Extended Theory on Selective Dependency: Debunking Natural Talent

RC Johnson, 2016

In studying shared tendencies and traits among creative, innovative, and successful individuals, I've run into common terms such as talented, gifted, genius, prodigy, etc. These words are often used superficially, and dangerously so. We still debate on matters regarding their actual existence, the full extent of their effect on individual achievement or success, as well as what causes talent or genius to emerge and how it is fostered. I have a slight issue with all these terms, but specifically the word 'Talent'. It isn't to say that talent doesn't have true meaning, or that talented or gifted individuals don't exist. However, when used frivolously, I believe these terms cause those who haven't yet been recognized as talented to believe that they aren't, and also cause the so called talented individual's hard work, effort, and skill to be undermined by simplifying their abilities to mere genetic predisposition. I would like to suggest a substrate of Selective Perception/Attention to possibly help further explain the true definition of talent called *Selective Dependency*. My theory is still, however, in its infancy and extremely undeveloped. It's simply opinion based on what little research I've done so far. I'm no expert in the field, but I'm hopeful that communicating the idea can bring progressive criticism and other points of view from the community.

We'll start with the definition of *Selective Dependency* (*SD*): which is, in short, the idea that our brains receive and process selective information based upon value, personal interest, cultural influence, or physical disposition. It's the involuntary sum of these that embody the individual's thumb printed thought pattern. In other words, we experience only that which our brain deems worthy to experience, resulting in individual expression or reaction based on those same restrictive principles.

I argue that, for instance, the essence of talent isn't simply an innate ability or craft, but rather a uniquely individual process of observation, interpretation, and comprehension relative to the individual and it's peers' expected progression in a known domain. For one to be 'talented' is for one to have an intuitive head start in any given practice. It's an individual having a natural edge over the competition. Meaning that one's talent is only recognized when compared to one's peer level of progression or skill in said practice. The recognition is extremely relative. Not only to the peers of the individual, but also to the culture's understanding of the established domain at the time.

Domain plays an important factor, so understanding true talent requires us to recognize the subjectivity of a vested domain. All domains or practices have been categorized by man. We collectively gravitate towards a certain practice, establish what is considered 'good' or 'right' in said practice, and base individual talent on one's ability to progress within the established rules. But where do the rules come from? What makes a drawing a good drawing? What makes it bad? How can we tell when someone is a talented musician or gifted athlete? We do so from distinguishing one's ability to quickly adapt to a rule for a specific domain or practice that we have collectively established. But what about domains that have yet to be discovered or settled? If we can agree that domains come from man, cultural progression and general understanding, we can agree that there are still domains and practices out there that have yet to be recognized. Which means that there is talent out there that has yet to be recognized as well. So you discovering your own talent may largely depend on whether a suitable domain has even been entrenched for you to be talented within.

Accessibility is another important factor for talent. Those who haven't had access to a certain domain have not yet been able to discover an aptitude or lack of within the domain. As a graphic artist, I often

wonder whether or not I would have grown up to be a sculptor had I been given access to Play-Do rather than a pencil and paper. I would have to say that I most likely would, although it didn't pan out that way. However, regardless of the medium, my aptitude for visual art was bound to be materialized. Two important things came out of my access to pencil and paper. The first was that my natural talent was discovered. Although we commonly would conclude that I'm talented in the practice of drawing, that isn't necessarily the core of my aptitude. But rather, the true talent is my *Selective Dependency*. My ability to observe the important aspects of the world around me, interpret and process the information in a visual tone, and easily comprehend how to recreate the important aspects of the information taken in. Done in such a manner that is considered to be 'good' or 'visually accurate' within the rules of the practice. The second important thing was that my access was abundant. Pencil and paper were extremely easy materials to come by. So my 'talent' was given a consistent chance to develop into a prominent skill during a time when my brain was in a developmental state and more malleable. Early access to a practice is very important, and may even be imperative to some domains and practices in exposing talent.

