

Hopkins Online Book Club – May 2011

Jay Lenrow: Welcome to the third podcast of the Johns Hopkins University Virtual Alumni Book Club of the 2010-2001 academic year. I am your moderator Jay Lenrow, alumnus of the class of 1973 and the vice president of the Hopkins Alumni Association. We're here on a warm spring afternoon in Mergenthaler Hall on the Homewood campus, on the last day of classes for the school year. It was just days ago that thousands of alums and their families traveled to Homewood for Alumni Reunion Weekend. Later this month, several thousand students from the class of 2011 will march across the Hopkins seal on Homewood Field to mark their passage from students to alumni. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome them as the newest members of the JHU Alumni Association. It is my pleasure today to introduce our faculty host Dr. Karl Alexander, John Dewey Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins, who will discuss this month's selection: "Outliers, the Story of Success" by Malcom Gladwell. Dr. Alexander was born in Philadelphia and graduated from Temple University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill where he received his doctorate in sociology. He began teaching at Johns Hopkins in 1972. His primary research and teaching interest are in the sociology of education, social stratification, life course development and research methodology. His research tries to understand why certain children and some kinds of children are more successful in school than others and how this affects them later in life. Dr. Alexander is mentioned prominently in Gladwell's book in the chapter entitled "Marita's Bargain", where he states "Virtually all of the advantage wealthy students have over poor students is the result of differences in the way privileged kids learn while they are not in school." Please welcome Dr. Alexander.

Dr. Alexander: Thank's very much, it's my pleasure to be able to have this conversation with you and to share my thoughts. Let me also welcome the newest entrants into the Hopkins family of alums.

Lenrow: Professor this is a book that has received a wide dichotomy of reviews and opinions, and the camps seem to be split between those who love the simplicity and find the book easy to understand and identify with, and then those who tend to criticize it because they don't think it's scholarly enough and too popularist rather than being a real scholarly book of sociology. You and I were just talking about the fact that there's truly a need for both types of work. So to start off, I would like to ask you your thoughts on that, and then I'll get into a few questions about the book.

Dr. Alexander: Well it's not a work of scholarship in the classical sense. It's not heavily annotated, there's not a rigorous methodology that leads you unambiguously to a set of conclusions. It tells stories, and it tells them in a very engaging way, and it connects those stories and the themes of those stories to issues of great importance to all of us. So I think its usefulness is in helping us see connections between things that ordinary people without Gladwell's careful, thoughtful, well-trained eye just miss. We don't see those connections that he's able to draw. And in drawing them he weaves together a story that

otherwise would be ponderous, and he makes it engaging, and with a wide range of topics that he touches upon throughout the book. It's really quite remarkable in its scope, and yet consistently returns to the dominant theme that he's developing, so not scholarship, but engaging writing, interesting storytelling, and depending upon your point of view, rich in insight. So I think it really is quite an impressive accomplishment, and I must say in terms of the considerations of a true academic as I am, it's a different medium for communicating, a very different kind of medium for communicating your work than the outlets that I typically use. And so the work that he refers to, focused on summer learning and differences in summer learning along social lines, that work is very well regarded in the professional community and the professional research community and among sociologists interested in education. It's very well known, it's very well regarded, but it's available only to a limited few. You know, those of us who read the professional journals and technical literature. Malcom Gladwell picks up on this theme and shares it with the wider world. It really is a terrific opportunity to get the word out in a way that more traditional academics just simply cannot do. So I've never met Gladwell. He was on campus a couple of years ago and unfortunately my schedule didn't allow, I was unable to attend the session, so I never met him. We never talked about our work. I must say I was astounded looking through *Outliers* when I saw, what is it, five to six pages devoted to it? I thought, "This is pretty cool!" A guy like Gladwell, or people who do the deep background reading for him, came upon this literature and saw its relevance and here it is! Now ordinary people are going to be able to share it with just normal everyday people, and have a much broader impact than what I'd be able to do through the outlets, the publication outlets, that are routinely available to me. In fact it's a funny, interesting coincidence that right around the time this book hit the streets and was getting all the massive attention that it did, my wife and I were in the process of refinancing our home, and the mortgage broker we were working with said "You know, I think I saw your name recently, weren't you in *Outliers*?" and I thought, "Well, this is something. I've achieved some modest celebrity standing!" But what's more important isn't that he connected my name to the book, but that he read about these issues and I would have never been able to have introduced him to this topic, and so Gladwell, for a person such as myself, Gladwell is a very useful vehicle of communication.

