Outliers: The Story of Success Study Guide

Outliers: The Story of Success by Malcolm Gladwell

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Outliers is Malcolm Gladwell's examination of what makes some people phenomenally more successful than others. These "outliers," as he calls them, are commonly thought to possess talent and intelligence far above that of the average person, but he challenges this popular belief by looking at the background of some notable outliers.

Gladwell begins with an examination of the small town of Roseto, Pennsylvania. The town is noted for having a remarkably low rate of heart disease among its residents. After eliminating possible causes such as diet, genetics and other factors, researchers conclude that it is the social structure of the tight-knit community that keeps them relatively healthy. The town is founded by Italian immigrants from the same place in Italy and Gladwell explains how they transplant their cultural traditions to their new home and how those traditions endure through generations in a "cultural legacy" that makes the town an "outlier."

Gladwell also looks at a phenomenon in Canadian junior hockey. The best players, it is noted, are born in the first three months of the year. Investigators discover that this is likely because the cutoff date to play in the age-based junior leagues is January 1. This means that children born shortly after that date are usually the biggest on their teams and have more experience playing than those born later in the year. They are the most likely, then, to be chosen for the more elite leagues and gain even more experience playing.

Gladwell then applies this finding to look at successful people like Bill Gates and The Beatles. He finds that in each case, these successful people have opportunities early on to gain an enormous amount of experience. Bill Gates has access to a computer terminal while in middle school at a time when only large schools and corporations have computers. The Beatles are hired to play nearly non-stop in Hamburg nightclubs before they start seeing success as a recording act.

In addition to receiving an opportunity to gain experience, a successful person also benefits from his cultural legacy. Gladwell contrasts the legacies of Asian cultures that center on the year-round intensive farming of rice with Western cultures that center on farming less intensive crops. Asian cultures prize hard work more, he claims, and this legacy is partly demonstrated in the longer school years they have for their children. He describes a New York City school that transplants this Asian model of schooling into an economically poor neighborhood and sees good results.

Gladwell concludes with an epilogue that applies his theories about experience, opportunity and cultural legacy to his own family, explaining the conditions that allow his grandparents and mother to succeed in Jamaica.

Introduction: The Roseto Mystery

Summary

Gladwell opens his book with a dictionary definition of the word "outlier." It is "something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body," and also "a statistical observation that is markedly different in value from others of the sample." His first example of an outlier is the town of Roseto, Pennsylvania in the first half of the 20th century.

Roseto is founded by Italian immigrants in the late 19th century. Most of the early residents are from a town in Italy, also called Roseto, after which the Pennsylvania town is named. The town grows up around the local slate quarry business and the residents reconstruct an American version of their Italian homeland.

What makes Roseto, Pennsylvania an "outlier" is that the residents are remarkably healthy when compared to other Americans. This fact comes to light almost by accident when a physician and professor named Stewart Wolf visits the town to give a talk in the 1950s and afterwards has a discussion with a local physician. This doctor tells Wolf that he has been treating people in the area for many years and that he rarely sees anyone from Roseto with heart disease.

The 1950s are a time when heart attacks are a leading killer of American men under the age of 65 and Wolf is surprised at the doctor's claim. He sets out to find out more. Along with some of his students, he investigates the family histories of as many Roseto residents as he can and verifies that indeed the death rate due to heart disease is some 30 to 35 percent lower than the rest of the country.

Wolf looks for reasons for this difference. He looks at the diet of the residents, but finds they are eating fatty and rich foods. He looks at exercise and other factors, but the residents do not seem to be any more active than average. He thinks perhaps there is something about the region that is healthy, but two nearby towns have heart disease-related death rates that are close to the national average.

After ruling out all these factors, Wolf concludes that there is something about the town itself that keeps its residents free from heart disease. He discovers that the town has a very high sense of community. People are very social and several generations of families live together. There are many clubs and other organizations and people are involved with their community. These seem to be contributing conditions to the relative good health of the residents of Roseto. It is not who they are as individuals, but where they are from that keeps them healthy. Gladwell closes his introduction by proposing that we can look at the success of individuals in a similar way. Success, he postulates, is as much or maybe more a result of where an individual is "from" than anything special about that specific person.

Analysis

Vocabulary

medieval, betterment, dialect, sociology, egalitarian, peers, physiological, ethos, quarries

Part 1, Chapter 1, The Matthew Effect

Summary

Gladwell calls the first of two parts of the book "Opportunity." The first chapter of the section is entitled "The Matthew Effect." The reference is to a verse in the book of Matthew in the Bible that can be summarized as those who have much will get even more, while those who have little will lose even that small amount. This is a central idea to Gladwell's theory of what produces successful individuals and he begins with the example of outstanding young Canadian hockey players.

Gladwell describes the complex system of amateur hockey leagues that are spread out across Canada. Children begin playing at a very young age and have opportunities to be selected for more elite teams as they grow up. At the peak of this system is the Canadian Hockey League, a junior of 17- to 19-year-olds who travel from town to town playing one another before large crowds and competing each year for a national championship called the Memorial Cup.

Gladwell goes into further detail about the "meritocracy" of Canadian junior hockey. Children play on teams grouped by age. Those that stand out are then selected to play on traveling teams that meet the best players from other teams. Eventually, the outstanding players are selected to play in the Canadian Hockey League, from which several go on to play professionally. On the surface Gladwell says, it would seem that the system is based entirely on the talent and skills of the individual hockey players, with the very best rising to the highest level of play.

Then Gladwell challenges this interpretation. He inserts a table of data taken from the program of the Memorial Cup championship from 2007. The table gives the names, position, birthdate and home town of the players on the Medicine Hat Tigers, one of the teams in the championship game for that year. Gladwell invites the reader to look at the data for any unusual pattern.

The pattern to which he refers is one that is first noticed by a Canadian psychologist named Roger Barnsley and his wife, who are at the hockey game. Barnsley's wife notices that the overwhelming majority of the players on the team are born in the first three months of the year. Afterward, Barnsley and a colleague investigate the birth dates of hundreds of professional Canadian hockey players and find the same pattern. Most of the best hockey players are born in January, February and March.