Metacognition is the key to understanding and developing talent once access to a domain is made. Our interpretation of our own thought methodology, even if subconsciously intuitive, allows us to persist in individual progression, regardless of the medium. Our awareness of ability not only allows us to improve and expand on the aptitude but also allows us to be creative in applying the ability to a vast spread of various practices and domains. Conversely, when one only knows of one's intuitive ability for a practice, without fully understanding the core of one's selective dependency or talent, one is restricted to persist and pursue in only a niche domain category. In other words, learn the core of your ability; fully understand your selective dependency, and you'll be able to transform it into a number of prominent skills. Alise Shafer Ivey, the founder of Evergreen Community School in Santa Monica, developed something she calls an 'Awareness Continuum' from studying the idea exploration and understanding process in children. This is what she believes to be the formation of metacognition:

The Awareness Continuum (Alise Shafer Ivey, Human Development Psychology):
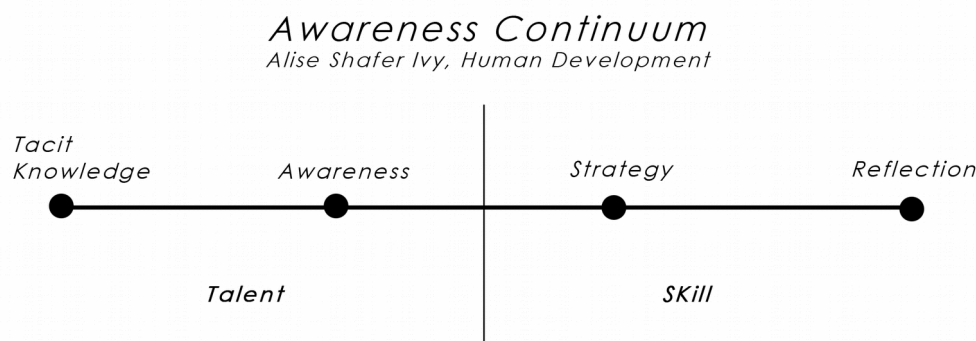
The continuum shows the subconsciously innate ability (tacit knowledge) being performed, the subject's awareness of his or hers own tacit knowledge, strategy development to improve efficiency, and reflection on what was developed so that repetition can ensue. In this case, practice makes perfect. However, like I stated earlier, while practicing and evaluating one's practices can lead to improvement, it can also be highly restrictive. To make sure this doesn't happen, we need to understand the differences of Talent Development and Skill Acquisition.

Skill Acquisition vs Talent Development is the main underlying concept of SD. This isn't to put one above the other, necessarily. Both are needed for true individual growth and should work in sync with one another. Skill Acquisition is simply gaining and applying new found knowledge. Learning a new trade, or motor skill. Whereas talent development starts with metacognition. Understanding your unique individual method of observation and processing, then applying this to different trades, allows you to capitalize on the intuitive nature. For most, if they have been called talented in one field, they end up only pursuing work or lifestyle in that field, believing it may be the only area of progression available to them. However, when we truly understand our SD, we can apply it to a vast majority of trades and progress in more ways than previously thought possible. Skill acquisition takes time and practice. Talent is innate, but also must be made known to the individual in order to be capitalized on. We move into our highest level of progression when we know our talent, and then apply it to how we acquire a new skill. Understanding this is crucial in order for the rise of novelty, innovation, and economic growth. Going back to the idea of domain, as mentioned in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's paper on Creativity, talent and ideas that transcend an individual domain into others is what often leads to revolutionary discoveries:

The inspiration for a creative solution usually comes from a conflict in the domain. Every domain has its own internal logic, its pattern of development, and those who work within it must respond to this logic. An intellectual problem may not be restricted to a particular domain. Indeed, some of the most creative breakthroughs occur when an idea that works well in one domain is transplanted in another. Many creative people are inspired by a gap or discrepancy in their domain that becomes obvious when looked at from the perspective of another domain. And then there are people who sense problems in "real" life that cannot be accommodated within the symbolic system of any existing domain.

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention)

The beauty of SD is in the unique individual application. In reality, we are all talented. And not in some superficial motivational sort of way. We literally all have individual capacities that aren't able to be replicated by anyone else. Understanding this will lead to a broader range curiosity, a stronger sense of purpose, a better life philosophy, a deeper level of passion, and progressive intrinsic motivation. Fostering a more dynamic, autotelic lifestyle. I hope this encourages all of us to accept our individuality. Capitalizing on our potential will open so many doors for our society. Pushing innovation and creativity to be a social standard. In a Google Talk by Steve Kolter titled 'Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance', Kolter's colleague, Jamie Wheal, also brings up this concept of natural individual awareness in regards to the "flow" state of human performance. Wheal ends his contribution saying *"You don't have to worry about changing who you are now. Just optimize your own bio-neuro self-system, and then see what your subjective inner experience is. And that's potentially game changing."*