Outliers Summary

By Malcolm Gladwell

Have you ever marveled at the world's best and brightest, and wondered how they became so successful? If you have, then this is the book for you.

Outliers is a story about success, but with a twist. It's not the typical tale of the "self-made" person, but rather, a more in-depth, intellectual pursuit of many of the hidden factors and idiosyncrasies that contribute to a person's high-level success.

An "outlier" is someone who falls on the outer edge of what's statistically plausible when it comes to our understanding of success. Bill Gates, the Beatles, and Robert Oppenheimer are all considered outliers. Bill Gates is a computer genius who co-founded Microsoft; the Beatles are among the most successful musical acts in history. Robert Oppenheimer is a world-famous theoretical physicist. The problem is that we tend to focus too much on what successful people are like, and pay too little attention to where they come from.

We'll briefly look at the hidden factors beyond our control, and how they play a vital role in the story behind success, a lot more so than we may think. Gladwell also debunks the myth that success is "self-made." He reveals how factors such as cultural background, family, birth dates, and other idiosyncratic experiences during one's upbringing, all weigh in on the chance of achieving outlier success status in today's world.

The Problem With Buying Into the Self-Made

Success Story

As a society, we tend to buy into the story of the self-made person, and the idea that natural talent, passion and hard work, lead to ultimate success.

Take the example of Jeb Bush, who ran for the governorship of Florida. He referred to himself as a "self-made man." His campaign strategy appealed to the developed world's idea, that we can determine our fate. What wasn't publicized, was that within his immediate family, were two American Presidents, a wealthy Wall Street banker, and a United States senator. Beyond ability and hard work, many underlying factors influence a person's success, and most of them are beyond our control. The bottom line is that, success is rarely the result of the actions of an individual alone. Let's take a brief look at some of the external factors, that weigh in on what helps someone achieve the extraordinary.

The Month We're Born In, Matters

Psychologist Roger Barnsley, looked at young professional Canadian ice hockey players, and noted the following: a disproportionate number of players are born in the earlier months of the year, specifically in January, February, and March.

What does this have to do with their chance of success? Go back to their school years, and this correlation starts to make more sense. Older kids born earlier in the year, seem to have an advantage over kids born later on in the same year. Twelve months can account for a lot of differences in the physical maturity of boys. An older kid might appear more mature in physical appearance, which may appeal to a coach looking for strong

boys for the hockey team. The boys who are chosen for the team then get the most attention, practice, and games, opportunities that younger boys might not get, and which make all the difference. It provides the slightly older boy with a better shot at becoming an NBA player, given all the additional hours of games, practice, and overall experience.

This phenomenon is called accumulative advantage, and it doesn't just show up in professional sports rosters, but also in school test scores. Teachers tend to associate greater maturity with ability. For example, a study looking at 4th-grade test scores, showed that older kids born in January, did better on test scores than the younger kids born in December of the same year. So success largely depends on opportunities that come to us early in life. Children who receive early opportunities for success, create a self-fulfilling prophecy, and those who receive early opportunities for success, benefit from an accumulative advantage.

The Year We're Born In, Plus Historical Events, Can Also Determine Success

The right time to have been born, to make it big in high-tech was the mid-50s. Some of the most successful computer programmers were born in this era. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and co-founder of Sun-Microsystems Bill Joy, were born between 1954 and 1956. Hitting this sweet-spot ensured they were an ideal age to be geared for the 1975 personal computer revolution. They were born late enough to have access to computers and hone their tech skills, but early enough to be among the first to market their ideas. Had they been a little older, they would have been more established in their lives and careers, and less likely to take huge career risks.

So far, we've looked at what birth dates have to do with our shot at success in certain areas. But there's another opportunistic factor to consider, and that's the chance to practice and master our craft.

Ever Heard of the 10,000 Rule?

Anders Ericsson's research on expertise, delves into how long we have to work at something, before becoming really good. The answer is consistent across several fields—we need to have practiced, or "apprenticed," for at least 10 thousand hours, before we reach mastery. Although this number isn't a hard and fast rule, it's a useful statistic to symbolize that greatness requires enormous time input.

