



Outliers, by Malcolm Gladwell (2008) Counter-Arguments

It is possible to summarize the thesis of Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* this way:

The highest levels of success come about because of opportunities and legacies that we have no control over.

Gladwell presents a very powerful argument for the validity of this insight, mainly through the assemblage and configuration of exemplary stories and cases. To give Gladwell's work the respect it so richly deserves, however, we should subject it to rigorous critical thought, to test its supports and its conclusions to see how well they hold up in the face of counter-argument, counter-examples, and critique. This resource is intended to initiate your own individual and independent critical thinking in response to Malcom Gladwell's bestselling and influential book.

Counter-Argument: Hockey excellence is not related to birthdate. Gladwell's Canadian and Czech Junior National Team rosters were anomalies.

You can conduct your own research here by looking up NHL teams or other sets of highly successful hockey players. I took the first ten current Chicago Blackhawks I could think of and looked up their wiki pages. For instance, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Kane.

Those ten players had these birthdates:

First Quarter (January – March) – 1

Second Quarter (April – June) – 3

Third Quarter (July – September) – 2

Fourth Quarter (October – December) – 4

Counter-Argument: The birthdate preference that Gladwell claims is also true in schooling (older kids by birthdate in a grade level do better in school) is actually not true, according to research that he doesn't cite.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/books/review/Leonhardt-t.html>

Counter-Argument: The opening Roseto story demonstrates a persistent flaw in the book: Gladwell argues from anomalous anecdote rather than social science.

<https://atlassociety.org/commentary/capitalism-and-morality/capitalism-morality-blog/3663-malcolm-gladwell-s-outliers-reviewed>

Counter-Argument: Sports disproves the 10,000 hour rule: genetics are far, far more important than the amount of time professional athletes practice.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/08/malcolm-gladwell-defends-disputed-10000-hours-rule/311884/>

Counter-Argument: The 10,000 hour rule has very little to do with the Beatles' achievements. The Beatles were so great because they were aesthetically and culturally revolutionary, completely original, inventing entire genres of popular music (e.g., power pop, orchestral pop, concept albums, etc.). Artistic originality is in some ways the opposite of endless practicing, which is much more important in classical music than in other categories of music.

There are a lot of sources to support this argument. Here are just a couple.

<http://twths.org/10-reasons-why-the-beatles-were-the-greatest/>

<http://darkhorseinstitute.com/why-are-the-beatles-important-to-music-history/>

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/the-beatles/biography>

https://www.reddit.com/r/explainlikeimfive/comments/302aaf/eli5_what_made_the_beatles_so_revolutionary_for/

Counter-Argument: There is very little social science to support the 10,000 rule. It may be true or it may not be true, but it isn't a research-backed insight.

<https://allaboutwork.org/2012/11/21/malcolm-gladwells-10000-hour-rule-doesnt-add-up/>

Counter-Argument: Identifying several historical circumstances as the key to succeeding as a lawyer in New York City seems like an example of cherry-picked evidence to support his thesis. If these circumstances were so causally determinative of success in the legal profession, there should be examples like this in every profession.

https://archives.cjr.org/the_observatory/the_gladwellian_debate.php

Counter-Argument: Extreme successes have to be singular the way that a Bill Gates is singular. Giving more people access to computers, for instance, in the early 1970s would have only intensified the competition to write the most popular and useful software. Someone (most likely Bill Gates) would still have emerged at the top, which proves the importance of personal characteristics.

<https://atlassociety.org/commentary/capitalism-and-morality/capitalism-morality-blog/3663-malcolm-gladwell-s-outliers-reviewed>

Counter-Argument: One clear example where a cultural bias toward respect for authority (the Korean Air chapter) is not enough social science to support the broad claim that the biases that our cultural background implant in us determine our success or failure.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2009/11/hating-on-malcolm-gladwell-are-reviewers-just-jealous/347534/>

Counter-Argument: Saying that Asians are good at math because historically they come from a culture that has had to work hard planting and cultivating rice paddies seems like a blatant example of identifying a correlation but not causation. (It's also not clear in the book how it relates to the point he makes that Asian languages have simpler, more logical systems of naming numbers.)

https://archives.cjr.org/the_observatory/the_gladwellian_debate.php

Counter-Argument: In the end, Gladwell's argument doesn't really add up to anything more than the truism that "no one can make it on their own," or "it takes a village." Gladwell is really only saying that social and historical context influences the lives of everyone. No one would disagree with that. He is not really saying – he cannot really say – that social and historical context is *more important* than individual characteristics in achieving success because then success would be generated more randomly than it is when the socio-historical conditions are right.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/06/review-outliers-malcolm-gladwell>

<https://www.thenation.com/article/gladwell-dummies/#axzz2ciiY0Lmv>

<http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/52014/index2.html>