

OUTLIERS: THE STORY OF SUCCESS¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR DANISHA L. MORRIS^{*}

*To build a better world we need to replace the patchwork of lucky breaks and arbitrary advantages that today determine success . . . with a society that provides opportunities for all.*²

I. Introduction

An outlier is defined as “something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body.”³ In this book, the term outlier is used to describe men and women who have managed extraordinary successes,⁴ men like Bill Joy, who has been called “one of the most influential people in the modern history of computing.”⁵ Contrary to popular belief, outliers don’t reach astronomical success simply because they are somehow better, smarter, more determined, or work harder than most. The true secret to extraordinary success, as successfully illustrated in *Outliers*, is, rather, that these individuals are “invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot.”⁶

Using case studies, interviews, and his own family history, Malcolm Gladwell examines these “hidden advantages”—cultural legacies, parentage, and when and where a person is born—and illustrates how they contributed to the success achieved by individuals chronicled in the book. In so doing, Gladwell succeeds where so many other authors who write on success have failed: He cleverly avoids coming across as another salesman, peddling the usual lists of “effective habits” and the promise of “self-help”⁷ while simultaneously rejecting the concept of

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¹ MALCOLM GLADWELL, *OUTLIERS: THE STORY OF SUCCESS* (2008).

² *Id.* at 268.

³ *Id.* at 3.

⁴ *Id.* at 17.

⁵ *Id.* at 36–37.

⁶ *Id.* at 19.

⁷ See, e.g., STEPHEN R. COVEY, *THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE*, PHEN (1989).

“self-made men”⁸ that has captured the American imagination.⁹ Instead, Gladwell uses each of the subjects in *Outliers* to challenge the traditional definition of success, asserting:

People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to our parentage and patronage. . . . The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It's not enough to ask what successful people are like, in other words. It is only by asking where they are *from* that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't.¹⁰

In closing, Gladwell leaves the reader with an interesting thought: Success is “grounded in a web of advantages and inheritances, some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all.”¹¹

II. The Author

Malcolm Gladwell, himself, is somewhat of an outlier, although he does not agree.¹² He was born in England, the son of a Jamaican, psychotherapist mother and an English, mathematics professor father.¹³ Now the author of three New York Times best-sellers¹⁴ and regarded as

⁸ See Frederick Douglass, Address at the Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Self-Made Men (Oct. 17, 1859) (stating that the most successful of men are self-made and concluding that inheritances of convenience are, most often, hindrances to achievement).

⁹ See, e.g., JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS, THE EPIC OF AMERICA (1931) (describing the American dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement”); see also Jonas Clark, *In Search of the American Dream*, THE ATLANTIC (May 1, 2007), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/05/in-search-of-the-american-dream/5921/#>.

¹⁰ GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 19.

¹¹ *Id.* at 285.

¹² Jason Zengerle, *Geek Pop Star*, N.Y. MAG., Nov. 9, 2008, available at <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/52014/>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See generally *Biography*, GLADWELL.COM, <http://www.gladwell.com/bio.html> (last visited Sept. 4, 2009).

one of the most influential writers in business thought,¹⁵ his personal journey to success is as much a testament to the theory underlying *Outliers* as the case studies he uses.

Gladwell did not set out to become a great writer. He studied history at the University of Toronto and ultimately wanted to work in advertising.¹⁶ After graduating, however, Gladwell found himself the victim (or beneficiary) of “demographic luck”¹⁷—he could not find a job in advertising, so he accepted a job as a writer for the *American Spectator*.¹⁸ The job at the *American Spectator* ultimately led to a position at the *Washington Post*, where Gladwell honed his skills as a business and science reporter and as chief of the New York bureau. Gladwell credits his time at the *Washington Post* with preparing him for his next job, a writer for the *New Yorker*. Gladwell believes the position at the *New Yorker* ultimately gave him his greatest opportunities.¹⁹

Gladwell’s inability to find a job in advertising, the kind of “lucky break”²⁰ Gladwell refers to in *Outliers*, paved the way for Gladwell’s success as a writer and public speaker. Because his books challenge organizations to think critically about social change in a way that sheds light on organizational success, they are “on the recommended reading list at many companies and business schools,” and he “has spoken at West Point and the National Institutes of Health, among many other institutions,” including the World Business Forum.²¹

Gladwell is obviously an intelligent and talented writer. However, the world may never have known his talent had he not been born into the right family at the right time.²² Gladwell’s own success is a result of opportunity; he was introduced to the study of people by his

¹⁵ See, e.g., Danielle Sacks, *The Accidental Guru*, FAST CO. MAG. (Dec. 19, 2007), available at <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/90/gladwell.html?page=0%2C0>.

