

The Genius Checklist:

Nine Paradoxical Tips on How *You* Can Become a Creative Genius!

A Book Prospectus

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Overall Rationale

Not long ago I published a speculative essay in *Nature* about whether genius had become obsolete in the natural sciences (Simonton, 2013a). My email inbox was soon inundated with reactions both positive and negative. In the latter category were irate emails from “neglected geniuses.” A typical example was someone who claimed to have completely overturned Einstein’s physics, but who was still waiting impatiently for a call from Stockholm to schedule the Nobel Prize ceremony. The person couldn’t understand why if Einstein was universally acclaimed as a genius, he did not receive the same acclamation for proving him wrong. After all, $E = mc^2$ should actually be $E = mQ^2$ —just don’t ask what Q stands for! Sometimes these overlooked geniuses expected me to certify their claims. When I declined to do so, a few accused me of being a fraud, even posting their accusations on their personal websites (where their revolutionary work is most often published). One made it very clear that he expected me to be fired by my university as soon as the hoax that I perpetuated had been revealed. Being an expert on genius thus seems to have a downside: Too many out there are seeking vindication! And who wants to wait for posthumous fame?

You don’t have to be a crackpot to place so much value on genius. Many otherwise ordinary people will take an IQ test to see if they can join Mensa, an international society devoted to persons in the upper 2% in general intelligence, thinking that membership confers genius status. When the MacArthur Foundation began its Fellows Program in 1981, honoring highly creative people with a substantial amount of money with no strings attached (currently \$625,000 paid over five years), journalists called the Fellowship a “Genius Grant,” thus certifying the recipients as genuine geniuses. Of course, many parents hope that one or more of their children are “budding geniuses,” sometimes even trying to accelerate the budding by exposing their infants to a “Baby Einstein” product. Genius is so highly valued in contemporary society that the honor is often loosely applied to achievements that don’t necessarily require either superlative intelligence or exceptional creativity—such as outstanding athletes. What does it mean to apply the designation “basketball genius” to a point guard like Stephen Curry? Does that signify something more than supreme talent?

Although “genius” is often bandied about in popular culture and mass media, the word is most frequently used in complete ignorance of the extensive scientific research on that very subject. These investigations began more than 150 years ago (Galton, 1865) and continue to the present day (e.g., Simonton, 2016b). Of course, these research findings are not accessible to general readers. Most results are buried in technical journals full of esoteric statistics and mathematics. So somehow the central results must be extracted and communicated to a broader audience. That is one major goal of the proposed book. The principal way of achieving this end is to make ample use of anecdotes drawn from the biographies of well-known creative geniuses.

Yet another goal is just as important: The need to convey the complexity of the scientific results, but without making the presentation too complicated. Genius operates in ways sometimes so subtle as to seem contradictory. For example, is genius born or made? The correct scientific answer is both. Yet too often authors will choose sides, such as arguing that genius is entirely the product of nurture rather than nature (e.g., Howe, 1999). To avoid such oversimplifications, I have translated the scientific results into nine paradoxes representing both sides rather than just one. Contradictory though the resulting tips may seem, both sides contain a grain of truth. Indeed, knowing when one aspect or the other holds is crucial to understanding the intricacies of genius. For instance, sometimes first-borns have the edge, other times those born last. So, which when? That’s the key question!

The net outcome is a list of nine paradoxical tips that constitute a sort of double-edged checklist about how to assess whether you or anybody else counts as a genius. The specific tips are indicated in the tentative contents that immediately follows.

Tentative Contents

Acknowledgments

Prologue

Tip 1: Score at Least 140 on an IQ Test! Don’t Even Bother Taking the Test!

Tip 2: Go Stark Raving Mad! Become the Poster Child for Mental Health!

Tip 3: Start Out as a Zygote with Super Genes! Carefully Pick Your Home and School!

Tip 4: Be the Oldest Kid in Your Family! Make Sure You’re Born Last!

Tip 5: Study Hard All Day and Night! Indulge Your Wide Interests, Hobbies, and Travels!

Tip 6: Impeccable Perfectionists Rule! More Failures Means More Successes!

Tip 7: Make Yourself a Child Prodigy! Wait Until You Can Become a Late Bloomer!

Tip 8: Do Your Best to Die Tragically Young! Live to a Ripe Old Age!

Tip 9: Withdraw Alone to an Isolated Retreat! Social Network with Kindred Spirits!