The reason, Barnsley determines, is simple. January 1 is the cutoff date for the age-based teams in amateur hockey in Canada, putting all children born in a certain calendar year on the same team. The developmental abilities of children increases steadily and a few months can make a large difference in agility and coordination. Children born in the early part of the year have an advantage of several months over their teammates born later in the same year. Thus they are likely to stand out on their

teams and be selected for the more elite squads. Once in the more elite system they receive more training, more playing time and more experience. This makes them even better.

The primary contributing factor in success as a Canadian hockey player, Gladwell asserts, is not individual skill but the month of birth. He tests his hypothesis on other similar sports leagues with January 1 cutoff dates. He finds the same holds true in soccer leagues in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as a Czech hockey league. The best junior players have birthdays in the earliest part of the year.

Gladwell draws a similar conclusion about the American public school system. Children who are older than their classmates have an advantage and are more likely to get into gifted programs and receive more opportunities, widening the gap between the successful and average students.

Analysis

Vocabulary

consequential, dismissive, accumulative, biases, preadolescence, beneficiaries, entrepreneur, forbears, patronage

Part 1, Chapter 2, The 10,000-Hour Rule

Summary

Chapter 2 is called "The 10,000-Hour Rule", which refers to the claim that to become expert at anything a person must spend 10,000 hours at it. Gladwell begins by describing the success of a computer programmer named Bill Joy. Joy comes to the University of Michigan as a teenager in 1971 and finds his way to the new computing center that opens there the same year. He becomes a well-known programer famous for his quick ability and skill. After graduate school he co-founds Sun Microsystems and helps write the computer language Java. Much of the software used to connect computers to the internet is written by Joy. Among computer programmers he is famous as someone whose ability is far beyond the average.

Gladwell asks whether there might be something similar in Joy's case to what he describes with hockey players born in January. Perhaps, he suggests, something about Joy's surroundings allow him to become such a success. He diverts temporarily from Joy's story to talk about a study performed by a psychologist named Anders Ericcson. Ericcson studies a group of musicians and tracks how successful they are, how proficient they are, and how successful. The single most important factor he finds is how much they practice. There do not seem to be any "natural" musicians in his group whose talent alone carry them to the highest level of musicianship. There is a direct relationship between how much they play and how good they are.

Gladwell returns to Joy. He describes the unusual circumstances in the timing of Bill Joy's career in computer programming. In the early 1970s, when Joy begins college, the University of Michigan computer center is one of the best in the world. It is also remarkable in that it gives students access to it through terminals that allow a large number of users at the same time. This is different from previous computers, which are limited to loading one application at a time. Furthermore, Joy and some of his fellow students discover how to cheat the program that limits the amount of time they are allowed to use the computer and get unlimited time. He spends many hours every day programming, often working through the night. After graduating and going on to the University of California, Joy continues to program day and night. By his own estimate, he spends some 10,000 hours programming.

Gladwell points out that Joy is unique in having such an opportunity. At the time, only a handful of schools have computer centers where students have access and Joy is able to have unlimited time. He is talented, yes, but he is also one of a very few people in the world who has the opportunity to put in 10,000 hours of work on programming.

Gladwell again diverts from Joy's story to discuss this 10,000 hour rule in another example. He looks at the Beatles, the remarkably successful British band of the 1960s that seem to come out of nowhere to rocket to stardom in the US. However they do not come out of nowhere, Gladwell explains. They get their start playing in the 24-hour

clubs of Hamburg, Germany, where they play for hours at a time several times a day. By the time they start getting public notice, they have already put in over 10,000 hours playing as a band he explains.

Returning to computer software, Gladwell looks at the phenomenal success of Bill Gates. He finds a parallel to Joy's story. Bill Gates comes from an affluent background and goes to a school that has a computer terminal that gives him access at an early age. He and his friend, Paul Allen, go on to found Microsoft. Like Joy, they are able to spend hours and hours at a young age programming. They also are uniquely placed in time to be able to take advantage of advances in computer access that are not available to their older colleagues. In addition, their age is such that they are starting their careers at a time when the computing industry is poised to expand greatly. In fact, Gladwell explains, Bill Gates, Bill Joy, Paul Allen and several other very successful computer entrepreneurs and programmers are all born about the same time in the 1950s. Like the Canadian hockey players, their time of birth appears to be a significant part of their success.

Analysis

Vocabulary

Mainframe, gawky, meritocracy, algorithm, assimilate, prodigies, tedious, epicenter, stint

Part 1, Chapter 3, The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 1

Summary

Chapter 3 is called "The Trouble with Genius, Part 1" Gladwell begins with a description of Chris Langan, a man who has possibly the highest IQ of anyone alive. He describes Langan's appearance on a television quiz show, as well as the remarkable intelligence he displays at a very young age. Gladwell leaves the discussion of Langan to return to his story later.

Gladwell turns to the subject of IQ, which is short for "intelligence quotient." A standard IQ test called the Stanford-Binet test is developed by Professor Lewis Terman at Stanford University. Terman performs a remarkable experiment beginning in the 1920s, in which he sifts through school records to find a group of children with very high IQ scores, whom he then tracks through their school career and into their adult life. He measures their success. He expects that high IQ will predict success as an adult, but the results do not bear this out. He finds that his high-IQ students turn out to be successful or unsuccessful at the same rate as the rest of the population.

Gladwell asserts that intelligence has a threshold. He compares it to the importance of height to a basketball player. Being tall is an advantage, but being taller than another player does not automatically make one a better player. It is the same with intelligence. Having a high IQ is an advantage, but being "smarter" than others does not automatically make one more successful. One only has to be smart enough.

Gladwell concludes by returning to Chris Langan, perhaps the smartest man on the planet. His amazing IQ tells us nothing about his chances at success, however. Gladwell will fill out Langan's story in the following chapter.

Analysis

Vocabulary

adversaries, theoretical, abstruse, cognitive, divergence, libidinous, convergence, percentile affirmative

Part 1, Chapter 4, The Trouble with Geniuses, Part 2

Summary

Chapter 4 is the second part of "The Trouble with Genius." Gladwell returns to Chris Langan. In an interview with him, Langan describes how his family is very poor while he is growing up in Montana. After high school, he wins a scholarship to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, but loses the scholarship after the first year when his mother fails to turn in some financial aid paperwork. He transfers to the University of Montana, but when he needs to change his schedule to accommodate something he is told he cannot, and he drops out. He never returns to school and starts working in construction. He has been working on what he feels is an important theory of the universe, but despairs of it ever being published because he does not have the traditional college background.

