insurance. Conversely, an old driver may stoke concerns about reaction time, hearing, eyesight and energy levels. On the face of it, these concerns seem reasonable. These age-related characteristics and their perceived implications, if tested on a given population, may indeed be shown to have some causal relationship. Nonetheless,

while the chances of an older driver having poor hearing are greater than that of a younger driver, it doesn't mean that every older driver should be tarred with the same brush. Assigning that trait to an older driver because he is old and not because we have tested his auditory skills is called stereotyping.

By its own definition, stereotyping is an error. It is the process of drawing an oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person. To make decisions based upon stereotyping is therefore fraught with inaccuracy. It may lead to us making the wrong decision in terms of the quality of our journey home, but it will also inevitably deny someone the chance to make a living, based upon metrics that are inherently unfair. This would be an example of prejudice.

Mature societies take age-related prejudice seriously. Legislation prevents certain forms of it, particularly in the realm of employment opportunities. But while protection against age discrimination is on the rise, the obvious causal relationship discussed above means that it hasn't captured the imagination as much as gender and racial discrimination.

Measurable differences between genders and races clearly exist (medical examinations employ these known differences frequently in administering healthcare) but their impact on, say, providing a taxi journey home, would generally be thought of as zero. In the modern day, public perception

of a decision based upon race or gender would likely have extremely damaging consequences on the decision maker.

Why then, are such decisions made?

a) Convenience

We don't have the time to conduct a hearing test on every elderly taxi driver that we encounter. Instead, we might make a decision based on the knowledge that there's a greater chance of hearing ailments among the old than there is within a younger population. What we are doing is protecting ourselves from perceived danger by playing the percentages or working within the odds.

It's this process, logical but flawed, that provides us with one of the biggest social paradoxes of our time. As we look out for ourselves, developed and socially mature societies look out for everyone else. As we make a decision to improve the safety of our cab ride, society protects the livelihood and social position of the driver we shun. The more society becomes cognizant of its role here, the more it chastises us for not taking a personal responsibility in it. We are therefore faced with a personal choice.

Stereotyping and prejudice can be the initial steps towards discrimination, which in turn manifests itself in racism, sexism, and an increasing number of other 'isms' that challenge our notions of self within society and provide

minefields, each of which we would be ill-advised to approach publicly, without having a sense of where we might blow ourselves up.

b) Ignorance

If the thought processes discussed above seem familiar to you, there is cause for celebration. We all make mistakes and we all occasionally fall foul of what we know to be ethically right, given the paradoxes we're tasked to contend with. But at least you've considered them and perhaps even made an attempt to traverse them.

Undoubtedly, though, some people aren't as fortunate. Due to a lack of education, integration and misinformation, a combination of the following can prevail:

(a) actual belief that a given population wholly conforms to a given stereotype; and
(b) an unwillingness to examine the extent to which it does.

The trait in (a) is ignorance – a lack of knowledge and understanding of what brings about stereotyping, its flaws as a means of drawing conclusions and the problems that arise.

This and the traits in (b) can manifest in fear or phobia of people who are different or unfamiliar. This is how we get the terms 'homophobic' and 'xenophobic'.