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How Outliers Came to Be

In elementary school I was asked to follow a man to another room in the school. Thinking I was in trouble again, I nervously followed. In the small room, the man proceeded to ask me questions, identify ink blots and solve puzzles. A few days later, I was informed that I was deemed gifted and was given a chance to meet with fellow gifted students and a special teacher once a week. We would work on puzzles, solve problems and learn concepts in these meetings, as well as occasional field trips and weekend camps. I was offered special treatment and advantages that were only available to a few students per school. This opportunity, if used properly, could give a person a definite “leg up” in high school and then into university. I was born on January 3rd, but its significance will not be apparent until later in this paper.

An outlier is defined as,

1. something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body.
2. a statistical observation that is markedly different in value from the others of the example.

(Gladwell 2008:3)

In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos on The Hour, Malcolm Gladwell promotes his latest book, *Outliers*. In the interview, he briefly discusses real life ex-

amples of outliers and how they came to be as such. As related to his novel, his outliers are people who are now successful, exceptionally skilled and stand outside the norm. They became that way because of the many advantages and opportunities they had on their path to success and in this essay, I will examine how various people got to be an outlier and their specific circumstances that all reveal distinguishable patterns.

Many experts and Gladwell believe, that in order to be exceptionally skilled at something, you must practice or work at it at least 10,000 hours. That works out to about three to four hours of practice per day for ten years. In their study of chess masters, Simon and Chase (1973:394-403), observed that no one was at the skill set that of an international chess master without putting in about ten years of intense practice with the game. "The exceptions in this century, such as the famous chess players, Bobby Fischer and Salo Flohr, were only a year shy of the prerequisite 10 years of preparation" (Krogius 1976). You simply must put the time in to truly achieve greatness. To be incredibly successful, like an outlier, an element of good fortune is also present and the path to success is certainly not a complete struggle. For an outlier, they have put in a huge amount of time and effort and no one is denying that, except life has provided them with certain conveniences that help them along their journey to success.

The first story of a rise to success is about the Beatles. In some circles, the Beatles are considered the best rock band of all time. They produced hit after hit for almost a decade. By the time they landed in the U.S., they were polished musicians with great song writing abilities starting to show. What we had not seen is the long

hours they spent playing in night clubs, night after night. They had already been playing together and polishing their talents for 7 years. Now, this is the point where practice enters the picture. The Beatles were asked to play at nightclubs in Hamburg, Germany, for eight hours a night, seven days a week. They had to learn endurance and an enormous amount of songs to play that many hours continuously. By the time they had their first successes in 1964, they had played live an estimated 1200 times. Most bands never perform 1200 times in their entire careers (Gladwell 2008:69-73). It is not a surprise that the Beatles were as good as they were since they played so much. Their success is not without mention of the opportunities to practice and become outliers.

Currently the richest man in the world and definitely an outlier, Bill Gates' road to success was full of large quantities of formative hours, but was afforded many advantages along the way. To becoming a software giant, it took a long road, but it was paved in gold. Gates, born into a wealthy family, attended a private school for Seattle's elite families. In the 1960's, when computers were reserved mostly for colleges (even at that, they would only have one per institute), Gates' school purchased a cutting edge computer. His computer programming began there and he virtually lived in that computer room. Next, for awhile, a company offered him free computer time in exchange for working on a piece of software for the company. In those seven months alone, he racked up 1575 hours. After getting banned from using the high school computer for causing mischief, Gates began using a computer at the University of Washington between 3 and 6 a.m. because no one else had scheduled time at those hours. He would wake up in the middle of the night and walk or take the bus to the

university then go home after to continue on and start his day, right under his parents' noses. Another big opportunity for Gates was spending his spring school term writing computer code for high school credits instead of having to go to classes (Gladwell 2008:73-80). By the time Gates dropped out of Harvard to start his own software company, he was well passed the 10,000 hours. Aside from that, Gates was presented extraordinarily favorable circumstances which helped vault him to outlier status and world's richest man.

Yet another fine example of outliers in cultures are pro hockey players. Pro hockey players are good at what they do and have put in a lot of ice time to get to where they are, but it all started with a small stroke of good luck. And, the majority of all pro hockey players share in that same quality of luck. Most kids start hockey at five years old and the cutoff for each age is at the start of January. What happens is these kids born in January are just about a whole year older than their teammates who are born in December, for example. At that young of age, one year makes a big difference in intelligence and size. In most sports, it is the bigger and sharper kids that tend to be better than the rest. And so the cycle begins; the better kids get more ice time, get picked to be on the representative team, play alongside better players, play in more games, get sent to hockey camps, get better training and on and on until the kid is actually one of the better players. He or she is a self fulfilling prophesy, largely, because they were given more opportunities to hone their skill along the way (Gladwell 2008:42-48). To further this argument, the psychologist Robert Barnsley (1988:167-176), noted the unique pattern of early month birth dates in players for the upper levels of hockey. This pattern is all across the board and throughout all promi-

ment hockey leagues. There are, however, many exceptions to these findings, but Barnsley concludes that around 40 percent of the best of the best were born between January and March, thirty percent between April and June and less for each month thereafter (Gladwell 2008:30). Additionally, this phenomenon is not limited to just hockey. It has also been observed in soccer, baseball, football, and basketball. As quoted in (Gladwell 2008:35), "Barnsley argues that these kinds of skewed age distributions exist whenever three things happen: selection, streaming, and differentiated experience." Ultimately, one would consider him or herself unlucky to be born before an age cutoff and the opposite is true for it to be a blessing to be born just after an age cutoff, in hockey, for example, in January.

