

Round 1

Let's dial down the hype about grit

Research Digest of the British Psychological Society

15 September 2017

In 2007, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth authored a paper on a trait she called "grit" which went on to arrest the attention of anyone interested in the secrets of success. TED talks and a 2016 book followed, wherein Duckworth explained how a combination of passion for a topic, and perseverance in the face of difficulties – the two facets of grit – were the recipe for achievement, a claim borne out by studies within schools and across the lifespan.

In recent years, however, researchers have become more critical of the scope and relevance of the concept. Now an article published in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, suggests grit gives surprisingly little insight into the world of creative success.

On first glance, grit seems a must for creatives. Countless artistic professionals associate their success with a passion for their chosen art form, and describe the necessity of perseverance in the face of obstacles and discouragement. But the value of grit isn't backed by the three new studies from a team led by Magdalena Grohman at the University of Texas.

They used Duckworth's publicly available "grit scale" (which taps passion and perseverance); a personality questionnaire measuring the Big Five traits; and a self-report measure of creativity, the Creative Achievement Questionnaire, which captures public achievement in ten different creative domains such as music or dance, with participants scoring higher if they've done things like played in a band or made an original composition.

In an initial survey of 131 university students (two thirds women, average age 19), their creative achievement scores correlated with their scores on the personality measure of Openness to Experience, but showed no significant relationship with either facet of grit.

A second larger study (325 students), with more comprehensive measures of grit and personality, found Openness again correlated with creativity, both on the Creative Achievement Questionnaire and on a measure of everyday creativity capturing frequency of activities such as writing or being a member of a camera club. But again, grit showed no correlation with either creative measure.

This seems surprising, but consider something: the first survey found the "passion" facet of grit (among other things, high scorers say that are not distracted by new ideas and projects) correlated negatively with scores on Openness to Experience. Given that higher Openness is

associated strongly with greater creativity, both here and in the wider literature, the negative correlation with grit should give us pause for thought.

Grohman's team were ahead of us, highlighting that Duckworth defines passion primarily as a commitment to one thing at the expense of others (another example: on the grit scale, passionate people score lower on the item "I become interested in new pursuits every few months"). Openness, as the name suggests, is all about becoming interested in new and different things. Moreover, there is no emotional element in the passion facet of grit as conceptualised by Duckworth: no measure of excitement, joy or elation by participating in the activity. Her notion of passion is less like the fiery, explorative artist, and more like a nerdy completionist devoting their time to finding that last sticker for their 1986 Panini sticker book. And that characterisation simply seems to miss the mark of what we mean by creative passion.

If this sounds unfair, consider Grohman and her colleague's final study, where they asked high school students to rate classmates' creativity, in terms of who produced the most original assignments. Their teachers were also asked to rate the students' persistence and passion, in whatever way they understood those terms, and both these scores correlated with higher student creativity. The students' self-reported perseverance (as measured by Duckworth's grit questionnaire) also correlated weakly with their creativity, but this association disappeared once the researchers took account of differences in personality scores.

The fact that teacher-rated passion and teacher-rated persistence correlated with creativity (even after accounting for personality), but that scores on the grit scale did not, suggests that passion is indeed relevant to creativity, but not as conceptualised by Duckworth's notion of grit.

It's worth noting that these were student samples rather than professional creatives, so further work would need to be done there too, but given the conceptual tension between passion and Openness, it seems plausible to expect similar patterns to emerge.

Where does this leave grit? Well, with a recent meta-analysis suggesting that grit has only modest associations with performance, and is strongly associated with the incumbent personality predictor of success, trait Conscientiousness (also true in this study, with correlations between .54 and .65), it seems appropriate to dial down the grit hype and treat this construct like any other psychological measure – of potential interest, but unlikely to be the breakthrough that changes society.

Round 2

Invictus

William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.

Round 3

The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus

Nicolas Poussin

1638



Final Round

The Character-Building Toolkit

David Brooks

The New York *Times*

9 January 2025

I've always liked the TV character Ted Lasso's definition of moral education. Being a soccer coach, he said, is "about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field."

A few years ago, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Angela Duckworth, got a bit more specific. She wrote that character formation means building up three types of strengths: strengths of the heart (being kind, considerate, generous), strengths of the mind (being curious, open-minded, having good judgment) and strengths of the will (self-control, determination, courage).

I'm one of those people who think character is destiny and that moral formation is at the center of any healthy society. But if you're a teacher in front of a classroom, with 25 or more distracted students in front of you, how exactly can you pull this off? Moral formation isn't just downloading content into a bunch of brains; it involves an inner transformation of the heart. It involves helping students change their motivations so that they want to lead the kind of honorable and purposeful lives that are truly worth wanting. It's more about inspiration than information.

And yet every day, there are schools that are doing it. On just about every campus I visit there are professors who teach with the idea that they can help their students become better people. It may be a literature professor teaching empathy or a physics professor who doesn't teach only physics but also the scientific way of life — how to lead a life devoted to wonder, curiosity, intellectual rigor and exploration.

This week I was at a convening on moral development hosted by the Making Caring Common project at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. The room was filled mainly with educators and as they described their work, it was like being offered a tool kit of concrete practices that together constitute an outstanding moral education. Here are some of the ideas the conversation stirred in me. I suspect that they could be helpful for parents as well as teachers or anybody who wants to build a society in which it is easier to be good:

A countercultural institutional ethos. People's characters are primarily formed when they live within coherent moral ecologies. They are formed within an institution — whether it's a school, a biker gang, a company or the Marine Corps — that has a distinct ethos, that holds up certain standards ("This is how we do things here"). In this way habits and temperament are slowly engraved upon the people in the group.