Langan does not seem to have the ability to take full advantage of his enormous intelligence, Gladwell explains, and he asks why. He compares Langan to the young Robert Oppenheimer who also displays great intelligence at a young age. Oppenheimer has trouble in school early on as well, but is able to talk his way out of it. Later on, without any real experience, he talks himself into the leadership of the Manhattan Project, the secret project that develops the atomic bomb. What makes the men so different? Gladwell looks at something called "practical intelligence." Langan is raised in a poor family in a rural setting. He is not well prepared to assert himself in the relatively urban setting of Portland. He does not have the social skills that might allow him to talk the University of Montana into letting him switch classes so he can continue to attend. Oppenheimer has not only high intelligence, but he is sociable and able to convince people to help him.

Langan ends up living in rural Missouri, practically alone. He reads widely and continues to work on his theories, but he admits to Gladwell that he has little interest in pursuing a publisher. He has admitted defeat, Gladwell writes. He has tried to go it alone; however, no successful person ever makes it alone, Gladwell asserts.

Analysis

Vocabulary

niche, credentials, despondent, orthogonal, hyperinvolved, concerted, mineralogical, entitlement, tumbledown

Part 1, Chapter 5, The Three Lessons of Joe Flom

Summary

Chapter 5 is called "The Three Lessons of Joe Flom." Joe Flom is a partner in a very successful New York law firm. Gladwell provides a short summary of Flom's successful career. He is born in the 1930s and grows up in Brooklyn. He goes to work for a small law firm after college and later is made partner. The firm expands and grows to become one of the most prominent in the country. The story looks like a typical rags-to-riches success story, Gladwell explains, but he adds that he hopes his readers are skeptical of such stories at this point.

The first "lesson" of Joe Flom, Gladwell calls "The Importance of Being Jewish." Flom is Jewish, and when he goes looking for his first job after finishing school he is excluded from the "white shoe" law firms that are the most successful in the late 1940s. These firms are run by Christian men who live in the suburbs and they do not hire Jewish lawyers no matter how talented they might be. As a result, Flom goes to work at a small firm that takes on whatever work they can.

One of the things that Flom does as a young lawyer is help when someone wants to take over a public company against its will. This is done by "proxy war," where shareholders in the company are convinced to vote out the current board of directors and replace them with people who will agree to the company being acquired. These proxy wars are often messy and hostile and the "white shoe" firms will not take on the legal work involved. They consider themselves gentlemen who do not stoop to that level.

Flom and his fellow young Jewish lawyers, already excluded from the established firms, have little choice but to take on the work. As time goes on, the business climate changes. Hostile takeovers become more and more common and Flom and others receive more and more work. Finally, the white shoe firms come around and start to take on the work, but by this time Flom has so much more experience at it that he is able to command a large part of the business and surpass many of the established firms. Had he not been excluded for being Jewish when he first started, he would have lost the advantage, Gladwell explains.

The second "lesson" of Joe Flom is "demographic luck." Flom is born in the 1930s. Gladwell finds other successful Jewish lawyers who are born around the same time. The United States sees a decline in birthrates in the decades before the 1930s, Gladwell explains, reaching a low point around 1935 before beginning to climb again. Flom and others born in his generation have an advantage because of this decline in birthrate. The schools they attend are built for the larger generation before them, and the class sizes are smaller. When it comes time to apply to colleges, they have their

pick of good schools because the supply of students is relatively low. The same holds when they enter the job market. They find they can find all the work they are willing to take on.

The third lesson of Joe Flom is "The Garment Industry and Meaningful Work." He looks at the story of a family named Borgenicht who becomes successful in the garment industry in New York in the early 20th century. The Borgenichts, like many others, immigrate from Europe and come to New York. They find that their skills as tailors and sewers learned in their home country are in demand in New York as the garment industry expands. The Borgenichts start by sewing children's aprons in their home and then expand the business to employ more and more people. They are successful, Gladwell explains, but never wealthy. Their work is meaningful, however, and they impart to their children a unique set of social skills that make them successful within their own generation. A remarkable number of the children of immigrants who develop the garment industry in New York go on to become doctors and lawyers, Gladwell documents. The kind of work their parents did has a direct influence on their own success, Gladwell claims.

Analysis

Vocabulary

denounce, litigator, haberdashery, demographic, solicitous, meteoric, clothier, petticoats, seamstress

Part 2, Chapter 6, Harlan, Kentucky

Summary

The second part of Outliers is called "Legacy." The first chapter, Chapter 6, is entitled "Harlan, Kentucky." The small town of Harlan, Kentucky is located on the Cumberland Plateau in a mountainous region of southeastern Kentucky, Gladwell explains. It is settled in 1819 by British immigrants who come from the northern part of the British Isles. The town gains some notoriety in its early days because of a feud between two large families, the Howards and the Turners. Over the course of several generations the families argues and fights with one another, with the disputes occasionally erupting into violence and even murder.

Gladwell explains that Harlan is not unique in this regard. In the late 19th century there are several other similar feuds throughout Kentucky and the region, including the famous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys. "When one family fights with another, it's a feud," Gladwell writes. "When lots of families fight with one another in identical little towns up and down the same mountain range, it's a pattern," (p. 166).

Gladwell goes looking for the cause of this pattern of family feuds. He explains that Kentucky is settled by people who come from a "culture of honor." Back in Britain, they are herdsmen and herding cultures worldwide have commonly developed such a culture, Gladwell explains. In a culture of honor, loyalty to one's family or clan is the most important thing. People from this background are driven to defend their families and are quick to respond to any perceived threat. Gladwell claims that this culture survives in Kentucky and other places that are settled by British herdsmen for several generations after they come to America.

