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Cp: Summary overview

It's undeniable that Outliers: The Story of Success is hugely successful

On the surface, Gladwell offers a compelling narrative of success that is different to the commonly-stated "natural talent" or "innate ability". We'd all like to believe that we're capable of success beyond our natural talents and abilities, so the book offers a comforting argument for readers.

Gladwell's argument is that there are no real outliers that success is far more formulaic than we expect. In each chapter, he reveals a predictable pattern of: the right background, the right timing, the right opportunities, the right amount of effort, and so on. Unsurprisingly, the examples he uses fit nicely with his theory hockey players, lawyers, rice farmers, plane crashes, and so on.

His approach is to simplify the complex and boil success down a formula, but the problem is human life is not a formula; reality is not simple. That's why we all know of people who put in little work yet achieved success or who tried hard but missed the moment. Ironically, he fails to acknowledge the outliers from his own argument.

Bill Gates is a great example of this. Gladwell puts Gates' success down to a set of predictable factors: being born at the right time and in the right place and having early access to a computer. However, Gates pointed out a few key points that Gladwell ignores:

- Being open to and noticing opportunities

- Thinking outside the box

- Having a "fanatical" interest in a field

- Having the natural aptitude that encourages someone to pursue the mystical 10,000 hours*

*I say "mystical" because the 10,000 hours rule was an overgeneralization of Anders Ericsson's research, where 10k was an average and was about intentional practice, not just a number of hours.

In other words, Bill Gates isn't just a set of good circumstances, timing, and practice. He's an individual who saw the opportunity, took the initiative, was naturally good at what he did, and enjoyed it enough to do it more. Thus, not everyone who was born in 1953 and given a key to a computer lab would have created Microsoft.

There are no doubts many people born at the same time who were given similar opportunities but didn't spot them, didn't take them, or squandered them—and ended up nobodies. Why? Because if we give the same opportunity to a group of people at the same time, they will react differently as they are different people.

Gladwell is most likely right that success involves the general factors of luck, timing, and opportunity, but that's only half the story; it also involves the personal factors of spotting and seizing opportunities, having natural talent, and taking an interest and those factors aren't predictable.

My concern is the message that Outliers sends to people: success largely isn't within your control; it's down to factors outside your control such as luck and timing, and the only factor your control is the amount of effort you put in. Thus, if I'm not

successful, I can just blame it on poor timing or being "unlucky". Conversely, if I put a ton of effort in and reach 10,000 hours, I will expect to magically be successful.

On the other hand, if we take Gates' broader view, we can accept that some circumstances are beyond our control (like being born at the right time and given the key to the lab) but we can also train ourselves to look out for opportunities, to identify the things that we're naturally good at, and to follow our enthusiasm for the things we love. That plus Ericsson's intentional practice might get us far nearer to success, and to taking our life back into our hands.