Richard Weissbourd, the faculty director of Making Caring Common, notes that over the past many years, schools and the broader culture have embraced the idea that the purpose of childhood is to prepare for individual achievement and happiness, rather than, say, caring for others or the common good.

The schools that focus on moral education stand athwart that tide. They have a sense of moral mission, that who you become is more important than what career track you pursue. They are thick institutions. They have a clear goal and everybody knows their role in achieving it. They have rituals to mark transitions. They have retreats and group travel so that people can see one another before the makeup goes on. They provide opportunities for struggle and growth. They often have sacred symbols and initiation rituals so that everybody knows they belong. As David Yeager writes in his book "10 to 25," when people are in their student years, their primary motivation is to experience feelings of status and respect. They will listen to and respond to challenges only if they feel respected and safe.

The moral skills. Treating people well involves practicing certain skills, which can be taught just as the skills of carpentry and tennis can be taught. First there are the skills of understanding — being good at listening and conversation, and eliciting life stories so that you can accurately see the people around you and make them feel seen.

The French writer Simone Weil wrote that attention "is the rarest and purest form of generosity." How you see people determines how you show up in the world. If you see with eyes of judgment, you'll find flaws, but if you see with generous eyes, you'll see people doing the best they can.

Then there are the skills of consideration, how to treat people well in the complex circumstances of life: how to offer criticism with care; how to break up with someone without crushing the person's heart; how to ask for and offer forgiveness; how to end a conversation or a dinner party gracefully. Many students today don't learn these skills at school or anywhere else.

Exemplars. Admiration is one of the most powerful moral emotions. When you look at the great historical figures, there's often some other historical figure they admired and lived their life toward. Nelson Mandela had Mahatma Gandhi; Abraham Lincoln had George Washington.

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had each other. “Tell me who your heroes are, and I’ll tell you how you’re going to turn out,” Warren Buffett once said.

Since Plutarch, teachers have been assigning books that put examples of greatness before young people. Occasionally there will be a match, and some young person will ignite with a holy fire.

Moral traditions. It’s hard to make good judgments unless you have clear moral beliefs. But unless your name is Aristotle, you probably can’t come up with a whole moral philosophy on your own. Fortunately, we are the lucky inheritors of many rich and varied moral traditions: Stoicism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Rationalism, Romanticism, etc. Schools can teach these traditions and students can decide which seem true to them. People become their best selves as they begin to embody the values of a specific moral tradition.

Deep reading. Students learn about these traditions by studying the great texts of each. It’s noteworthy that most great moral traditions ask people to passionately study difficult texts — whether it’s the Torah, “The Odyssey,” the Quran or even “Das Kapital.” The charge is not just to read certain books, but to devour them, to enter into them and struggle within them, until the deeper meanings enter the blood. Kafka famously said that “a book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.”

You don’t experience that if you’re just skimming a book enough to get through class. One of the great morally formative institutions of my life was the University of Chicago. From the vantage point of my 19-year-old self, my professors’ learning and wisdom was beyond immense. They burned with an enthusiasm that if we would only read the great books passionately and think about them deeply, we would know how to live. This is an infection I have never gotten over.

Self-confrontation. We’re all sinners in some way and each of us has a core sin. Maybe you’re a people pleaser or egotistic or judgmental. Dwight Eisenhower’s core sin was his terrible temper. When he was only 10 he threw a temper tantrum and his mom sent him to his room. About an hour later she came up and recited a verse to him: “He that conquereth his own soul is greater than he who taketh a city.” When he was 76, Eisenhower said that was one of the most important conversation of his life, because it taught him that if he was going to do anything positive in the world, he would have to conquer his anger. For many people the struggle against their core sin is the central drama of their life. They are formed by this confrontation; schools and parents can help people honestly appraise and challenge themselves.

Paid public service. Heroism is almost always the same — some good but flawed person, struggling on behalf of some ideal. Community service, whether it’s feeding the poor, sitting with the homeless or championing some cause, is not just to make society better; it is done to usher a transformation within the person doing the service. That happens when some ideal, held

in the imagination, is lived through practical work performed by the body. People don't become better versions of themselves as they acquire intellectual information; they get better as they acquire emotional knowledge — the ability to be made indignant by injustice, outraged by cruelty, to know how to gracefully do things with people, not for people. That kind of knowledge comes through direct contact with the problems. Some schools have even offered to pay students to perform service, because not everyone can afford to do it otherwise.

Community service gives the server a glimpse of what the moral motivations feel like — the challenges and rewards of caring for others. Community service often expands the servers' social range, bringing them into contact with people from different classes, political groups and generations. It teaches people that noble ideas are of little use if the people holding them don't know how to cooperate.

I once visited Valparaiso University in Indiana, where the students in the honors college not only study the great books but also have to put on a musical production about one of the ideas in the books. They don't just write papers about what a healthy community looks like. They have to create one while trying to complete a demanding task.

Our founders understood that democracy imposes greater moral demands on the citizenry than any other form of government. They were intent on building morally formative institutions that would produce such citizens. We've kind of dropped the ball on this over the past few generations. But signs of hope are everywhere to be found.