In fact, Gladwell presents evidence that the culture survives today. In the 1990s, two psychologists named Dov Cohen and Richard Nisbett conduct an experiment at the University of Michigan. They ask several college-aged men to fill out a questionnaire and then walk down a narrow hallway to hand it in. Part of the experiment is to create a challenging situation for half of the subjects. As they walk down the hallway, a person involved with the experiment partly blocks their way by opening a file cabinet, forcing the subject to squeeze past him. As the subject passes, the experimenter mutters an audible insult, calling the subject an obscene name.

The experimenters then look at the reaction of the subject. They take saliva samples to measure whether their hormone levels rise. They then present the subjects with a story about a conflict between two young men over a woman and ask them to provide an ending for it. They evaluate the answers to gauge how angry the subjects are over the incident in the hallway. They find that the subjects who are from southern regions of the US are much angrier than those from the North.

Gladwell asks what this means. The subjects from the South are not necessarily descendants of British immigrants, yet they appear to have been influenced by the culture that descends from the British Isles. They do not all come from small towns like Harlan, but as a group they display the same kind of quick response to a perceived insult to their honor that fueled the family feuds across Kentucky. Gladwell calls this a "cultural legacy" and names the second part of the book after this phenomenon. He gives the example of Harlan, Kentucky to introduce a discussion of how a person's cultural legacy can affect their success.

Analysis

Vocabulary

plateau, deposition, subpoenaed, indictment, clannish, turmoil, confederate, unequivocal, deferential

Part 2, Chapter 7, The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes

Summary

Chapter 7 is called "The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes." Gladwell describes the terrible crash of Korean Airlines Flight 801 in 1997, when the plane flies into a hillside while landing on the island of Guam. The pilot, Gladwell explains, is very experienced and is recognized for his safety record. According to the flight recorders, the pilot has difficulty seeing the runway in heavy rain and is confused by his instrument readings that indicates he is lower than he expects. The plane hits a hillside near the airport, killing 228 people.

The crash is part of a pattern of crashes by Korea Airline flights, Gladwell explains. In the previous twenty years, the airline experiences numerous crashes. Its safety record is so bad that some countries consider banning the airline from operating inside their borders. Korean Airlines performs an internal audit and finds numerous problems themselves, including flight crew members that are inattentive and undertrained.

Korean Airlines turns itself around, however, and Gladwell explains that it is because they realize that a large part of the problem is Korea's cultural legacy. He interviews a pilot and researcher named Suren Ratwatte, an expert on how human behavior can affect flight safety. Ratwatte describes a plane crash that takes place in New York when a Colombian airliner runs out of gas near the John F. Kennedy airport. The plane experiences bad weather on its flight up the east coast and is delayed circling other airports, using up fuel. By the time it reaches New York, it is dangerously low. The Colombian pilot and co-pilot do not effectively communicate the urgency of their situation to the air traffic controller, however, who is unaware of their situation. Gladwell includes parts of the recorded conversation between the cockpit and the air traffic controller where the co-pilot only mentions the fuel situation in an apparently casual way. Had the co-pilot been more direct in expressing the emergency, the flight could have been landed immediately. Instead it is put into a holding pattern where it uses up the last of its fuel and crashes.

Gladwell traces the problem to a cultural feature of Colombia. He introduces the work of a Dutch psychologist named George Hofstede who researches some of the cultural differences among the countries of the world. He measured things such as to what extent the people of a country trust and follow authority, and with what degree of willingness. This measurement is called the "Power Distance Index" or PDI. Countries like the United States have a low PDI, meaning that people interact with figures of authority without much deference and are ready to challenge authority when the situation calls for it. Countries like South Korea and Colombia have a high PDI, meaning that they recognize many levels of authority in a cultural hierarchy and are reluctant to challenge authority.

The case of the Colombian crash, Gladwell asserts, is a clash between these two ends of the cultural spectrum. The Colombians are intimidated by the more authoritative American air traffic controller and are unwilling to challenge him even when the safety of the plane is at risk. Returning to the Korean Airline crash in Guam, Gladwell reveals more of the conversation in the cockpit where it appears one of the flight crew tries to express his opinion to the pilot that they should not try to land in the current conditions. However, because of the cultural legacy that prevents the subordinate crew members from speaking openly to challenge the authority of the pilot's decision, however, his warning is not made strongly and when the pilot does not heed it, the flight crew member does not repeat it.

In the Korean culture, Gladwell explains, there is a tradition of politeness and circumspection that does not include blunt discussion. The burden of understanding is placed on the listener, not the speaker. Conversations allude vaguely to the central subject, but much is left unsaid to be inferred by the others in the conversation. This cultural legacy does not work well in a situation like a flight cockpit, Gladwell claims, where information must be sometimes be conveyed accurately and quickly. Also, the responsibility of the co-pilot is to alert the pilot to potential danger and even to take control if he thinks the pilot is not acting safely. In cultures that have a high PDI, it is difficult for the co-pilot to take this responsibility.

Korean Airlines brings in an America consultant to help turn their dismal safety record around. One of the first things the consultant does is ensure that all the pilots on flight crew members speak English. English is the common language at air traffic control towers worldwide. It also differs from Korean in that it does not have multiple ways of speaking to someone depending on the relative social status of the people in the conversation. By using English, the Korean flight crews are able to change their relationship with one another, Gladwell claims, and step away from their cultural legacy in the ways that hinder the safe operation of the plane.

Analysis

Vocabulary

terrain, catastrophic, sensationalized, procedural, incapacitated, headwind, mitigate, awry, constrained

Part 2, Chapter 8, Rice Paddies and Math Tests

Summary

Chapter 8 is called "Rice Paddies and Math Tests." In this chapter, Gladwell makes the case that the practice of rice cultivation has created a cultural legacy among Asian cultures that leads to more relative success for people from those cultures.

Rice paddies, Gladwell explains, are complicated systems that require careful planning and regular attention. They must be perfectly level, the plants must be properly spaced and the paddies must be irrigated properly. They are usually weeded and harvested by hand and two crops can be planted and harvested each year. Unlike the cultivation of crops like wheat, which require very little attention during the growing season, rice requires the farmer to be working on his paddies continually throughout the year.

