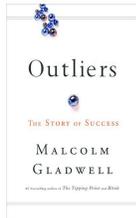


Norming the Outliers

A review of



Outliers: The Story of Success

Author: Malcolm Gladwell

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The great American dream is that people can rise from obscurity to greatness with hard work and talent. *Outliers* is about the people who rose from rags to riches, the people who supposedly exemplify the American dream. According to Malcolm Gladwell's newest book, the American dream is more of a myth. Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Gladwell depicts a more complicated theory in *Outliers*. Gladwell defines achievement as a mix preparation and talent.

Outliers is a very different book than Gladwell's last book, *Blink*. Both books are very readable, and should be easy to understand for a general audience. *Blink* focuses on scientific studies and data, but dresses them in interesting stories to make them clear to a non-scientific audience. In contrast, *Outliers* is about the case study. The book follows the stories of unusual individuals, small populations that make it hard to get a significant sample for scientific study. This is logical because the very nature of an outlier makes it hard to run any statistical analysis on them. How does one measure the best of the population and get a good sample?

Lewis Terman found the brightest students of the California schools and followed them throughout their lives. Terman was convinced that with the amount of intelligence these children possessed, they would be the new artists, scientists, and innovators of their time. Most of these children were successful, but not as successful as Terman thought they would be. *Outliers* explains why being at the very top of the intelligence chart is not a guarantee of great success. Gladwell hypothesizes that intelligence has a threshold of success. One does not need to be the most intelligent in the field, just intelligent enough to succeed. This is similar to the study of thresholds in sensation. One does not need to have the best senses to detect the stimuli, just good enough to detect the stimuli.

Outliers argues that you do not have to be the best to be the most successful, you only have to be in the right

place at the right time and be willing to work hard. Ray Kurzweil voices a similar opinion in his book *The Singularity is Near* (2005). Kurzweil believes that a successful technology is not only innovative and useful, it comes at just the time people are willing to accept it. Chance may help, like high school kids who have a chance to practice computer programming just in time for the computer revolution. The top programmers of the 1970s were not the best innate programmers. They did not naturally rise to the top. Rather, they found a rare opportunity and they took advantage of it. These people had the money to go to a school with a computer and had the time to practice programming. It took them about 10,000 hours to master programming, and Gladwell found that most people at the top of their field had spent at least 10,000 hours practicing. This led Gladwell to create the "10,000 hour rule" which simply states that a person must spend at least 10,000 hours of practice to master a skill. The programmers were smart, but more importantly; they had the opportunities to become an expert. They were good at writing computer programs, but more importantly, they had the time to master it just before it became a lucrative career. Again, we see that there was a threshold for intelligence; but more important was the culture and opportunities of the individual.

Gladwell discussed the effects of cohorts on success. He combs through the birth dates of successful people and finds that a great portion of them are born around the same time. This means different month of the year for athletes, providing a few months of development early on. Successful businesspersons in new fields are usually born in the same five-year span. They have to be old enough to have practiced in their field when the change occurs, but not so old that they are part of the established system.

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Others born a few years outside this critical period may be as skilled as or more skilled than the great successes, but they missed that small window of time that is the difference between a success and a great success.

Gladwell seems to argue that a cultural learned helplessness exists. People from high socio-economic status families tend to ask more questions and have less reverence for authority. A person from this type of background is more likely to ask for help and fight for opportunity. In contrast, a person from a low socio-economic family is more likely to accept what authority figures say and ask fewer questions. This is a classic demonstration of learned helplessness (Seligman & Maier, 1967). The two groups are not different in intelligence or talent; they have just learned different lessons about how to deal with authority. The worldview of a wealthy culture is more likely to produce successful people. The myth of the wealthy culture is that these people have risen to the top because they are innately the best, but there are at least a few examples of very talented individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who never attain the success of those who came from a privileged background.

A person does not need to have genetic, personal, and social superiority to succeed. One of the stories in *Outliers* is about a genius who tried to poison one of his teachers and later went on to work with some of the best scientists in the world. He had a major disadvantage in his personal history. Because he had exceptional genetics and the culture to convince others he was not a threat, he succeeded. Another genius dropped out of college shortly after the first term started because the school seemed unwilling to accommodate him.

Success is not determined solely on how much one practices or the lucky chances that allowed them to succeed. Success is also affected by how long of a break a person takes between practice sessions. Memory research indicates that learning has a very fast decay rate. This decay rate decreases with each relearning. Gladwell uses the example of schoolchildren in the United States and China to exemplify this. Children in the United States have a long summer break when compared to children from other countries. Children in the United States forget what they learned over this break, this effect decreases if they have a stimulating summer. Children from China do not have a long summer break and they have less of a forgetting curve between semesters. Gladwell believes that the reason Chinese children are better at school than United States children is not because of worse school systems or poor teaching, but rather a simple practice effect.

Outliers hypothesizes that success is determined in part by biological factors, part social factors, and part personal factors. Gladwell puts the least emphasis on biological factors. Without the innate intelligence and skill sets, successful people could not accomplish what

they have. Without opportunities and cultural background, successful people may not have considered doing what they do. Without their personal history and experiences, their skills would be too underdeveloped to be considered great. The story of success actually is a good example of the biopsychosocial model (Engle, 1977). An interaction of at least two of the three worlds is what it takes to make a true success story.

References

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