Epilogue

Endnotes

References

Estimated word count: 100,000

Market Analysis

The proposed book should attract a wide readership. Besides potential instructional use, especially at the undergraduate level, the volume should prove attractive to the general public. To be sure, because genius is such a popular idea, there is no shortage of recent books already on the subject. Yet many of these are nothing more than self-help books that rely far more on anecdote than research. This description certainly applies to Gelb's (2002) *Discover Your Genius* and Patrick's (2013) *Awakening Your Inner Genius*. Neither of these, in fact, was written by a scientist who has contributed to our understanding of genius (see also Gladwell, 2008). That same limitation applies to Robledo's (2016) *The Secret Principles of Genius*, even if this particular author earned degrees in psychology and has published a few papers on creativity.

In contrast, researchers who can claim to have made important contributions to our scientific understanding of genius will often write books that place the most weight on their own research. Examples include Duckworth's (2016) *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* and Ericsson's (2016, with Pool) *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*. Neither can be considered comprehensive treatments of what it takes to become and be a genius (Simonton, 2016a). Indeed, even though both books discuss genius, their authors wisely left "genius" out of their book titles.

Two other recent books come somewhat closer to the currently proposed book. The first is my own *Genius 101* (Simonton, 2009). Published as part of Springer Publishing's "Psych 101" series, the volume was intended for undergraduate classroom use. Although it deals with many of the same topics, it covers the research literature without much use of anecdotal material. The citations are also in APA style, which can often turn off many general readers. The second example is Ness's (2013) *Genius Unmasked*. Where *Genius 101* features chapters centered on topics, *Genius Unmasked* contains chapters organized around geniuses, thereby devoting much more space to biographical details and much less to relevant research findings (Simonton, 2013b). This shift in emphasis should not surprise us given that Ness, while certainly a very accomplished scientist, does not conduct original research on the topic of genius.

All told, I know of no current book that would compete for the same broad market as *The Genius Checklist*.

Author's Expertise

Since earning my PhD from Harvard in 1975, I have produced well over 500 publications that treat key aspects of genius, creativity, and leadership. These contributions include 13 books (10 sole authored, 1 edited, 1 co-edited, and 1 author-reprint collection), 137 book chapters in edited volumes (including 47 chapters in definitive handbooks), 45 entries in 25 encyclopedias, and 337 publications in 131 journals, annuals, and other periodicals. My book publishers include the university presses of Harvard, Yale, Oxford (twice), and Cambridge (twice), while my articles appear in such high-impact vehicles as *Psychological Review*, *Psychological Bulletin*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, *American Psychologist*, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *Psychological Science*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Developmental*

Psychology, Psychology and Aging, Journal of Applied Psychology, Psychological Methods, Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, and the previously mentioned Nature.

These research accomplishments have resulted in numerous honors, among them the William James Book Award, the Sir Francis Galton Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Study of Creativity, the Rudolf Arnheim Award for Outstanding Contributions to Psychology and the Arts, the Henry A. Murray Award for “distinguished contributions to the study of individual lives and whole persons,” the Joseph B. Gittler Award for “the most scholarly contribution to the philosophical foundation of psychological knowledge,” the Theoretical Innovation Prize in Personality and Social Psychology, the George A. Miller Outstanding Article Award, the E. Paul Torrance Award for “the enhancement and spread of creativity ... and who are themselves creative thinkers,” and three Awards for Excellence from the Mensa Education and Research Foundation. I have also been elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Association for Psychological Science, and 12 divisions of the American Psychological Association. Even though 93% of my publications are single authored (and thus cannot easily benefit from co-author self-citations), my Google *h*-index remains an impressive 68, with 234 publications cited at least 10 times each.

With respect to the specific expertise underlying the proposed book, in 2014 I sole edited the very first handbook exclusively devoted to the subject of genius: *The Wiley Handbook of Genius* now represents the authoritative compendium on the topic. Admittedly, my singular expertise on the subject could also produce a rather dry read. However, for a quarter century I taught a popular general education course on Genius, Creativity, and Leadership, earning major instructional awards along the way—including the highest teaching honor bestowed by the American Psychological Association. So I do know how to make the topic accessible to the uninitiated. In addition, although most of my publications appear in technical journals, I have from time to time published in more popular outlets. A particularly appropriate example is my featured article on “The Science of Genius” written for a special issue of *Scientific American Mind* devoted to “Think Like a Genius” (Simonton, 2012). This piece was sufficiently well received to get reprinted in a slightly updated version a few years later.

Hence, if anybody can write a book like *The Genius Checklist*, I’m that person!

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