Since the main agricultural crop requires such continuous attention, Asian rice-growing people develop a culture that puts an importance on hard work. With rice, harder work is rewarded with a better crop. In Western cultures that grow different crops, a different cultural legacy arises. Farmers of the middle ages are active in the spring and fall for planting and harvest, but spend their summers mostly idle. In winter, they go into a kind of hibernation, moving very little to limit their need for food and eating only at subsistence levels. The political system of the middle ages in Europe also means that farmers are not working for themselves but for a feudal lord who takes the larger share of their produce. In southern China, by contrast, the amount taken by the government is fixed so that a farmer who produces more keeps more of his crop.

The result, Gladwell claims, is a cultural legacy among Asian peoples that prizes hard work as the way to gain success. He uses the field of mathematics as an example. He cites the results of a study by a math professor named Alan Schoenfeld who looks at the way people learn math. Schoenfeld discovers that it takes time for most students to grasp a mathematical concept. Many western students simply give up on difficult math problems or concepts rather than take the time to fully grasp the concept. Students who are willing and able to put in more work are going to gain a more meaningful and deep grasp of math.

Gladwell looks at the results of an international test of math skills. The countries that score at the top of the results are Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. All of these countries have a cultural legacy based on the cultivation of rice, Gladwell points out. Just as in the case of Bill Gates and the Beatles, he suggests, the people who work the hardest and longest at something are the most successful.

Analysis

Vocabulary

paddy, terrace, nurtured, efficacy, conceptually, template, repressive, feudal, superimposed

Part 2, Chapter 9, Marita's Bargain

Summary

Chapter 9 is called Marita's Bargain. In this chapter, Gladwell focuses on a public middle school in the South Bronx in New York City called KIPP Academy. The children who attend the school come from one of the worst neighborhoods in the city, but the students who are chosen by lottery to attend consistently outperform others in their academic achievements. The reason behind the success of the KIPP Academy, Gladwell claims, is that they have stepped outside the cultural legacy on which most public school systems are based.

Gladwell cites some opinions of early American educational theorists who claim that too much education is not good for average people. Long hours at school result in "over-stimulating the mind" which is bad for overall health. This thinking becomes ingrained in the design of public school systems.

Gladwell looks at the practice of summer vacation. He remarks that it is usually seen as an "inviolate" part of the school year. There is evidence, he claims, that long breaks in the school year actually undo much of the gains some elementary school students make while in class. He compares reading scores for some students at the end of one school year and at the beginning of the next, broken down by economic class. He finds that the poorest children make no improvements in their reading over the summer vacation, while those students in higher economic classes show improvement. He attributes this to the type of parenting styles he discusses in the first two chapters. Children whose parents engage them and offer them opportunities continue to learn and improve over the summer. Children of parents who leave them mostly on their own over the summer and do not reinforce reading or other educational activities do not advance in their skills.

The suggestion Gladwell takes from these numbers is that while efforts are being made to reduce class size and improve school facilities, the facts point to a simpler solution for children who are falling behind in school. They need more of it.

This is part of the philosophy behind the KIPP Academy. Students are at school until 5 o'clock in the evening. They attend class on Saturdays, and go for an extra three weeks in the summer. They spend on average fifty percent more time in class than students in the regular schools. This is similar to the cultural legacy of the rice-paddy cultures Gladwell discussed earlier. Asian countries do not have long summer vacations in the school year, which Gladwell connects with the rice farming legacy of having to work hard year round.

Gladwell profiles a student named Marita, a 12-year-old KIPP student. She tells him about her typical day, which involves getting up very early to be to school on time, then studying and writing sometimes until 10:30 at night. As she describes her day it

becomes clear she does little beside schoolwork and sleep. She has given up a lot, Gladwell explains, but the "bargain" she has made is that she may be among the 80 percent of KIPP students who go on to college.

Gladwell closes the main portion of his book with this description of Marita. He again questions the idea that phenomenally successful people like Bill Gates and the Beatles became successes completely on their own. It does not require a high IQ to be a success, he repeats, it only requires the chance to put in the work and gain the experience. Marita was given that chance when "someone brought a little bit of the rice paddy to the South Bronx," (p. 269).

Analysis

Vocabulary

protocol, motley, curriculum, innovation, pernicious, fallow, socioeconomic, concerted, counterintuitive

Epilogue, A Jamaican Story

Summary

As an epilogue to the book, Gladwell includes the story of his own success as it connects to his own family's background. Gladwell's ancestors are from Jamaica. His great-great-great grandmother is a slave bought in Jamaica who has a child with her white owner. Gladwell explains the social structure in Jamaica at the time, which is partly based on skin tone. Lighter skinned black people are given more opportunities and privileges than darker skinned people. Gladwell's grandmother, Daisy, along with his grandfather, Donald, are school teachers able to provide an education for their twin daughters, one of whom is Gladwell's mother, Joyce.

Gladwell charts the social conditions that come together to allow his mother to advance her education. In the 1930s, when his mother is a young girl, a man named William MacMillan visits Jamaica and writes about the poor conditions of its school system. He warns the British government that if improvements are not made, trouble is ahead. A few years after he publishes his critique in a book, riots sweep across the Caribbean, including Jamaica. As a result, the British government implements many of MacMillan's recommendations that allow the best students of Jamaica to gain scholarships to private schools where they can get a full education.

The timing is perfect for Gladwell's mother, he explains. She and her sister are able to get into one of the private schools. Had they been born even a few years earlier, he writes, she might have missed the opportunity. After high school, Joyce's twin sister, Faith, wins one of the very few scholarships to go to college in England. There is no money to send Joyce as well, so Daisy, Gladwell's grandmother, borrows the money from a Chinese shopkeeper named Mr. Chance. This is also a stroke of luck, Gladwell explains. Chinese immigrants to Jamaica at this time are enjoying great success as shopkeepers and merchants. Had Mr. Chance not been present in her neighborhood, his mother might not have had the chance to go to college.

Gladwell explains that his mother goes on to marry a math professor and herself becomes a successful writer and family therapist. He closes his book with a quick summary of the conditions that make it possible for his mother to achieve such success.

