

Quantity, not quality, the factor in creative success

by [phil](#) on Sunday May 15, 2011 4:25 PM

Malcolm Gladwell [writing in the New Yorker](#) (subscription-only) makes the case that it's quantity, not quality, that distinguishes the successful creatives. The article is behind a paywall, but here's the good excerpt:

The psychologist Dean Simonton argues that this fecundity is often at the heart of what distinguishes the truly gifted. The difference between Bach and his forgotten peers isn't necessarily that he had a better ratio of hits to misses. The difference is that the mediocre might have a dozen ideas, while Bach, in his lifetime, created more than a thousand full-fledged musical compositions. A genius is a genius, Simonton maintains, because he can put together such a staggering number of insights, ideas, theories, random observations, and unexpected connections that he almost inevitably ends up with something great. "Quality", Simonton writes, is a "probabilistic function of quantity."

Simonton's point is that there is nothing neat and efficient about creativity. "The more successes there are," he says, "the more failures there are as well"—meaning that the person who had far more ideas than the rest of us will have far more bad ideas than the rest of us, too. This is why managing the creative process is so difficult. The making of the classic Rolling Stones album "Exile on Main Street" was an ordeal, Keith Richards writes in his new memoir, because the band had too many ideas. It had to fight from under an avalanche of mediocrity: "Head in the Toilet Blues," "Leather Jackets," "Windmill," "I Was Just a Country Boy," "Bent

Green Needles," "Labour Pains," and "Pommes de Terre"—the last of which Richards explains with apologetic, "Well, we were in France at the time."

At one point, Richards quotes a friend, Jim Dickinson, remembering the origins of the song "Brown Sugar":
I watched Mick write the lyrics....He wrote it down as fast as he could move his hand. I'd never seen anything like it. He had one of those yellow legal pads, and he'd write a verse a page, just write a verse and then turn the page, and when he had three pages filled, they started to cut it. It was amazing. Richards goes on to marvel, "It's unbelievable how prolific he was." Then he writes, "Sometimes you'd wonder how to turn the fucking tap off. The odd times he would come out with so many lyrics, you're crowding the airwaves, boy." Richards clearly saw himself as the creative steward of the Rolling Stones (only in a rock-and-roll band, by the way, can someone like Keith Richards perceive himself as the responsible one), and he came to understand that one of the hardest and most crucial prats of his job was to "turn the fucking tap off," to rein in Mick Jagger's incredible creative energy.

Oftentimes I've been hampered by worrying about whether *this* piece or another will become great, often at the expense of reducing how much I write. I think I've had it backwards.

<http://philosophistry.com/archives/2011/05/quantity-not-quality-creative-success.html>