

CREATIVE REVIEW:

Is it better to be an outlier?

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Outliers – The Story of Success
Malcolm Gladwell
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By moving beyond the individual, the most obvious identity of success or failure, Malcolm Gladwell has thrown open the gestalt of success and failure. He, through the support of innumerable studies and examples, has illustrated how factors outside the individual, such as when and where one is born, the culture one is brought up in, the people one is surrounded by etc. determine who we ultimately are and become. However, the author's over-emphasis on situational and apparently peripheral factors in the success story may lead the reader to be disillusioned and feel helpless in the hands of fate. It is not that the author denies the role of the individual in determining

The revelation that the universe is one and interrelated is becoming more and more obvious day-by-day to scientists and philosophers alike. And Malcolm Gladwell has spread the light of this revelation to uncover the underlying and intertwining factors in the story of success, the story of outliers.

Outlier:

An outsider; a person who avoids acceptable or expected behaviour [Oxford]

his own success or failure; it is just that the author shows that the individual is not the sole dictating element.

"It is not enough to ask what successful people are like. It is only by asking where they are from that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't".¹

The range and depth of studies the author has used is absolutely mind-blowing, with each one leaving a lot of space for subjective interpretations. The author begins by defining what/ who an outlier is with a

¹ Ch:1 The Matthew Effect, pp: 19

beautiful illustration of a town that stands out in a number of ways from its surrounding areas. He, then proceeds to uncover one-by-one the hidden dimensions of an outlier. In the first chapter, he explores the underlying dynamics in the way in which opportunities in society, such as the month in which an academic year starts etc., are designed. Here, he highlights the importance of relative age of a child, especially in the first few years of life, in determining whether the child is likely to be successful or not. He further enlightens us on how these insights can be made to advantage larger chunks of the society. It is important to note that the author's perspective here is largely social and very little individualistic.

"The question is this: is there such a thing as innate talent? The obvious answer is yes. Achievement is talent plus preparation. The problem with this view is that the closer psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger the role preparation seems to play".²

In the second chapter, the author speaks about the importance of the role of practice and preparation in the story of success. It seems that outliers spend, on average, 10,000 hours of concentrated effort in gaining the mastery that distinguishes them from the masses. This observation gives a hopeful picture that anyone can become an outlier with 10,000 hours of preparation once they have the minimum talent to step into a particular field. But an element of doubt crosses my mind: isn't it only the passionate mind that is likely to spend such long hours in developing its innate potential? And on the other hand, isn't it the same 10,000 hours spent in negative thinking and actions, useless customs and traditions, and lethargic and unproductive mindsets that is making many of us masters in creating misery and rigidity?... Then the author moves to describe the opportunities that luckily happen to fall in the way of an individual that leads him/her to become an outlier. But again a doubt crosses my mind: Isn't it only the eye of a sculptor that sees the potential sculpture in a piece of stone that stumbles upon his way? Answers to these

questions seem to be outside the author's realm of enquiry.

"Knowledge of a boy's IQ is of little help if you are faced with a formful of clever boys".³

The author then proceeds to explore the implications that an individual's IQ hold in reality. He questions whether a measure of IQ is appropriate and sufficient to give an idea about an individual's giftedness, about his/ her likelihood of being successful in life and becoming an outlier. The author holds that after a minimum threshold level, it doesn't matter how much higher your IQ is in determining success in life. Factors such as ability to think divergently and creatively are, according to the author, better predictors of success. *"We have seen," Terman concluded, with more than a touch of disappointment, "that intellect and achievement are far from being correlated."⁴*

Simultaneously, the author also illustrates how educationists are oblivious to this fact and select students for admission to an institution based on their IQ scores. That is, higher the student's IQ the more likely that the student would be selected. This practice gives an illusion of superiority, in addition to giving an illusion of superiority on a totally different dimension that actually predicts success.

He further highlights the importance of practical intelligence in day to day lives and how they have helped people achieve success and how lack of the same has stopped many from tasting success and happiness in life despite having extraordinarily high levels of IQ. He attributes this ability more to family background, parental attitudes and upbringing rather than to inborn characteristics. For example, he has illustrated how parents' attitude towards authority – both their own and that of others, can influence how a child is able to assert himself and how he is able to get his way by communicating the right thing to the right person at the right time. He also brings in the concept of concerted cultivation which deals with parental perception of their role in the child's growth and development and how it helps a child face challenges

² Ch:2 The 10,000- Hour Rule, pp: 38

³ Ch:3 The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1, pp:69

⁴ Ch:3 The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1, pp:90

in life. But a few questions keep on propping into one's mind: "So, what can I do about it? If my parents have a mind set that is hindering my growth, does it imply that I can never get out of it? And what about the thousands of children born into well-to-do families and who have the best of opportunities and still fail to make anything in life?" The author again fails to answer these questions. But despite all these uncovered gaps, I also find myself silently agreeing to the fact that "*no-one – not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses – ever make it alone*"⁵.