Analysis

Vocabulary

Anglican, expound, prohibitive, abolition, repugnant, mulatto, fetishizing, industriousness, victimhood

Characters

Chris Langan

Chris Langan is an extremely intelligent man profiled by Gladwell in his discussion of the relationship between intelligence and success. Langan grows up in a very poor family in Montana. He shows remarkable intelligence at an early age and is able to grasp complicated mathematical concepts well beyond his years. After high school, he earns a scholarship to a private college, but loses the scholarship when his mother fails to turn in some financial aid paperwork. He tries college again in Montana but drops out when he is unable to get to class and unable to arrange to change his schedule.

Langan drifts from job to job and at the time of Gladwell's profile is living on a run-down farm in Missouri. Langan has extremely high intelligence, Gladwell explains, but he does not have the assertive social skills to get what he wants. He might have been able to continue college had he been more adept at interacting with people, Gladwell suggests. He compares Langan to Robert Oppenheimer, another extremely intelligent person who has a troubled younger life but who is able to negotiate his social environment masterfully and become a world-famous scientist as the head of the Manhattan Project.

Langan is used as an illustration of Gladwell's point that intelligence alone does not guarantee success.

Joe Flom

Joe Flom is one of the most successful lawyers in New York City who rises to prominence in the 1970s handling corporate law cases. Flom is from a Jewish family who lives in Brooklyn during the great depression in the 1930s. His parents are immigrants. He does well through law school, but afterward is unable to get a job with any of the well-established New York firms because he is Jewish.

Gladwell explains that what at first look like disadvantages turn out to be advantages for Flom. The country sees a dip in population in the 1930s, meaning that Flom and others of his age born at the time are able to find spots in good schools. Since he is turned away from the established firms, Flom and other young Jewish lawyers have to take whatever work they can get. Some of this work is helping with corporate takeovers, which the established firms feel is beneath them. When the economic climate changes in the 1970s, however, and corporate takeovers start happening with more frequency and on large scales, Flom and the other Jewish lawyers who already are experts at it have an enormous advantage and become the most successful.

Flom's background as a child of immigrant parents, Gladwell claims, is also an advantage. Many immigrants are engaged in what he calls "meaningful work" and instill

in their children a respect for their own personal cultivation. Many of the children of immigrant parents go on to become doctors and lawyers, Gladwell explains.

Bill Joy

Bill Joy is a pioneer in computer software development. Gladwell uses his career as an illustration of how it takes thousands of hours of practice to become expert at some complex task. Joy has an unusual opportunity as a new college student to work on a large computer system at the University of Michigan. He regularly works long hours and overnight on his programs, gaining an a amount of experience programming that makes him an expert at a young age. He then goes on to found a successful software company and becomes famous among computer programmers.

Bill Gates

Bill Gates is the founder of Microsoft, and one of the richest men in the world. Like Bill Joy, Gates has an early opportunity to practice computer programming and is able to translate his experience into a successful software business.

The Beatles

The Beatles are a wildly popular British pop band in the 1960s. Gladwell uses the group as an example of how long hours of practice can lead to success. Some of the first regular performances of the band are at nightclubs in Hamburg, Germany, where they play for several hours every day, gaining important experience.

Lewis Terman

Lewis Terman is a social scientist who develops a standard intelligence test and studied intelligence. He performs a long-term experiment where he tracks the academic and career performance of several students who show high intelligence scores in school. He discovers that there is no connection between intelligence and success at a career.

Suren Ratwatte

Suren Ratwatte is an airline pilot and an expert on human behavior. Gladwell interviews him regarding the behavior of some pilots and flight crew members in planes that have crashed.

Geert Hofstede

Geert Hofstede is a social scientist who develops a system of measuring cultural attitudes toward authority. One aspect of his system is called the Power Distance Index, or PDI, and measures how members of a certain culture view people in power.

Robert Oppenheimer

Robert Oppenheimer is a brilliant but troubled student who nevertheless goes on to a successful career as the leader of the Manhattan Project, the secret project that develops the atomic bomb for the United States.

Mauricio Klotz and Laureano Caviedes

Mauricio Klotx and Laureano Caviedes are the pilot and co-pilot of a Colombian airliner that crashes on Long Island in New York when it runs out of fuel. Gladwell examines their behavior in the cockpit and looks at the cultural differences that contribute to the crash.

Stewart Wolf

Stewart Wolf is a social scientist who examines the small town of Roseto, Pennsylvania, to determine what causes that town's relatively low number of heart disease-related deaths. He discovers that Roseto's social structure is a main contributor.

Daisy Ford Nation

Daisy Ford Nation is the author's grandmother who is from Jamaica. She has twin daughters, one of whom is Gladwell's mother. Daisy is able to send both her daughters to college by borrowing money from a local merchant.

Joyce Nation Gladwell

Joyce Nation Gladwell is the author's mother. He profiles her life as an illustration of how opportunity and cultural legacy contribute to her going to college and having a successful career.

Marita

Marita is a 12-year-old student at a KIPP school in New York City. She is the focus of the last chapter of Gladwell's book in his examination of how the American cultural legacy of education might be changed to produce better results.

Objects/Places

Roseto

Roseto is the name of a small town in Pennsylvania and also the name of a town in Italy, where most of the first residents of Roseto, Pennsylvania are from. It is remarkable because of the low death rate among its residents.

South Korea

An Asian country with a culture that recognizes many levels of authority and social standing. Gladwell examines the Korean culture as it relates to the behavior of Korean airline pilots in crisis situations.

Harlan, Kentucky

A rural mountain town in Kentucky that is settled by immigrants from the borderlands of England and Scotland. Harlan is the location of the Turner-Howard feud, which Gladwell uses to illustrate the Southern culture of honor.

10,000-hour Rule

A "rule" that says that to become expert at some complex task, a person must practice it for 10,000 hours.

TIMSS

TIMSS stands for Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. It is a standardized measurement of ability in math and science between countries. Asian countries are typically among the best performers on the test.

Korean Air Lines

An airline that is notorious for its poor safety record before it examines the cultural behaviors that are contributing to crashes.

IQ

IQ stands for "intelligence quotient." It is a standardized measurement of intelligence, with 100 being an average score.

Aviana Crash

The crash of a Colombian airplane on Long Island. Gladwell examines the causes of the crash and the cultural behaviors of the flight crew that contribute to it.