Jay Lenrow: I have to believe that for academics, there's probably a tinge of envy in the fact that you've been working in, in the broader sense, you have been working in this area, and trying to get people to understand sociology, and in your case how it involves education, and then somebody can come up with a best seller like that and reach this broader audience. But on the other hand, I'd also have to believe that for an academic that truly believes it's important for the greater public to understand these theories, Gladwell is a wonderful bridge from those people in the academic world to the broader society, and gives them an easily digestible understanding of some of the issues that you've worked on for so long.

Dr. Alexander: No you've put it very well. In fact there's very little envy, at least I can't speak for others whose work appears in the book, but I'm actually quite content with my little professional niche in the way that I do my research and the presentations that I make to professional audiences and the

publication outlets I have. So I don't aspire to more, I think I have a very realistic sense of what my strengths are and what my limitations are. But having said that, I also firmly believe that, and this isn't just the work that I do, but the work that many of us do, really is of relevance, has practical relevance to issues that challenge us in helping make the world a better place and helping people that need our help, and to have someone that steps forward to in a sense serve as an intermediary who can speak to a wider audience and a different audience than I, is terrific. So I am grateful, not envious. I wish that there were more Malcom Gladwells in the world who could spread the good word. But there is a balance to be struck. Before we started the interview we were actually talking off mic about "pop sociology", and so they're spreading the word in a responsible and useful way, and then on the other hand they're spreading the word in a way that kind of trivializes the issues or gets far removed from any reasonable base of evidence. So it's just kind of talking and talking without any kind of, without much substance behind it. And public scholarship comes in many guises, and some are more useful than others. I actually think Gladwell is quite responsible in his use of evidence. Not everyone is. So we do have to be cautious and careful.

Jay Lenrow: Why don't we turn to the book and start looking at some passages that you, in particular, felt made important points and representative of Gladwell's writing and some of the things we were just discussing?

Dr. Alexander: Sure I'd be happy to. Actually the book is rich with possibilities. One that caught my eye, and it does speak to Gladwell's talent in kind of capturing an idea, involves his relating some comments made by Jeb Bush, former president Bush's brother as we know, politician in his own right. So Gladwell, on page 18, quotes Jeb Bush when he was asked about whether it was advantageous or disadvantageous to have the family lineage that he does, and he says, "I think overall it's a disadvantage," Jeb Bush once said of what it meant of his business career that he was the son of an American president, and the brother of an American president, and the grandson of a wealthy wallstreet banker and US senator. When he ran for governor, he repeatedly referred to himself as 'a self-made man' and as measure of how deeply we measure the rate of success with the efforts of individuals, that few batted an eye at that description."

And I think, assuming that the quote is accurate, that really should set us all to thinking about what it means, this imagery of the self-made man, and the rags to riches, this Horatio Alger story, there is a conceit that we are makers of our own futures. And certainly one of the points that Gladwell was trying to press upon us, upon all of us, is that yes we may all work hard, and yes we all may have exceptional talent, but all of us find our way through life through fortuitous events, and through experiences that either help move us ahead or hold us back. So we don't exist in isolation, we're part of a wider community and a wider network, and we do rise or fall on the shoulders of others, as well as our own efforts. And I think we all know that, but it's easy to let that slip by, when we start thinking about not just our own accomplishments and what we've done but also the situation of others. Yes, we can credit the self-made man, but the flip side of that is to hold those who are less fortunate, less successful, also personally responsible for their circumstances. So I think it's almost an iconic image, if you will, that

someone of Jeb Bush's background can lay claim to being a self-made man. There's a sense in which the absurdity helps make the point.

Jay Lenrow: How about some more passages? While you're looking, you think about that Jeb Bush story and you wonder in this day and age with the press often looking for anything they can to discredit politicians, why he wasn't challenged more often on that statement.

