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Factors of Success in Good Will Hunting

Good Will Hunting is the story of Will Hunting, a 20-year-old parolee from South Boston, and his path to “success,” a slippery term he must learn to define for himself along the way. The movie begins with Will being arrested for assault when he and his friends jump a group of bullies. While he is awaiting trial, he catches the eye of a girl, Skylar, when he comes to the defense of a friend's wounded ego by wielding his astounding intellectual prowess. Then, Will catches the attention of an esteemed math professor when he, a lowly janitor at MIT, anonymously finishes a mathematical proof that has stumped the professor and his colleagues for years. The professor tracks Will down, finding him defending himself against the assault charge in court as eloquently and intelligently as any lawyer. After the trial, the professor strikes a deal with the judge and visits Will in jail to present him his options: he can serve time, or he can work on mathematical proofs under the supervision of the professor and see a therapist twice a week. Agreeing to the latter, Will is released from jail and the professor finds him a therapist. The movie intertwines Will's bi-weekly therapy visits, his romance with Skylar, and his mandatory mathematical work to create a portrait of good Will Hunting, a guy with a winning hand but that is too fearful to make a play.

Will Hunting is an analytical genius: he can easily solve problems whose answers have eluded award-winning mathematicians for years; with an entirely self-taught college education, he can run intellectual circles around cocky Harvard students; he can speak intelligently on just about any academic subject, from law to economic history to art; he even groks organic chemistry. According to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Will would probably be described as possessing an

exceptionally high level of logical-mathematical intelligence as well as a high level of linguistic intelligence. But, as Gardner's theory also suggests would be the case, Will does not possess as high of an intelligence in all areas, displaying no incredible bodily-kinesthetic feats or musical genius. This fact is exposed most clearly when he explains to Skylar: "I look at a piano, I see a bunch of keys, three pedals, and a box of wood. But Beethoven, Mozart, they saw it, they could just play. I couldn't paint you a picture, I probably can't hit the ball out of Fenway, and I can't play the piano." But when it comes to math, chemistry, analytical subjects, "I could always just play."

Although Will is incredibly intelligent, according to those around him he is not living up to his potential. This seems to be due to his lack of achievement motivation. Will is primarily motivated by competence motivation: striving to use his "cognitive, social, and behavioral skills to be capable and exercise control in a situation." However, when it comes to achievement motivation, "the drive to excel, succeed, or outperform others at some task"--proving mathematical theorems, for instance--he just isn't motivated. (Hockenbury, Don H., and Sandra E. Hockenbury. "Chapter 7." *Psychology*. New York, NY: Worth, 2010. 351. Print.) The professor is crushed by Will's lack of interest in using his genius, preferring to work as a janitor and live in Southie all his life rather than take a cushy job crunching numbers. Will claims that he doesn't share the professor's dreams, that he doesn't know what he wants to do but he envisions himself staying in South Boston all his life, working construction, going to the batting cages and out for drinks with Chuckie, their kids going to Little League together. It is fear that prevents Will from acting out of an achievement motivation, as his therapist, Sean, points out during one of their sessions, saying that when he looks at Will he doesn't see the "confident, intelligent man" that Will would like to be, but a "cocky, scared-shitless kid." He questions Will as to why, when he could be a janitor at any business under the sun, did he choose to work at MIT, one of the most prestigious math and science colleges in the country? The answer, according to Sean, is that Will *does* have dreams he wishes to achieve—both romantic and academic—but is too afraid to take the first step in realizing his dreams.

Will's fear of intimacy is a conditioned emotional response due to the trauma he experienced as a child. We learn late in the movie that he was orphaned, went through multiple foster homes, and was savagely abused by his foster father. Sean explains to the professor that Will was abandoned by the people who were supposed to love him the most so now he pushes people away before they have the opportunity to abandon him: a defense mechanism. Will seems to be analyzing the likelihood of someone abandoning him using an availability heuristic. According to Tversky & Kahneman, "when a rare event makes a vivid impression on us, we may overestimate its likelihood." (Hockenbury, Don H., and Sandra E. Hockenbury. "Chapter 7." *Psychology*. New York, NY: Worth, 2010. 300. Print.) Though the abuse he endured from his foster father occurred often for a period of time, and he lost key figures in his life, the vividness of these memories dwarfs the fact that he still has people in his life, his friends, who have *not* abandoned him. The defensive behavior he exhibits, pushing others away, is negatively reinforced: every time he pushes someone away and they do not abandon him (because he already left *them*), the desired result is achieved and the behavior is reinforced. As Sean says of this behavior in one of their sessions, this "super philosophy" allows Will to "go through life without really knowing anyone." The unwavering support of his friends, who he gets to spend much time with as long as he shuns new people and experiences, provides him with a conditioned reinforcer for this behavior as well. Throughout most of the movie Will struggles to stay in his comfort zone, until Chuckie gives a surprising monologue on how the best moment of his day is the few seconds between when he pulls up at Will's house and when Will comes to the door, that he always thinks then that maybe, just maybe, Will won't be there, that he will have left without a word to pursue greater things. At this point the conditioned reinforcer of Will's behavior is removed and, as predicted by Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, he then experiences extinction of the conditioned behavior of shunning intimacy, leaving without a word to chase after Skylar, the girl of his dreams.

Will Hunting's struggle to first define success for himself and then succeed illustrates how IQ is just one factor contributing to success. There are contributing factors from every portion of one's life:

from the intelligence one was born with, to the operant conditioning of one's childhood, to the availability of educational resources, to the expectations and accepted behaviors of one's social group, to one's own motivation—or lack there of. Some of these factors are fixed and others changeable, but whatever combination one has or creates for oneself in the moment will determine one's future success.