KIPP Schools

KIPP stands for the "Knowledge Is Power Program." It is an educational philosophy that implements longer class periods, longer school days and longer school years. Students are expected to work hard and commit to their education. Gladwell profiles a KIPP school in New York City that has seen good success among its students.

Hofstede Dimensions

A set of cultural measurements developed by Geert Hofstede. The Hofstede Dimensions measure attitudes and behaviors within defined cultural groups.

Cultural Legacy

One of the central concepts of Gladwell's book, a cultural legacy is an attitude or behavior that persists across generations within a defined culture. He gives several examples, one of which is the culture of honor in the American South. This cultural attitude descends from the sheep herders of the English borderlands who first settle the mountains of Kentucky, Gladwell claims, and still persists today.

Themes

Opportunity and Practice

In examining what made outliers like Bill Gates and the Beatles such phenomenal successes, Gladwell hits upon the important role played by opportunity. In each case, these successful people are given opportunities that most others do not have. In the case of Bill Gates, he goes to a school that owns a computer terminal connected to a large central computer. This is unusual in the 1960s and 1970s, when computers are room-sized devices costing millions of dollars and are owned only by large universities and corporations. Gates is able to start using a computer at a young age, gaining a head start on others in his generation. In the case of the Beatles, they have the opportunity to work in the non-stop environment of Hamburg nightclubs in the early 1960s when they sometimes play for ten or twelve hours every day.

In both cases, Gladwell observes what he calls the "10,000 hour rule." He cites an academic study that estimates that a person needs about 10,000 hours of practice or experience at something to become expert at it. It takes time to get 10,000 hours of practice, of course, so the earlier in life a person has the opportunity to start practicing, the sooner they will become experts. The critical time in a person's life seemed to be the late teens and early 20s when a person is usually taking the first steps in choosing a career.

In addition to having early opportunity to practice, there must also be social opportunities that can be taken advantage of. In the case of Bill Gates, he is of the perfect age at a time when the computing industry is mushrooming and the kind of skills he possessed are in demand. He and a handful of other computer software experts are perfectly positioned to take advantage of the growing need for software and are able to become very wealthy and successful because of it. The Beatles, Gladwell explains, seem to come out of nowhere at the time, but the 1960s are a time when cultural conditions are receptive to support major recording stars and at the time the Beatles have thousands of hours of practice as a band, giving them an advantage that other bands do not have.

Gladwell is careful to acknowledge that the opportunity that these and other very successful people enjoy is largely a matter of luck. Talent and intelligence are not unimportant, he admits, but it is not extra talent or extreme intelligence that makes these two examples into great successes; it is the fortune of having early opportunities to become good at something that makes them outliers.

Cultural Legacy

A major theme of the second part of Gladwell's book focuses on what he calls "cultural legacy." The first example he provides of this phenomenon is the apparently unusual

tendency of inter-family feuds to develop in small southern towns. Gladwell traces the pattern to the ancestry of the people who first settle the region. They are largely from the borderlands of England and Scotland, he explains, and mainly sheep herders. Herding societies, as opposed to those centered on agriculture, often develop a culture of honor, Gladwell explains, in which people are loyal to family-based groups and quick to defend them against any perceived threat from other family-based groups. When these people move to America, Gladwell claims, they do not lose this culture of honor even though they are no longer herders. The culture of honor persists through many generations and is still present today, Gladwell writes. He provides research data that appears to support the claim that people from the southern states are quicker to anger when insulted, for example.

Gladwell supports his claim with an extensive example of how airline flight crews from different cultural backgrounds behave differently under dangerous circumstances. He looks specifically at the case of South Korea, which has a cultural legacy of recognizing many levels of social hierarchy, with each person expecting to act deferentially to those above them. In a situation like an aircraft cockpit during a crisis situation, this kind of cultural legacy can be dangerous when subordinate flight crew members do not feel free to suggest possible solutions or to communicate openly with the captain. Gladwell describes how Korean Air Lines sets out to change these cultural habits in their flight crews and as a result significantly improves their safety record.

Gladwell then turns to the subject of education and academic achievement. He notes that Asian students regularly score higher on math tests than Western students and looks for an explanation based on cultural legacies. He explains how rice is the main crop of many Asian agricultural areas and how the raising of rice is a labor-intensive activity that requires regular, continual work. This is in contrast to the cultivation of Western crops like wheat, which only require heavy work at planting and harvest. When farmers in Europe during the middle ages are spending all winter in a state of near hibernation to conserve food, Chinese rice farmers are still working hard on repairing and perfecting their rice paddies.

The result, Gladwell suggests, is that Asian cultures that have a legacy of rice farming inherit drive and an ethic of hard work that leads them to excel in areas where harder work means better results. One of these areas is education, Gladwell claims, introducing the the theme of educational reform that is another of the book's main themes.

Educational Reform

Gladwell identifies the two main factors he believes contribute to success as opportunity and legacy, meaning that a successful person will have an opportunity to become proficient at something and will also be in a culture that supports and prizes their skills and abilities. He then looks at the specific example of education and suggests a way that these factors can be acknowledged and manipulated in order to produce more successful students.

Gladwell challenges the standard American practice of short classes and relatively short school years. He points to the evidence that long hours of practice are needed to master a subject. He introduces a study that shows math in particular can be better understood by allowing students to take their time and fully understand the subject rather than just drilling them with problems. He also presents evidence that the long summer vacation between grades is a time when many students stop developing academically.

Gladwell points to the Asian cultures with the cultural legacy of hard work. The school years in these countries is up to two months longer than the standard American school year. In the final chapter of his book Gladwell profiles a student at an experimental public middle school in New York City that has adopted the long school days of the Asian model. This school teaches subjects in long blocks of time rather than in short classes and its school year is longer as well. As a result of this design, the school's administrators say, math scores of its students are much higher and 80 percent of its students go on to college.

Gladwell's suggestion is that American schools could do a better job of educating students by giving them the opportunity and by changing the habits that have been ingrained by a cultural legacy that prizes a long summer vacation and short school days.