Dr. Alexander: Well you can pose that question more broadly when you think of all the things that are passed through by the media without unquestioning. Well here's a, there's probably a theme here on one that catches my eye, so let me share with you another one. This one is on page 32 and he says, "Do you see the consequences in the way we have chosen to think about success? Because we so profoundly personalize success, the self-made man, we miss opportunities to lift others onto the top rung. We make rules that frustrate achievement, we prematurely write off people as failures. We are too much in awe of those who succeed and too dismissive of those who fail. And most of all, we become too passive, 'we' overlook just how large a role we all play, and by 'we' I mean society, in determining who makes it and who doesn't."

So it's a continuation of that theme that we don't exist in isolation from the circumstances that surround us. We don't rise exclusively through our own efforts, and neither do we fall exclusively through our failings.

Jay Lenrow: I think what's interesting about both those passages is I often see the public's reaction to people and their success as either the person being totally self made or the opposite is that the global village or the local village is the sole determinate of someone's success, and Gladwell is essentially saying throughout the book that it's not one or the other; it's both and the way they interact as well as some of the innate ability of the person to take advantage.

Dr. Alexander: That's exactly right; I mean we don't want to go to either extreme. It does have, quite predominately in the book, this 10,000 hour principle. In order to really rise to the top in virtually any field or endeavor you have to work very hard. It doesn't come easy and no one hands it to you typically, and the 10,000 hours captures that -- 10,000 hours of practice if you're going to become a world class hockey player, 10,000 hours spent in the lab to elevate your work to the next level so that you can make the next great discovery. That we all rely on those around us and the circumstances that we find ourselves in to move ahead or fall back, is not to say that personal effort and initiative and competence are not important critical elements of the formula, but it's those competencies, even dedication and hard work typically do not in and of itself explain how the exceptional folks rise to the top, or the other side of the coin, the unfortunate folks kind of slip behind and fall farther and farther behind.

Jay Lenrow: I remember, this brings to mind a discussion I had with a close friend who was looking at people in the sales profession, and he said you can have two people that are equally good at selling who come from different backgrounds, have different levels of polish, and one could be having a decent living selling automobiles, and someone else could be working on Wall Street selling high priced securities, and their incomes and lifestyle would be vastly different. Yet the skill level could be the same and it's just some of the circumstances of their upbringing that's determined which slot they fell into, and that's not different than some of what Gladwell is saying.

Dr. Alexander: No it's absolutely not different; we can all tell stories about the good fortune and the misfortune. The good fortune being the right time and the right place, the opportunity presents itself. When that happens it can also be the misfortune, finding yourself in the wrong place at the wrong time. There are things in our lives that are beyond our control, chance occurrences, circumstance, Gladwell is very clever in identifying conditions we might not think of ourselves. Like the cohort born during the depths of the depression and then coming out of the depression. The baby born during the baby boom or the baby bust, the broad demographics play a role in determining whether there is a lot of competition or a scarcity of competition when you're trying to make it in any particular professional line of work. So there are these large externalities involving broad societal conditions, and then there are things that happen up close and personal, very close to home, in our family circumstances and our network of intimates that can either help or hinder, and we can be nimble and agile and try to find our way to the niche that's going to be the springboard to success. And some people can maneuver more successfully than others, but at some point you look around and say yeah, their conditions are either through interference or were facilitative, and it's just never all together under our personal control. It's beyond our control, and it plays a large role in how our lives unfold. It's not something that just kind of reading through a preordained script where you can anticipate every move.

Jay Lenrow: When Gladwell turned to discussion of the public education system, the public school system in this country, he turns to your work. And one of the quotes was that you suggested that the way in which education is discussed in this country is backwards. Can we discuss some of those passages and your contribution to the book?

