

Outliers

Malcolm Gladwell

Liars, outliers, and out and out liars

And then there's just plain exaggeration to tell a good story and court the intellectual fashions of the day, which are Gladwell's faults. He goes to interesting sources such as Geert Hofstede's *Cultures and Organizations*, biographies out of Silicon Valley, or Richard Flynn's work on intelligence, or the remarkable KIPP schools, and takes highly selected and anecdotal evidence to tell amazing yarns and breathe new life into hopes for equality which have remained unfilled for decades.

He argues by anecdote to have you believe that almost all success is due to incredibly hard work. The argument has some substance - an awful lot of success is attributable to tremendously hard work - but it also involves native ability, a fact which Gladwell would wish away. He totally, seemingly wilfully overlooks evidence that doesn't go his way, rather like Stephen Jay Gould a quarter century ago.

He tells us about the 10,000 hour rule for expertise. This theory, which arose in the field of psychology during the 1990s, holds that it takes 10,000 hours of experience to become a bona fide expert. Common sense tells you, but Gladwell does not, that this is a kind of rule of thumb. Also it is a continuum. If you were to listen to a violinist after 9000 hours of practice, and then again after 11,000 hours, the differences would be subtle. Moreover, there are some domains, such as music and certain realms of the law, in which common sense would tell you that practice will lead to this kind of expertise and others where it will not, such as mathematics and theoretical physics. I would recommend that any of Gladwell's readers Google this theory and decide for themselves how applicable it is.

His examples include Bill Gates and Bill Joy working incredibly hard at developing their programming expertise, which Gladwell concludes put them in a position to build Microsoft and Sun Microsystems. He also talks about lawyer Joe Flom of Skadden Arps. Well and good. Gladwell would have you believe that the patterns in coincidences he sees are absolutely compelling. They are interesting, but they are not the whole story. He doesn't tell you what an absolute dilettante Larry Ellison of Oracle was, how he basically wasted his life until he was about 30 doing whatever he pleased. It doesn't tell you about Pierre Omidyar of eBay who had his genius idea, started a company, gave it to a competent manager in Meg Whitman, and stepped back to enjoy it. It doesn't offer a theory about polymaths such as Leonardo da Vinci, Descartes, Poincare, Swedenborg and others who made contributions to so many fields that they could not have possibly invested 10,000 hours in becoming expert in all of them. He overlooks the fact that Gates' genius was in business even more than programming. The 10,000 hour theory doesn't offer an explanation for math and theoretical physics geniuses whose insights typically start coming to them before the age of 20. In other words, it is interesting but limited. Gladwell doesn't tell you that.

One of Gladwell's major, consistent, beat you over the head themes is that intelligence is not a deciding factor. In making this claim he says that Einstein's IQ was only 150. Excuse me? You don't have to be Einstein to know that's probably wrong. I went to school with kids that smart, and let me tell you, they were no Einsteins. Einstein never took an IQ test, but every Internet source which offered a guess put it in the realm of 160 or above. Gladwell also declines to mention the measured and reported IQs of guys like Warren Buffett, Gates, Joy and Myhrvold, which are astronomical. Instead, he says that anything over maybe 140 is wasted. Absolutely untrue. Being majorly smart is a major advantage in life. Who woudda thunk?

He drags out one certifiable genius who is not a resounding success to make the fairly obvious point that genius isn't everything. He overlooked a second - the Unabomber. These are anecdotes. Gladwell loves anecdotes almost to the exclusion of boring stuff such as statistical justifications.

In another bit of dubious fun with numbers, he lists the 75 richest people of all times, with John D Rockefeller heading the list. Certainly he has experts to cite for this, but even a casual reader will have to concede that an attempt to compare the monetary wealth of Bill Gates and Cleopatra requires a few, ahem, simplifying assumptions. Wealth can be measured a vast number of ways, among them spendable money, real estate, ownership of production, ownership of people, or the ability to direct human labor. Cleopatra didn't exactly spend US dollars circa 2010. In any case, when he discovers that almost 20 percent of his list were born within a nine year period around 1840, you can come to one of two conclusions. Gladwell concludes it is an amazing coincidence. I would suggest

maybe it is an amazing list. I will not claim that there is no substance to his argument, but as always, Gladwell is a little bit too breathless, and the list is more than a little bit contrived.

Gladwell argues that vast success is a matter of being in the right place at the right time, which certainly does not hurt, but it is not as decisive as he would have you believe. Every age has produced new opportunities, and people who were conspicuously successful in exploiting those opportunities. No mention of Sergei Brin, Andy Grove, Henry J. Kaiser or others whose success doesn't precisely fit his parameters.

He is a supporter of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools, as am I. Teaching every child to the extent of his abilities is a great idea. KIPP kids are overwhelmingly from the most disadvantaged sectors of society. Just learning to show up in school, do your work, and be a responsible employee is a tremendous step forward. Gladwell reports that 90% of KIPP alumni go to college, a remarkable number and worth reporting. He is quiet about what happens next, and Googling "KIPP alumni" doesn't reveal any overwhelming successes, despite the fact that the program is approaching 20 years of existence. If most of the kids have jobs, it is a tremendous success. If nobody has started the next Facebook, well, it was an extreme uphill battle even with sponsorship.

Gladwell is a popular writer because he tells the kind of myths that our popular culture wants to believe. He would have us accept that Asians are not as smart as they appear, and ghetto kids are a lot smarter than you would believe. He asks us to think that the things that set them apart are largely cultural. He makes a huge deal out of the difference between wet rice farming and any other way of making a living off the land, then draws major conclusions about the Chinese. Rice farming has made Chinese what they are. What about Indians, Thais, Viets, Indians, Filipinos and others who practice this agrarian art? Didn't work the same for them. Not a mention...

I would advocate that anybody reading this book also go to Gladwell's primary sources. Take a look at "Cultures and Organizations," and perhaps my Amazon review of it which calls into question the strength of the conclusions which the authors draw on the basis of their statistical factor analysis. Read Anders Ericsson's many publications on the 10,000 hours to expertise theory. Take a look at Flynn's work on intelligence, and that of Arthur Jensen and Richard Lynn, all three of whom speak highly of each other's work, and whom I have reviewed, and see if you conclude that measured intelligence is unimportant in individuals and/or groups. Examine the statistical analysis performed specifically to control for cultural factors, such as studies of identical twins raised in vastly different cultural settings.

My conclusion is that in almost every case there is some substance to Gladwell's happy tales, but in general they are vastly overstated. He is a good craftsman with a gift for saying what people want to hear. I am sure he will always be successful, and probably continue to be influential beyond the merit of his work. As Gladwell himself would tell you, some people have the good fortune to be born in the right time and place. This is an era that favors diversity, and he is its prophet.