Bill Gates started practicing his computer skills at the age of 13. He spent more than 10 thousand hours refining the art of computer programming, before he started Microsoft. Take the Beatles as another example. Before the Beatles became a global phenomenon, they were invited to play at a strip club in Germany. During this time, they played seven days a week, and this helped them build up over ten thousand hours of playing

together, and mastering their music. Beatles' biographer Philip Norman, said, 'by the time they returned to England from Hamburg, Germany, they sounded like no one else. It was the making of them.' The 10 thousand hour rule, dispels the myth of overnight success. The problem is that it's not just a matter of putting in the hours— it takes "deliberate practice," with the right feedback and support.

When it Comes to Practice, it's Not Just About Quantity, it's Also About Quality

When we're intensely focused, goal-driven, and receive continuous feedback and support, that's when the quality of our practice improves. However, not all of us are afforded the distinct chances, to put in hours of deliberate practice. And by distinct chances, this means, the opportunity to start practicing from an early age, as well as having access to the right environment and support structures. Those who get a head start at putting in 10 thousand hours of deliberate practice, have an even greater shot at success. For example, Mozart started composing music under his father's watchful eye, from the young age of five.

In addition to supportive parents, financial backing provides access to exceptional institutions and programs, that offer the chance to put in hours of deliberate practice. Bill Gates' schooling and university, helped entrench his skills and passion for technology. He came from an affluent family, and he had the opportunity to attend an elite private school, with access to computers. Then, he had the chance to go to the University of Michigan, which had a world-renowned computer science center, and this further inspired him to hone his craft.

You might think that innate genius must play a crucial role in all this talk

on success? However, genius might not play as much of a role as we like to think.

When it comes to genius, there's something known as the "threshold effect." IQ can be a useful metric for predicting success, but only up until an IQ of about 120. After a threshold of 130, other factors such as upbringing, and different ways of thinking, become more significant. It's worth looking at two people with exceptional intelligence, Christopher Langan and Robert Oppenheimer, who both ended up with vastly different fortunes.

Langan had an IQ of 195. To put this into perspective, Einstein's was 150. But Langan didn't reach a high level of success relative to Oppenheimer. Factors such as upbringing, may have put Langan at a disadvantage. Langan's genius was no guarantee of success, and other factors, like his childhood and background, made it difficult for him to take advantage of his exceptional intellectual gifts. In contrast, Robert Oppenheimer's upbringing was crucial to his success. Oppenheimer grew up in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Manhattan. His father, a successful businessman, was also hugely supportive, and Oppenheimer was able to attend an elite school. This example highlights that genius isn't the most important, or even the only important factor, in determining a person's success.

The argument is that, standard IQ tests don't actually determine whether or not someone will become successful. For one thing, Gladwell says, 'practical intelligence isn't accurately determined by IQ tests, yet it's a trait shared by outliers.' Furthermore, Robert Sternberg, a psychologist, explains that practical intelligence includes, 'knowing what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect.' Gladwell says that this is 'knowledge that helps you read

situations correctly, to get what you want.' So practical intelligence isn't something that we inherit, it's a trait that we learn.

The Role of Parenting in Developing Practical Intelligence

Practical intelligence is also known as social-emotional intelligence, or so-called street smarts. Kids who develop this trait, and learn to advocate for themselves, tend to be more successful than those kids who lack assertiveness and struggle in social situations.

For example, a boy's mom asks him to think of a list of questions en route to the doctor. During the appointment, the boy asks questions freely and confidently, despite his young age. As a result, he becomes more comfortable expressing himself to adults from this young age, and learns how to communicate to get what he wants out of a situation.

Our parents' lessons— explicit or implicit— can either improve or hinder our chance at success. What's more, wealth has a role to play. Sociologist Annette Lareau looked at parenting styles according to class, rather than race or culture. She found that wealthier families took a more active role in their child's education and development. They tended to cram their child's free time with enriching activities. This approach is called "concerted cultivation." Children learn to adapt to different situations and experiences, by benefitting from teamwork activities, and extramural sports or cultural events. In contrast, Lareau observed that working-class parents tended to be more hands-off. They feel equally responsible and care for their children, but leave them to develop naturally. These parents orchestrated playtime less. They also tended to "command" rather than "explain," and didn't expect their children to

express opinions around adults. Their children, as a result, tended to be more passive around authority figures. This study shows, that wealthier parents tend to instill in their children, a feeling of entitlement and practical intelligence, more often than lower-class parents do. This means children from more affluent families, tend to have higher self-esteem, and assert themselves more, giving them the extra edge to become outliers.