Style

Language and Meaning

Structure

Outliers is presented in two main sections with an introduction and an epilogue. Part One, which includes chapters 1 through 5, is entitled "Opportunity." Part Two, which includes chapters 6 through 9, is entitled "Legacy." The names of the main sections reflect the two main contributors to individual success in Gladwell's theory. A person must have the opportunity to become very good at something and must also be supported by a cultural legacy that rewards what they do.

In the introduction, Gladwell sets out his intentions for the book. He wants to explain the external factors that contribute to individual success. Gladwell names each chapter after one of the concepts he develops within it. He also opens each chapter with a quotation that relates to the chapter's content. In the epilogue to the book, the author tells a personal story of his own family's history, in which he applies the concepts he has developed in the book. End notes and an index are also included. Within the text of the main sections, Gladwell occasionally makes use of tables to present information about which he makes generalizations and from which he draws supporting evidence for his theory.

Gladwell is making an argument that the factors he identifies as contributing to success should be further identified and put into place to improve educational practices. The overall structure of the book follows the form of an extended essay, with examples given to illustrate the author's underlying reasoning, moving to a set of conclusions and then to a suggestion of how these conclusions might be used in practice.

Perspective

Gladwell is primarily writing about historical facts and events, looking at the social and cultural factors that contributed to the success of his subjects. He is also making an argument for acknowledgment of the concepts he identifies and employment of them in educational reform, so his perspective is at the same time forward-looking as well as historical.

Gladwell is writing about scientific research in many parts of the book, but he does not adopt a strictly academic perspective. Instead, he invokes anecdotal evidence to illustrate the concepts he describes. He takes a journalistic approach, describing concepts in a general way for a wide readership.

In the epilogue at the end of the book, Gladwell's perspective shifts to a highly personal one. He describes his own Jamaican heritage while applying the theory of success that

he has developed. He describes the opportunity and cultural legacies that allow his mother to get a good education in an otherwise economically poor environment and eventually go on to college.

Tone

Gladwell strikes a journalistic tone for much of the book. He carefully explains and illustrates the argument he hopes to develop, moving between interesting anecdotes and summary accounts of supporting scientific research. He uses language that is casual at times, sometimes addressing the reader directly or parenthetically. At each step of his argument he invites the reader to agree with him before moving on to the next point.

Gladwell is also challenging some standard beliefs, however, and his tone is at times incredulous or even sarcastic as he questions conventional thinking. He finishes the main portion of the book with a heartwarming and optimistic story of a young girl from the South Bronx who has been given an opportunity to succeed by attending a rigorous and successful public school. The optimistic tone is tempered with some sadness as he describes how the girl has sacrificed the normal social life a 12-year-old might expect to enjoy in order to succeed at the intensive school.

Finally, the tone becomes highly personal as Gladwell recounts the history of his own family, beginning with an ancestor who is a black slave in Jamaica. He conveys the various factors that allow his mother to get a good education in a poor country. This personal part of the book is also bittersweet, as he acknowledges that his fair-skinned ancestors enjoyed privileges that darker-skinned ones did not, a result of the racial politics in Jamaica at the time.

Quotes

Wolf and Bruhn had to convince the medical establishment to think about health and heart attacks in an entirely new way: they had to get them to realize that they wouldn't be able to understand why someone was healthy if all they did was think about an individual's personal choices or actions in isolation. They had to look beyond the individual." Introduction, p. 10.

The more he looked, the more Barnsley came to believe that what he was seeing was not a chance occurrence but an iron law of Canadian hockey: in any elite group of hockey players--the very best of the best--40 percent of the players will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September, and 10 percent between October and December." Chapter 1, p. 22.

The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours." Chapter 2, p. 39.

What I told you at the beginning of this chapter about the extraordinary intelligence of Chris Langan, in other words, is of little use if we want to understand his chances of becoming a success in the world." Chapter 3, p. 90.

He'd had to make his way alone, and no one--not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses--ever makes it alone." Chapter 4, p. 115.

By the end of this chapter . . . we'll see that it is possible to take the lessons of Joe Flom, apply them to the legal world of New York City, and predict the family background, age and origin of the city's most powerful attorneys, without knowing a single additional fact about them." Chapter 5, p. 120.

When one family fights with another, it's a feud. When lots of families fight with one another in identical little towns up and down the same mountain range, it's a pattern." Chapter 6, p. 166.

Why is the fact that each of us comes from a culture with its own distinctive mix of strengths and weaknesses, tendencies and predispositions, so difficult to acknowledge? Who we are cannot be separated from where we're from--and when we ignore that fact, planes crash." Chapter 7, p. 221.

Throughout history, not surprisingly, the people who grow rice have always worked harder than almost every other kind of farmer. That last statement may seem a little odd, because most of us have a sense that everyone in the premodern world worked really hard. but that simply isn't true." Chapter 8, p. 233.

Boe's point is that we could predict precisely the order in which every country would finish in the Math Olympics without asking a single math question. All we would have to do is give them some task measuring how hard they were willing to work." Chapter 8, p. 248.

The KIPP program represents one of the most promising new educational philosophies in the United States. But its success is best understood not in terms of its curriculum, its teachers, its resources, or some kind of institutional innovation. KIPP is, rather, an organization that has succeeded by taking the idea of cultural legacies seriously." Chapter 9, p. 252.

Superstar lawyers and math whizzes and software entrepreneurs appear at first blush to lie outside ordinary experience. but they don't. They are products of history and community, of opportunity and legacy. 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." Epilogue, p. 285.

Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 561185

What sort of opportunity does Gladwell think contributes to success? Can these opportunities always be made available to everyone?

Topic for Discussion 561186

What are the main differences between Asian and Western cultural legacies that Gladwell identifies? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each as he sees them?

Topic for Discussion 561187

Does Gladwell completely dismiss intelligence as a factor in success? What role does it play in his theory?

Topic for Discussion 561188

Does Gladwell make a convincing case for his theory of what makes a person successful? Why or why not?

Topic for Discussion 561189

How would Gladwell define "successful"? Does he present a definite idea of what success is?

Topic for Discussion 561190

Can cultural legacies be changed?

Topic for Discussion 561191

Discuss Gladwell's implicit call for educational reform. Do you agree or disagree with his conclusions?