The author then moves on to explore how changes in times can turn tables and how, with time, adversities become opportunities. Here, he describes the story of a successful lawyer, who owing to his background had to opt, after his graduation, for the least preferred profile in law. And this, as times changed (which took almost 20 years), turned out to be the profile most in demand. This turn of tables plus his expertise in this rare skill worked to his advantage making him the best in his field. There are, however, two points that catch my attention: one is the lawyer's willingness to accept things that cannot be changed and work on developing skills that can be improved. And then, here it is the adversity that turned into an opportunity because of changes that happened to happen; it is not the lawyer who had transformed the adversity into an opportunity. Here, the role of fate and situational factors are simply unbelievable and great. But how does this rationale explain success stories of individuals, who have, by themselves, worked to transform adversities to their advantage? May be, as the author holds, there might have been hands of fate working there as well. They might just have failed to catch our attention!

*"Success is not a random act. It arises out of a predictable and a powerful set of circumstances and opportunities"*⁶

The author continues to explain with the help of examples of European Jewish immigrants in the US, how one's culture, generation and family history can predict success. The author explores how the Jewish

culture and history, living in impoverished and intimidated situations worked to their advantage when they went in search of a living in the US. Here again, it is their very adversity that turned into their advantage. The author believes that one is more likely to be successful in a particular profession, if you are born at the right time and more likely to be successful, in general, if born during a demographic trough, i.e. a generation of relatively smaller size. "*For a young would-be lawyer, being born in early 1930s was a magic time, just as being born in 1955 was for a software programmer; or being born in 1835 was for an entrepreneur*"⁷.

*"Those three things – autonomy, complexity, and a connection between effort and reward – are, most people agree, the three qualities that work has to have if it is to be satisfying"*⁷

Children of parents pursuing professions highly satisfying and meaningful, that is professions high in autonomy, complexity and a perceivable connection between effort and reward, the author holds, are more likely to be successful in professions like law or medicine which again are professions high in autonomy, complexity and a perceivable connection between effort and reward. Such children are trained to believe that: "*...to tackle upper reaches of a profession like law or medicine: if you work hard enough and assert yourself, and use your mind and imagination, you can shape the world to your desires*". Though not the focus of the author, the story of the Jewish immigrants is indeed remarkable. Their willingness to work hard, their openness to study a completely new market and find unexplored areas, their competence to adapt, market and utilize their skills to suit the requirements of the situation is absolutely wonderful.

In the second half of the book, the author looks into how the traditions and attitudes we inherit from our fore-fore-fore fathers and mothers influence the way we view and react to the world. The author has made explicit, by exploring the way individuals from a particular culture view themselves, others and

⁵ Ch:4 The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2, pp:115

⁶ Ch:5 The Three Lessons of Joe Flom, pp: 155

⁷ Ch:5 The Three Lessons of Joe Flom, pp: 137

relationships, the role the collective unconscious, in Jung's terms, actually influence our lives.

*"Plane crashes are much more likely to be the result of an accumulation of minor difficulties and seemingly trivial malfunctions"*⁸

Errors in communication – its inappropriateness, its insufficiency – often happen in day-to-day lives, but seldom are they life-threatening. But they do often create uncalled-for problems. Malcolm Gladwell analyzes the causes behind air crashes and finds inappropriate communication playing a major role in leading to the worst. According to him, air crashes are not often a consequence of a malfunction alone, but often due to a series of communication errors, and unfavourable situational factors, each one trivial and inconsequential had they occurred alone. He further dwells on the major cause – lack of communication effectiveness – with the help of case histories of a number of plane crashes. He emphasizes the importance of communicating the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, to the right person with the help of extreme examples. However, these observations are extremely relevant and appropriate in understanding various problems that arise out of lags in communication in work and personal life. He explains how mitigated speech – which refers to attempts to downplay or sugarcoat the meaning of what is being said – can have serious implications when used inappropriately.

Culture influences the way individuals communicate as much as does the individuals' personality. The point here is that they do influence and awareness of this fact and understanding how they facilitate or prevent effective communication can go a long way in crossing barriers that individual and cultural characteristics and differences impose upon us. The author has illustrated the intensity of influence that cultural training and cultural priorities have on our lives and lifestyles, which even at the face of death we have difficulty letting go of.