¹⁶ Zengerle, *supra* note 12.

¹⁷ See GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 129–39.

¹⁸ Sacks, *supra* note 12.

¹⁹ Zengerle, *supra* note 12.

²⁰ GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 56, 268.

²¹ Rachel Donadio, *The Gladwell Effect*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 5, 2006, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/books/review/05donadio.html?pagewanted=all>.

²² See, e.g., Robert Colvile, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, DAILY TELEGRAPH (London), Dec. 13, 2008, at 23.

psychotherapist-mother, a writer in her own right,²³ and he could not get a job in advertising in 1968. Now, he is arguably, “the most successful journalist on the planet.”²⁴

III. Analysis

Outliers is an insightful compilation of stories about individuals who, by all accounts, are the leaders of their respective fields.²⁵ Although Gladwell personally conducted some of the interviews in the book, much of the information that forms the basis for his theory derives from other sources.²⁶ The book itself is divided in two parts: “Opportunity” and “Legacy.”²⁷ Each part lends credence to the theory that no one achieves success in a vacuum without the intervention of opportunity.

Part one of *Outliers*, appropriately subtitled “Opportunity,” opens with an examination of the birthdates of the elite Canadian Junior A hockey league.²⁸ While not apparent on the surface, Gladwell cleverly illustrates how skewed age distinctions create a situation where a hockey player born just after January 1st is forty percent more likely to develop into one of the best hockey players in the Canadian hockey league.²⁹ The potential success of this player is not necessarily based on natural talent, but, rather, may be due to “an enormous advantage in physical maturity” over the players he will play alongside in the next season.³⁰ Because he is bigger, he will be perceived as better and will be given additional coaching, playing, and practice time which, in turn, will make him better.³¹ The “hidden advantage” a hockey player born after cut-off receives is the opportunity to become a better player through practice.

²³ GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 283 (referencing a book his mother wrote in the 1960s entitled *Brown Face, Big Master* in which his mother described her experiences with racial discrimination).

²⁴ Colvile, *supra* note 22.

²⁵ GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 17.

²⁶ *Id.* at notes.

²⁷ *Id.* at contents.

²⁸ *Id.* at 15–29.

²⁹ *Id.* at 23–24 (nothing that January 1st is the cut-off date for age-class hockey in Canada).

³⁰ *Id.* at 24–25.

³¹ *Id.*

Like physical ability, genius can also benefit from opportunities to “practice.” For example, Gladwell points out that Bill Joy, a distinguished computer scientist and co-founder of Sun Microsystems, happened to be born at the right time. In 1971, at the age of sixteen, he enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. Until then, Joy had never worked with computers, and he intended to major in engineering.

That same year, the University of Michigan Computer Center, one of the best in the nation, opened, providing Joy with an opportunity for thousands of hours of programming “practice” as computer programming was changing from computer cards to time-sharing.³² Had Joy entered the University of Michigan before 1971, his access to computers would have been, at best, very limited. Despite his genius, he likely would not have had the opportunity to “practice” programming, and his influence on modern-day computing, if any, would have been very limited. Joy, therefore, owes a big part of his success to the unique opportunity he was afforded.

Outliers does not suggest that a person can be successful without a baseline of intelligence and without hard work. On the contrary, Gladwell acknowledges the genius of outliers like Joy³³ and embraces the idea that true expertise in any given subject or profession takes about ten thousand hours of practice.³⁴ However, part one of the book succeeds in convincing the reader that, once a basic threshold of genius is reached, “extraordinary achievement is less about talent than it is about opportunity.”³⁵

Part two of *Outliers*, “Legacy,” is the book’s greatest strength. It provides insight into the way cultural legacies, even centuries old, influence behavior and, ultimately, achievement. The stories Gladwell uses to illustrate his theories are entertaining, and his method is effective. At the outset colorful, historic family feuds are used to show that “[c]ultural legacies . . . persist, generation after generation, virtually intact . . . , and they play such a role in directing attitudes and behavior that we cannot make sense of our world without them.”³⁶ Gladwell also

³² *Id.* at 43–47.