Finally, Cultural Legacies Can Be a Crucial Factor in Success

Here's a fun fact from the book: 'A four-year-old Chinese child can usually count to forty, whereas a four-year-old English child can typically only count to fifteen.' There's truth to the stereotype that Asians are good at math, because research backs this. On international comparison tests, students from Asian countries score in the top percentile.

However, the reasons for this go deeper than genetics, and there are two angles to the argument. The first angle is that the Asian cultural legacy of language and rice farming, play roles in their numerical aptitude. The second is that their descendants are rice farmers. This might sound odd, but let's go through it.

First, from a language standpoint, Chinese numbers take less time to pronounce. This difference makes mental arithmetic much easier for Chinese speakers, than for English speakers. For example, English speakers say eleven, instead of one-teen, which would be in keeping with the pattern of other teen numbers, such as fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. In contrast, the Chinese twelve, is said literally as ten two. The Asian number system is more intuitive and easier to learn and

understand. Therefore, Asian children learn to do math faster than English speaking children.

Math requires diligence, and research has shown that students in Western countries, give up on math problems far quicker than students in Eastern countries. So in addition to the legacy of language, this point can be viewed through a socio-cultural lens. People with ancestors who worked in rice paddies, tend to inherit a work ethic that's particularly helpful when learning to persevere through math. Farming rice is much harder than farming Western crops. Rice farmers work approximately 3000 hours a year. That's 60 hours per week. It takes extreme diligence to be a rice farmer. This legacy gives children with a southern Chinese heritage, an advantage at math, as it's a work ethic characterized by rigorous focus and discipline. And when it comes to maths, this kind of diligence is key.

So there are some deeper insights when it comes to the story behind success. One of the keys to success, is that it happens when opportunities align with our talents. Gladwell uses this metaphor to explain: 'The tallest tree (the "outlier") isn't necessarily the product of the hardiest seed. The seed became the tallest tree because it fell upon fertile soil, was exposed to plentiful sunlight and water, and wasn't chopped down or choked by weeds. The seed's environment gave it the many opportunities it needed to grow into a tall tree.'

We Should Build Systems that Give People the Time and Opportunity to Learn

Building systems to enable people with varying IQs, from different cultural backgrounds, is paramount. The South Bronx's Knowledge is

Power Program, or KIPP Academy, is one such example. It's a middle school open to students from this low-income area. There are no exams or admission requirements, and most students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite this, KIPP manages to get 84% of its pupils to perform at, or above, their grade level in math, by the time they finish eighth grade.

So how do they do this? Well, students are given supportive conditions for learning, as well as the opportunity to attend school for longer periods of time, both over the course of a day, and over the course of the school year.

A five-year study, by Karl Alexander of Johns Hopkins University, demonstrated that summer holidays have a detrimental effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Paradoxically, disadvantaged students progress more during the school year, than students from the highest socioeconomic group. Continuing school into the summer break, enables students from lower-income families, to continue to learn, rather than fall behind their wealthier peers. They also learn in a relaxed atmosphere; they're encouraged to ask questions and struggle through problems at their own pace, making for meaningful learning.

In Conclusion

We may think outliers possess some mysterious innate ability to rise to the top of their fields. However, as we can see, other factors such as birthdates, families, and culture can significantly affect success. If we recognize this, we can start trying to level the playing field, and create more opportunities for people to succeed. Gladwell asserts that 'we are so caught in the myths of the best and the brightest, and the self-made, that we think outliers spring naturally from the earth. We look at the young Bill Gates, and marvel that our world allowed that thirteen-year-old

to become a fabulously successful entrepreneur. But that's the wrong lesson. Our world only allowed one thirteen-year-old, unlimited access to a time-sharing terminal in 1968. If a million teenagers had been given the same opportunity, how many more Microsofts would we have today?'