Dr. Alexander: No (laughing) you'll have to twist my arm! Actually one of the excerpts from the book that I picked out here is because it does tie in with the work of mine that he uses. He says that, "For the poorest students, America doesn't have a school problem, it has a summer vacation problem." He goes on to say that the schools aren't broke, but there are conditions outside the school that are fundamentally important to children's academic success or failure, that we often lose sight of when we focus our policy lens on school improvements and school directives for helping move children along, and in particular as a vehicle for helping disadvantaged children along from low income families. So the popular mantra is if you get ahead in life, you need to work hard and play by the rules, and if you perform well in school, a world of opportunity awaits you. So doing well in school is the vehicle for moving up in the world and for extricating yourself from poverty, and of course there are elements of

truth to that, but schools don't exist in isolation, schools are part of the kind of larger fabric of society. And while children are going to school, they're also going to family, so families are a continuing influence in children's lives, in their personal developments and their academic development. And what our work shows – and it's based in Baltimore, it's actually a study that was launched back in 1982, when a colleague in the sociology department and I, launched a research study that we called "The Beginning School Study", because its intent was to focus intensively on the beginning school transition, that is the experience of first grade . Children are just acclimating to life in school. Having children being obliged to negotiate the transition from being a home child to being a school child is a transformative time in children's lives, and how they weather that transition has implications that echo well into the future in terms of how likely they are to succeed in school, in later years, and then how school serves as a bridge to later opportunities beyond school and adulthood. So in "The Beginning School Study" research program we tracked the educational experience and family conditions of a large group of youngsters attending Baltimore city public schools, about 800 in total, and we talked to them, and their parents and their teachers, and we had access to school records. So we filed a rather extensive, substantial database on the experiences of these youngsters at their earliest stage of schooling, and we continued to monitor the late progress for years, extending, almost in fact up to age 30. We talked to them. These were youngsters who were first grade in 1982, and we talked to 80% of the original group as young adults at age 28, 29 in 2006. But the story about summer learning and winter learning faces back to the early elementary years. What we were able to do – looking at standardized, nationally norm standardized achievement tests, we're talking about the kind of nuts and bolts of learning, the kind of learning that shows up on achievement tests – we looked at how improvement in test scores tracked across the elementary school years, starting at the very beginning of first grade, extending through the end of fifth grade, the end of elementary school the way that Baltimore is constructed. And because of the far sightedness of the folks in the Baltimore City public school system at the time, and I say far sightedness because this was very useful as a research leverage for the kinds of questions we were asking and they were doing twice annual testing, the Baltimore school system at the time was doing twice annual testing, fall at the beginning of the school year and again in the spring at the end of the school year. So we had to compile a database that included fall and spring achievement testing for first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade and fifth grade, the same children every time. It's a panel study. And with that information, having that information available to us, allowed us to plot their achievement gains, for this group of 800 or so youngsters, over the school year, which is progress they registered from the fall to the spring, beginning of the school year to the end of the school year. And that's a pretty standard thing to do in the literature, how children are advancing while they're in school. But what's not so standard, and what we were able to do because we had the twice annual testing, is to also calculate their achievement gains over the summer months, summer learning, as opposed to school year learning. This is in the early elementary grades, first through fifth, and the way you calculate summer gains is to look at where the children's scores were at the end of a given academic year, and then what their scores are at the beginning of the next one, so the end of first grade to the beginning of second grade, and that interval brackets the summer. And so with the twice annual testing, which is really quiet uncommon, you can compare school year learning to summer learning. That's a long awaited setup that turns out to be a straight forward but compelling story. When you look at achievement growth in that way, what you find is that the achievement gap across social lines, that is the difference in the average achievement

level from children of low income households versus children from higher income households, the achievement gap across social lines that's obvious in the early elementary grades substantially originates over the summer months. It's during the summer months that children from middle class households, professional families, college-educated parents, those children are continuing to build up their academic skills over the summer months, the kinds of skills that show up on paper and pencil achievement tests. Because their parents, they're living in a resource rich environment, if you will, parents, being professional and college educated, they're fluent verbally, parents probably are both interested in reading because there are books in the house, newspapers, and magazines. Parents will often read to their children, will rehearse reading with their children, and will work on number facts with their children. These children will also have enriching experiences over the summer months, they'll go to museums, they'll go to summer camp, they'll take gym lessons, they'll work on learning how to play piano, they'll go on overnight trips, they'll have expansive experiences during the summer months. Children from lower income families, the poor and near poor, they don't have that kind of environment. They're within that house or beyond that house in terms of excursions out to museums and going on family vacations. Their achievement scores don't improve over the summer months. We call it summer slide or summer setback. Basically they are treading water. These youngsters are performing at the beginning of the school year about at the same level that they were performing at the end of previous one. So basically it's a flat profile. So what you find is the achievement gap, the children from more advantaged households, they're continuing to build up their skills, the kinds of skills that pay off in school, over the summer months, whereas lower income children are not. And so in our project here in Baltimore, what we find is that essentially the entire increase in the achievement gap going from first grade through fifth grade traces to differential out of school learning during the summer months, which is really quite extraordinary.