³³ *Id.* at 37.

³⁴ *Id.* at 40.

³⁵ *Id.* at 76.

³⁶ *Id.* at 175.

provides real-world examples of how taking affirmative steps to confront the issues created by cultural differences, such as lack of proficiency in “aviation English” in the cockpit of an airplane, can save companies, like Korean Air, from the brink of self-destruction.³⁷ The broader premise of part two is that understanding cultural legacies can influence how we train and educate, regardless of cultural origin, providing opportunities for all.³⁸

Often it is socially and morally repugnant to draw distinctions on the basis culture, because cultural distinctions usually invoke considerations of race and invariably imply a stigma of inferiority. To make matters worse, government programs that were enacted to alleviate some of the divide by providing opportunities to those who, otherwise, would have none, are viewed as “handouts” to racial minorities who are less than qualified and undeserving.³⁹ In *Outliers*, however, Gladwell does an excellent job of stimulating consideration for cultural legacies on a basis that does not imply inferiority. In fact, in two examples cited in *Outliers*, cultural consideration accentuates positive attributes that create opportunities that increase the chances of outlier success.⁴⁰

IV. Conclusion

Outliers is a thought-provoking look at the way opportunity affects success. This concept is not novel; it is intuitive that a child born in a low-income neighborhood to drug-addicted parents is less likely to graduate high school than one born in an affluent family with access to private schooling. This is not necessarily because the former child is not as smart as the latter. Instead, it has more to do with the lack opportunities for positive reinforcement. However, most people tend to discount other, more subtle influences on the outcome of success, influences as simple as when someone was born and where he or she went to school.

³⁷ *Id.* at 219.

³⁸ *Id.* at 224–85.

³⁹ See Progressive.org, Handouts, Entitlement, and Social Welfare (Dec. 17, 2007), <http://www.progressiveu.org/143635-handouts-entitlement-and-social-welfare>.

⁴⁰ See GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 116–60, 224–49 (stating that the children of Jewish dressmakers and Chinese rice farmers understand the value of meaningful work, a cultural advantage that many American children lack, and understanding meaningful work contributes to outlier-type success).

With the nation in an economic recession, opportunities for education, work, and entrepreneurship have dwindled. Moreover, as businesses have closed and foreclosures have increased, the nation's cultural divide, based primarily on socioeconomic disparity, has continued to deepen. We should strive for a way to provide opportunity to all who are willing to make the effort because, as the examples in *Outliers* demonstrate, "success follows a predictable course. It is not the brightest who succeed. . . . Outliers are those who have been given opportunities—and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them."⁴¹

In an ideal society, there would be no arbitrary advantages on the road to success. As much as possible, many microcosms of American society, such as the U.S. military where minorities represent one-third of the population,⁴² have attempted to balance these advantages. Of course, equalizing advantages is a lot simpler to do in a structured environment, like the U.S. military, where there is one standard for everyone; despite cultural backgrounds everyone is given the opportunity to succeed.

On the other hand, how realistic is it to apply this concept to society as a whole? How do you bottle opportunity and make it available to all? Certainly, you can provide additional training aimed at leveling the playing field, but there is no way to ensure that if a job in advertising isn't available, the *American Spectator* will come calling. There are just some opportunities that cannot be equal. After all, aren't families started and business deals made on chance encounters, everyday? Can we really normalize opportunity?

At the very least, *Outliers* levels the playing field in one critical way: It leaves the reader with the certainty that anyone with a baseline intelligence, if given the opportunity, can become an outlier.

Maybe, that's the point.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 267.

⁴² John Kruzen, *Military: Model of Diversity*, ARMED FORCES PRESS SERV., July 22, 2008, available at <http://www.army.com/news/item/4027>.