Perceptions of Achievement: Privileging Innate or Acquired Ability?

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Malcolm Gladwell’s paper “The Quarterback Problem” describes the naturalness bias or hierarchy in which most of society seems to favor natural talent, whether it is seen in sports, business, or academia. This phenomenon inspired our exploration of the extent to which attributes such as intellect, musical ability, athletic ability, and business skills are deemed more authentic or admirable when they are believed to result from biological or innate ability versus acquired skills that come with hard work and experience. With profiles of musicians, intellectuals, athletes, and entrepreneurs, this study tested whether an innate or acquired basis for achievement would influence evaluations of individuals who possess them.

Twenty participants, all Harvard undergraduates, read profiles of high-achieving individuals presented in newspaper-clipping format. Each received one profile reflecting the innate condition, a filler profile, and a second profile reflecting the acquired condition. Results from randomized trials showed that profiles reflecting innate ability significantly affected judgments of talent in the three fields of performance but not other variables such as likelihood of dealing with difficulty, which were seen as stronger in those who had acquired their talent. Profiles of entrepreneurs produced strong endorsement of acquired talent.

Ongoing extensions of the study target highly experienced or professional musicians to determine how these individuals themselves evaluate the quality of performances with knowledge that the performing musician is innately talented or has acquired the talent through hard work, even when the level of performance is identical in the two conditions.