



2016

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by Howard Newell

Introduction

Malcolm Gladwell is a *New York Times* staff writer who has written several books and articles challenging conventional wisdom. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) examines how people become successful, and challenges the readers to rethink the stereotype that hard work and brains lead to success. Gladwell uses anecdotes, personal interviews, and studies to challenge the notion that success is derived solely from an individual's merits, and argues that what leads to success is the opportunities, experiences, and culture a person has or is exposed to. He breaks the book up into two sections with the first section, "Opportunity," focusing on opportunities and environments that people had in order to become successful, and the second section, "Legacy," uncovering how culture can have long-lasting implications for a particular group's success. While Gladwell is able to provide plenty of evidence to bolster his argument in the first section regarding a person's opportunities leading to success, he struggles in the second section to succinctly connect the anecdotes and studies to successful outcomes, and oftentimes requires the reader to make a leap of faith to reach the conclusion that he provides.

Evaluation/Analysis

In Gladwell's first section, "Opportunity," he states that success is comprised of a combination of experience, opportunities, and a certain degree of intelligence. But how much experience is required in order to become successful? Gladwell answers this by pointing to a study conducted by K. Anders Ericsson at Berlin's Academy of Music

(Ericsson, 2014) that found what separated expert musicians from merely good musicians was that the experts had logged around 10,000 hours of practice, whereas the merely good musicians had logged between 4,000 to 6,000 hours. Neurologist Daniel Levitin echoes similar sentiments, saying that "the emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of...being a world-class expert-in anything" (Gladwell, 2008, p. 40). Gladwell further illustrates his point by chronicling several notable people's rise to success, such as Bill Gates and The Beatles, and states they had the opportunity and a conducive environment available for them to achieve the critical 10,000-hour mark in their respective fields to become successful.

Gladwell then segues into his chapter on intelligence, arguing that beyond a certain threshold, simply having a high IQ is not a guarantee of success. Rather, you simply have to be smart enough in order to be successful. He refers to a study conducted by Richard Lempert at the University of Michigan (Lempert, Chambers, & Adams, 2000) who compared minority law students with lower academic scores to non-minority law students with higher academic scores to see if academic ability translated into real-world success. As Lempert discovered, "We found that they were doing every bit as well. There was no place we saw any serious discrepancy" (Gladwell, 2008, p. 85).

At the end of the first section, Gladwell has provided a compelling argument with supporting evidence to suggest that highly successful people

are a product of their experience, environment, and a certain amount of intelligence, and not just their individual personalities or merits. In the next section on legacy, Gladwell opens with a narrative of a study that provides the reader with the framework that a cultural legacy, even originating from several hundred years ago, can shape and impact a person's success.

Gladwell begins delving into power-distance relationships in the context of airline pilots and crew. Power-distance is typically defined as a culture's acceptance of how power is distributed among relationships between leaders and subordinates. Low power-distance cultures are accepting of less hierarchical relationships, and high power-distance cultures typically accept a more hierarchical relationship. Gladwell discusses a Columbian airline crash that was caused by hierarchical command structure between the pilot and his aircrew, with the crew uncomfortable at explicitly expressing concern over the pilot's decisions, and writes how Korean Airlines, with a similar high power-distance culture, was able to improve its dismal crash record by retraining the airline crew to adopt a more Western, low power-distance environment in the cockpit. Unlike the first section's chapters' findings that could be applied to a variety of settings, the absence of studies examining power culture or other anecdotal evidence from different work environments is glaring. Gladwell's polished prose and logic in the previous chapters is now reduced to an anemic, vague statement of "when we understand how much culture and history and the world outside of the individual matter to professional success...we have a way to make successes out of the unsuccessful" (Gladwell, 2008, p. 220).

What does this really mean? Surely there are successful international corporations with employees in different countries who encounter

cultural differences that could impede success. Does this mean that these corporations have had to adopt a low power-distance culture in order to achieve success, like the airlines he provides as examples? Gladwell simply doesn't explain the validity of his assertion, leaving the reader to assume that his assertion may be only valid in airlines or other similar, fast-paced work environments.

In the next chapter, Gladwell postulates the stereotype of Asians being good at math could have a basis in their culture of year-round, labor-intensive rice farming. He uses proverbs and historical anecdotes to argue that the concept of constant, hard work has embedded itself into most Asian cultures and that this translates into these countries being noticeably better in mathematics, because they're more willing to work harder on problems than their Western counterparts. But this is a hard sell; using hand-picked proverbs and different agricultural methods as evidence that this is the cause of a country's success in math seems like an extreme extrapolation, and seems jarring compared to the first section's well-researched chapters. Instead, the reader is left to ponder the absence of studies in this chapter, and to question whether Gladwell is providing a gross oversimplification of why Asian countries perform better in math than Western countries.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Gladwell provides a thoughtful examination of success, and effectively argues that what matters most to becoming successful is a person's experience and opportunities. His concept that culture contributes to success unfortunately lacks sufficient evidence and appears to be based solely on personal observation and opinion. However, the idea itself is intriguing and could prompt future research examining this particular relationship to help us better understand how culture could have an impact in

obtaining success, and further our knowledge on how to become successful.

References

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