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COMMENTARY ON ERICSSON *ET AL.*

# Exploring the implications of putting the expert performance framework into practice

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We can count on Anders Ericsson and his colleagues to give us well written and articulated arguments that challenge our thinking. Since it is difficult to address the many points and sub-points of their extensive and meaty manuscript, we will limit our comments to two key issues that emanate from the piece: (a) the audiences that the authors address; and (b) the implications of their work for policy.

## Potential audience for Ericsson's work

Three audiences can greatly benefit from studying the target article carefully:

1. Researchers who are focused on giftedness in the form of 'g' or other abilities categorized as innate.
2. Practitioners who work with talented individuals in various domains.
3. Researchers who study the process conducted by the second group.

Ericsson *et al.* seem to focus more exclusively on the first group, which is a significant but limited representation of the gifted or talent development community.

Some scholars and practitioners argue that innate talents or gifts are necessary for eventual significant performances or ideas. But no serious scholar argues that innate abilities *are also sufficient* for greatness. We argue that it is just as difficult to isolate the contributions of disciplined practice as it is to isolate innate abilities. The research question that would put this argument to rest is to show how two groups, one with 'abilities' in that particular domain and another without, would perform with identical practice regimes, holding variances such as previous exposure, family values and psychosocial dimensions constant, especially in domains where creativity

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is the main criterion for renown. In other words, how does one account for people who practice as much as experts, but never achieve that stage of expertise?

The second audience that should be familiar with Ericsson *et al.*'s work is made up of the teachers and coaches who identify and prepare elite performers and scholars. Most members of this group are renowned for their skill in 'knowing talent when they see it'. Of course, by the time they 'see it', it's hard to distinguish how much a candidate's performance is due to practice, abilities, opportunities, personality or passion.

There is yet a third group of audience members, all of whom are familiar with Ericsson *et al.*'s work. This group of scholars draws from the work of the first two audiences. We include ourselves in this third group as those who have studied talent development first hand among concert performers, springboard and platform divers and science professionals. We agree that:

- Disciplined practice guided by an outstanding teacher/mentor is essential to developing exceptionally high quality performance.
- Commitment of years to instruction and practice is also essential.

However, the implications of the research conducted by Ericsson *et al.* have not been sufficiently fleshed out, to the regret of the latter two audiences listed above.

- In some areas where strength, speed and increasingly difficult physical feats of daring are the measures of greatness, money and effort are already going into analyzing training to maximize potential. Will financial support be invested in random assignment of individuals to such a regimen of training to see whether they are competitive? Without such studies, training efforts and practice cannot be isolated from other variables that contribute to the development of champions.
- What does disciplined practice look like when it comes to developing outstanding ideas rather than physically expressed strength, speed and daring routines?

### **Implications of Ericsson's work for policy**

Ericsson *et al.*'s main concern is with the scientific study of giftedness, removed from social context and judgments. Yet the current reality of gifted identification and assessment forces researchers to think about the policy implications of their work. For example, no roadmap for definitive, scientifically-based paths to talent development yet exist. Shall we therefore drop efforts to find and develop talent until such paths are sufficiently scientific? Should we invest whatever money currently exists in talent development programs into ensuring that every person who wants to be a concert violinist, research scientist or sculptor gets the very best teachers? Although this is a cause that meets the criterion of ideas for a perfect world, would such initiatives lead to wise use of resources and human capital? How can we be inclusive enough to ensure that those that might otherwise fall through the cracks are served while excluding those who won't be a good investment or are likely to lose interest?

Most of Ericsson *et al.*'s emphasis lies on practice, yet the role of other variables in producing greatness needs to be addressed. Although practice is an essential

component of becoming an expert, factors such as motivation, ambition, etc, are also essential, yet not sufficiently addressed in the target article. For example, according to Subotnik and Jarvin (2005), Juilliard teachers say that a student can be technically perfect, yet if he or she does not possess a 'feeling' for the music, the music can be a failure or not compelling. They acknowledge that there are tricks for mimicking emotion that can be taught to technically adept students, but that audiences respond to genuine interpretation.

We argue that in the imperfect world of limited resources, domain-specific abilities in combination with psychosocial characteristics and excellent teaching contribute to outstanding performance and the generation of great ideas. Domain-specific abilities, whether innate or developed through exposure, attract teachers seeking out protégés. In order to be great, however, an individual must go beyond his or her teachers. We contend that an individual's psychosocial and expressive dimensions are the variables that make the largest impact on a field or audience. For example, Laura Wilkinson, 2000 Sydney Olympic Gold medalist in the 10 meter platform diving event, fractured her foot six months before the Olympics, only began to practice two weeks before the event, yet dove perfectly and won. Because she and her coach did mental imagery instead of physical practice, other factors than practice and expert skill must have been involved in her success.

We look forward to the continuing evolution of the talent development field and welcome Ericsson *et al.*'s scientific examination.

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