Luck has to have a part in a person becoming an outlier- something to explain the special circumstances that have been presented. An example of what happens to someone when the talent and hard work are both present, but money and advantages aren't is the story of Chris Langan. Chris has been dubbed "the smartest man in America" with an IQ estimated at 195, leagues higher than Albert Einstein at 150. It should be noted that the average IQ is 100 (Gladwell 2008:134-140). In his childhood and teenage years, his brothers remember Chris spending his summer holidays (between school years) religiously studying languages, math, philosophy, and practicing guitar (Gladwell 2008:104). Chris excelled in school so much that he was offered two scholarships to two universities. These scholarships were incredibly useful to Chris considering he was born and raised in deep poverty and many serious adversities. Against all odds, Chris was a genius kid although now, he has nothing much to show for except a string of jobs in construction and a nightclub bouncer. To begin with,

Chris had far fewer advantages than people like Bill Gates and the Beatles. His bad luck struck while he attended university and due to reasons outside his power, he was forced to drop out in the two different scholarship situations (Gladwell 2008:134-140). Opposite of the examples previously examined in this essay, Chris Langan had many unique circumstances that prevented him from realizing his full success potential. Hard work aside, think of where Chris could be if he just had the luck that Bill Gates had.

Excellence in school is quite similar to the hockey example. Kids born in January are almost a whole year more mature than their December counterparts. Family income also plays a big role in the child's success. High income family's children do better because the parents are active in their child's schooling. The parents will protest grades, motivate, check with teachers, help with homework and can afford better private schools. During summer vacations, the kids are sent to summer camps, brought to museums, and enrolled in special programs. Furthermore, the child will read books if they are bored because there are books available in the home (Gladwell 2008:387). To go even further, Asian children are even more scholastically motivated than other cultures because of the high pressure and strong work ethic instilled in them since young. Asians are known as the hardest working farmers in the world (Gladwell 2008:350). Professor Peters has even observed Asian kids in Toronto all gathering in a building to work on their homework, right away, after school, for hours, every day). On the other side of the tracks though, is the low income households. The parents in those homes usually don't have a college education, nor motivate, nor get involved in their child's education. On the other hand, the children being free to do as

they please on their time away from school is that they learn valuable social skills, fall down, are physically active, and learn many common sense lessons that they could not have learned from reading in any text book (Gladwell 2008:388).

A final example of where luck is extremely evident is regarding some of the wealthiest people of all time. Gladwell identified that 20 percent of these people were born within nine years of each other and lived in the USA. Upon further investigation, he recognized that during the 1860's and 1870's the American economy was going through a boom; the railroads were being built all over, Wall Street was emerging and industry was getting a firm foothold. These 20 percent were born between 1831 and 1840- just 9 years apart. By the time the 1860's rolled around, these people were at the perfect age to take advantage of America's boom in economy. If they had been born in the 1840's they would have been too young. If they were born in the 1820's, they would have been too old because their mind-set would have been shaped by the civil war (Gladwell 2008:89-90).

Perhaps, luck isn't luck at all. In popular culture there is a theory of the law of attraction. Made popular by Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret*, proposes that what you think about, you bring about. Your mental focus and faith will eventually attract that which you focus on to you. This includes material items, vibes and even partners; nothing is excluded. Although the law of attraction is a controversial subject, there have been people come forward attesting to its effectiveness. If the law of attraction is a real law, then every outlier is entirely responsible for the successes they have experienced after all. Someone like Bill Gates, whether intentionally or deliberately, has envisioned and concentrated on each dose of good fortune that he has been dealt.

In the interview with Malcolm Gladwell, he was asked to talk about his hair and the trouble it has got him in. From a sociological perspective, Gladwell decided that he was treated different during the span of time because he had short hair. At this time in his life, he was getting speeding tickets more readily and being treated differently in general. He noted, the last straw that made him to grow his hair back was, at one point, the police ran up to him and surrounded him out on a city street. It turned out that they were looking for a rapist and had wrongly identified him as the one they had a picture of.

Of all the examples of outliers provided in this paper, a common pattern was hard work and around 10,000 hours of it. Additionally, circumstances that were outside of the outlier helped to guide them to the ultimate success they experienced in their life. Using the information from Gladwell's interview and the use of his book, I have been able to investigate these reasons for outliers' successes. I have further backed each example up with relevant statistics and case studies that offer a small understanding of a portion of society.

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