Jay Lenrow: Probably not unexpected though.

Dr. Alexander: Well, depends on what your expectations are. Actually I think it's been, this work is not exclusive to our project, fundamentally the same pattern that has been documented in other studies, including studies done at the national level. But what it does is it directs your attention to the fundamental importance of enriching experiences outside of school for developing school based competencies, the kind of skills that pay off in terms of being able to perform at a high level academically. So when Gladwell says "We don't have a school problem, we have a summer problem.", what he's pointing out is that low income and disadvantage children, not all, but in general are denied the kinds of enriching opportunities, the kinds of learning experiences and enriching opportunities, enriching experiences that middle class children have more or less routinely through the way their families work, the experiences of family life.

Jay Lenrow: Kind of the flip side on that, I'm reminded of a discussion I heard a number of years ago between two young teachers who had gotten their education degrees together. One went to work at an innercity school, another went to work in an independent school. They were talking in the late fall after

back to school season, and the one in the inner city said on back to school night hardly any parents showed up and the one in the independent school said every parent showed up. And that would seem to correlate to your concept of those students not getting adequate support not only in the summer time but probably at home in general.

Dr. Alexander: Well I think that's exactly correct. It's just one element of a very large set of issues that come together to have similar implications that parents who are knowledgeable about what it takes to be successful in school and are energetic in working with their children to build a strong foundation, those parents are really making a difference in their children's lives that will pay off over the long haul. So yes, here at Hopkins we have an Education and Research Development Center, one of the best in the world, and one of research scientists at the center, Joyce Epstein, has been working for a decade plus on strategies for strengthening what she calls home school partnerships. Schools reach out and parents will reach in – strategies to try to remediate precisely the difficulty that you've identified that many parents just aren't aware of what they can do to help make their children aware, and when they are aware they might just not have the tools to do so. So they need help, and schools can play a very constructive role in reaching out to provide that help. But it's challenging in a whole host of ways. You can go through a whole checklist of what's available to a typical child of a professional family that isn't available to the typical child of a low income family, poverty level or near poverty level, and it's an impressive checklist; computers in the home, access to the web, lots of reading material, parents who read themselves and are highly literate and verbally fluent, these trips and enriching experiences, it goes on and on and on. But the differences in family life are deeper than that, and you can't capture those differences adequately through a checklist approach. There are just deeply embedded differences in family life that envelop children as they grow up, and have cumulative consequences. I'm reminded, as they talk about, there's a remarkable book by two child development psychologists who videotaped family life on site that is in the household on a monthly basis for the first three months of a children's life, and these children were first brought into the study at birth. Then on a monthly basis through three years, the researchers went in and observed the household, the way families conducted themselves, videotaping and then doing a content analysis. Well what they observed, what they recorded, and they were looking at three types of families – professional families, working families, and welfare level families – and they were particularly interested in the use of language in the home, and what they found were some truly extraordinary differences across social lines, and one of their findings probably captures that more vividly than anything else I can think of. And what they found was the total number of words used spontaneously in day to day interactions within the household, the total number of words used by three year old children in middle class families, exceeded the total number of different words, unique words, variety of language, total number of words used by three year old children in middle class households exceeded those used by parents in welfare level households. So you're talking about fundamentally different kinds of household environments in terms of the richness in use of language, and that's over a three year period in infancy but it continues. So we're talking about differences in family life that are profoundly important, and these differences obviously play out outside school. So Gladwell's point, and he uses our research to make the point, is that family is the first educator, and much of the focus on education policy in school reform as the way to lift children up is misplaced in the sense that schools

typically play a secondary role in children's lives, whereas families play a primary role, and it's challenging, maybe too challenging, to think that the burdens that children carry with them into school from outside school can be fully remediated through school based interactions, so we don't have a school problem, we have a summer problem. That's the sense of it, but there's a deep foundation to it that helps make that meaningful.