However, culture need not necessarily have the last say always if we are willing to learn from it and grow out of the limitations it has imposed upon us. The author

has illustrated how we can liberate ourselves from this cultural helplessness with the example of Korean airways, which from being the most dreaded airline turned to become the best in the field. All that it requires, according to the author, is an openness to acknowledge where we are from, the influences it has on us and a willingness to change what we can change.

The author then proceeds to analyze the role of cultural heredity in determining an individual's ability to grasp mathematical concepts and persevere on a particular problem. The author finds the cultural legacy that underlies the willingness to work hard, and the ability to engage in professions inherently complex and meaningful holding the same roots to the factor that dictates individuals' patience and ability to persevere in a particular task – be it an agricultural or a mathematical dilemma. He also explores the advantage that Asian students have over American students in grasping mathematical concepts owing to the relatively simpler and transparent linguistic structure they are exposed to. Further studies on linguistic characteristics by the author, through analysis of proverbs from different cultures, throws light on the mindsets and ideologies that run individual lives. For instance, the following Russian proverb "If God does not bring it, the earth will not give it" shows the fatalism and pessimism typical of a repressive feudal system, where peasants have no reason to believe in the efficacy of their own work. On the other hand, Chinese proverbs such as "Don't depend on heaven for food, but on your own two hands carrying the load" lay greater emphasis on hard work, shrewd planning and self-reliance or cooperation. These attitudinal differences, regardless of ability, the author holds, can go a long way in determining success. The point emphasized here, the importance of hard work, self-reliance, shrewd planning etc. in determining success, is diametrically opposite to the ones emphasized earlier, where he held that opportunities that happen to fall in one's way dictate success. Thus, we see that it is a combination of factors within and outside oneself that synergizes success as it is a series of unfavorable situations and conditions, within and outside oneself, that lead to disasters.

The author, with the example of a school that

⁸ Ch:7 The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes, pp: 183

succeeded by imbibing the lessons learnt from cultural legacies, shows how development and growth can be facilitated in various situations. The school, by incorporating the mindset to work harder and longer which is characteristic of Chinese paddy farmers, increased their working hours. The students were encouraged to spend more time in learning the concepts taught and engage more in independent thinking. They were explained the miracle of meaningful work. All this increased and value laden efforts finally led the school to be one of the best in the United States. The author has thus shown that there are lessons to learn from different cultures and these lessons can be incorporated into our lives, regardless of our original cultural background, if it means more chances of success and more opportunities to be outliers.

"...Their success is not exceptional or mysterious. It is grounded in a web of advantages and inheritances, some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky – but all critical to making them who they are. The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all".⁹

The author ends by narrating the story that summarizes it all – the story of his legacy. He has shown how his parents, grand- and great-great-grand parents were able to live exceptional lives, despite cultural adversities, owing to miraculous and seemingly fairy-tale like opportunities that came their way. He feels that it is the hands of fate that have worked in *outlierly* way and it is not the outlier, as most of us believe, who is the outlier.

The book is divided into two parts – Opportunity and Legacy. In Part One, there are five chapters namely: *The Matthew Effect*, *The 10,000- Hour Rule*, *The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1*, *The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2*, and *The Three Lessons of Joe Flom*. In the first part the author has focused on the way opportunities in life spelt success or failures for individuals.

In Part Two, there are four chapters namely: *Harlan Kentucky*, *The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes*, *Rice Paddies and Math Tests* and *Marita's Bargain*. Here, he has shown how cultural legacies help and hinder us

in the path of success. The book ends with an epilogue: *A Jamaican Story* which gives us a peek into how opportunity and legacy had favored the author's and his ancestors lives.

This book is a must read for educationalists, human resource developers, planners and builders of societies and nations. At a time when reforms in education, economy and lifestyles are seriously looked into world over, this book might provide a new perspective in designing opportunities, such that a larger spectrum of individuals are able to benefit out of the opportunities provided, such that a larger number of individuals are helped to become outliers in their own right.

'As opportunities came their way that made outliers, ... it is the opportunity that came my way in the form of this book and a request to write a review for this book that has enabled me understand my role in my life and the role my relatedness has on my life...'

As opportunities came their way that made outliers, the outliers they actually became, it is the opportunity that came my way in the form of this book and a request to write a review for this book that has enabled me understand my role in my life and the role my relatedness to each and every element around me has on my life and on those of others around me. The story of our lives is like the globe, the universe – from any one point you can't see the whole of it; but you can know that what you see is not all that is, if you are willing to explore. And just because we have eyes to see, ears to listen, tongue to speak, nose to smell and skin to feel doesn't necessarily imply that we see, hear, speak, smell and feel the opportunities that come our way. A realization of this is important in developing our sensitivities, so that we can reach greater heights, within the present familial, social, cultural, and economic situations we live in.

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⁹ Epilogue: *The Jamaican Story*, pp: 285