Jay Lenrow: If you were organizing a group of alumni in a book club discussion, what are two or three key issues, just briefly, that you think they would love to discuss?

Dr. Alexander: Well sure. In advance you asked me to think through discussion topics, and certainly *Outliers* is rich with possibilities. Let me try a few and see if the listeners will rise to the occasion and find these to be kind of intriguing topics to take on. So one of Gladwell's accounts of his own family lineage that he takes up in the epilogue, is an interesting exercise where he reflects back on his own upbringing and family circumstances through the interpretive logic of *Outliers*, and I think it might be interesting for those who are listening in and engaged in a discussion group to revisit their own experiences growing up through the lens and interpretive logic of *Outliers*. So how have circumstances and family conditions shaped our personal journeys, and what has been the balance between merit that is success achieved through raw talent and hard work, and fortuitous opportunity? A bit of introspection here to see if we can do our own Gladwell-esque interpretive accounting of our own lives as they've played forward.

Jay Lenrow: I think that would be something fascinating, for a group to share their own stories and interpret their own success based on some of the theories that Gladwell throws out.

Dr. Alexander: Let's see what comes in when they try. One of the things that I thought was intriguing how Gladwell chose to advance his agenda, offering his interpretive account, is that he stopped short of policy advocacy, in-your-face let's fix the problem and here's how we do it. Really there are policy implications that would follow from his account of success and I'm wondering what some of those might be. So for example, if you accept what Gladwell has to say about the conditions that make for success, and the other side of the coin, the conditions that hold many back, are there implications of that for public policy such as the appropriateness of an inheritance tax? Do we keep it all for ourselves? Ought that to be an entitlement? If we didn't get it all on our own, is it really ours? Is there a public claim on some portion of matter to accumulate over the years? Another might be how we fund our public schools. Property taxes at the local level are the main revenue stream for public education, but property taxes differ here in the state of Maryland. There are tremendous differences between the property tax rates across counties – Baltimore city's is much higher than any of the surrounding counties as we know, but Baltimore County is wealthier than Baltimore City, per capita basis nowadays. But do children be the beneficiaries of their good fortune of where they happen to be born, in the city or in the county? Children have no control over that. But the happenstance of birth has profound implications for the quality of education and for the funding of their school systems by virtue of our tax policies. So local

property taxes, is that the right way to fund public education, when it means that some children are going to have access to more generously funded schools and others will have to make do with less generous funding? Children are caught up in that. The ones that have the advantages didn't themselves do anything to deserve those advantages. The ones that are disadvantaged, children I'm saying, didn't do anything themselves to deserve their disadvantage. And yet our system rewards some more generously than others, or supports some more generously than others. And there are other public policy issues that could equally as well be thought through in terms of what Gladwell has to say about the paths to success.

Jay Lenrow: To wrap up, are there any fundamental questions you would like the listeners, the readers, to ask themselves or each other as they go through the book and some things that you'd like them to keep in the back of their mind as they read Gladwell?

Dr. Alexander: Well, one thing that I think is well worth pondering is the meritocratic imagery that Gladwell directs our attention to. The formula for success as hard work applied to the talents that you have is the route to personal advancement. If you work well and you work hard, and we use our abilities to the fullest, things will work out just fine. And is the meritocratic imagery, is I don't want to say is peculiarly American, because I don't want to seem too U.S.-centric here, but this meritocratic imagery that Gladwell sketches really is thought to be fundamental to the American character, and he's obliging us to step back and say is it really that simple? And I think if you ask that question as you go through the book, is it really that simple, what he's showing are exceptions to the simple rule, and there are many.

Jay Lenrow: The discussion, the comparison of Langan to Oppenheimer, is one that comes to mind for me.

Dr. Alexander: And point of fact I think that you could look at almost every one of the many stories that Gladwell weaves and use them as a vehicle for addressing that question, is it really that simple? Does hard work applied to the innate talents you have really win the day, is that what makes the difference?

Jay Lenrow: Thank you very much Dr. Alexander for a fascinating discussion. I'd like to remind our listeners that Dr. Alexander will be posting several questions on the website for online discussion during the months of May and June. We look forward to your participation, and look forward to you coming back to the online book club. It always restarts in the fall. Thank you.

Dr. Alexander: My pleasure, thank you.