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Is Grit the Magic Elixir of Good Character?

Some Reflections on Angela Duckworth's New Book, *GRIT: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*

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1. Grit Fever

MacArthur-prize ‘genius’ Angela Duckworth has published her long awaited first book, [*GRIT: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* \(Scriber, 2016\)](#). Previously, Duckworth’s co-authored 2007 academic paper on the topic has been cited 1,157 times, according to Google Scholar, and her six-minute Ted Talk from 2013 on the subject of grit has been watched more than 8.4 million times. The new book has been receiving copious attention and raving reviews, especially in the popular media. Judging from those, grit is the best thing since sliced bread, and realising its potential to transform lives marks a true epiphany in the field of character studies. Notably, there have also been some [scathing reviews](#) from academics who accuse Duckworth of conservatism, anti-egalitarianism and even racism.

As often the truth lies, in our view, somewhere in between those extreme reactions. The research on grit is interesting, but there is so far too little of it. Hence, Duckworth’s conceptualisations, the empirical work underlying those conceptualisations and, in particular, the developmental and educational implications she draws from her work are all under-developed and premature. The jury is still out – and is likely to be so for a while yet – on whether grit is the new magic elixir of good character or just another snake-oil.

2. The Grit Thesis and Some Initial Worries

The fundamental thesis about grit is simple. It is a trait of character more powerful than IQ or talent in predicting life satisfaction and life success. The ‘plodders’ (p. 21) can tread where the luminaries stumble, just if they have enough grit. Those who come to this book expecting a deep philosophical argument, or summaries of extensive psychological and educational research, will be disappointed. *GRIT* is, after all, not a scholarly work but one written in the style of self-help books, with generous helpings of ‘just-so’ stories about Duckworth herself and her family and friends, and also various other ‘grit paragons’ from whom we are prompted to take our cue. Readers must begin by ploughing through numerous stories of this kind and wait until Chapter 3 for any show of an argument. Duckworth seems insensitive to

[worries that have been expressed](#) about the potential of paragon-and-role-model education to disempower rather than empower, and to produce grovelling, uncritical hero-worship.

There are many other and more substantive worries, however, lurking in the background, and when we read through the book, we were concerned by Duckworth's lack of attention to many of those. Partly this lack can be explained by the nature of the readership at which the book is pitched: enlightened members of the general public rather than academics. Partly it may be traceable to Duckworth's self-confessed dislike of confrontations and conflict (p. 130). There is precious little of the gladiatorial mind-set in Duckworth that revels in anticipating objections, chewing on counter-examples and spurting out fiery retorts. Rather, Duckworth prefers the tone of the charismatic educator who draws the audience in with an uncomplicated, buoyant message.

It would be unfair to write a full-scale academic review of a book whose aim is not to make an academic argument. In this Web essay, therefore, we will only gesture at some of our concerns and hope that opportunities will present themselves later of engaging in a solid academic debate about grit – once Duckworth or others have packaged the concept in more standard scholarly wrappings.

3. The Catchy Construct

'Grit' is a catchy term, but what does it really stand for? From earlier writings and an [interview with Duckworth](#), we had understood grit to stand for a combination of resilience (the capacity to bounce back from negative experiences) and persistence (the ability to continue towards the attainment of a goal over a long period of time in the face of possible boredom and distraction). Resilience, at least, has a reputable academic pedigree as a construct, although its efficacy may sometimes have been over-exaggerated. However, in this book, Duckworth barely mentions resilience but specifies grit rather as a combination of *perseverance* and *passion*. In her 10-item Grit Scale (p. 55), five items are meant to tap into the former construct and five into the latter. Judging from the formulation of some of the putative perseverance items (such as number 2 on responses to setbacks), Duckworth considers perseverance to cover the terrain of resilience, but perhaps to have a wider scope than that construct; we are not sure. The Grit Scale is a pure self-report instrument, and Duckworth frankly concedes that it is 'ridiculously fakeable' (p. 229). But Duckworth has a partners-in-crime resort to rely on if we object to the scale just because of its self-report nature: many respectable psychological instruments would then fall by the wayside, too.

We are worried, however, about the construct validity of ‘grit’. It is not as if the underlying ‘perseverance’ and ‘passion’ are robust psychological constructs with a long-standing history of academic conceptualisations and research. But there are some other constructs in the conceptual neighbourhood that do have such a history, notably the Big-Five ones of *conscientiousness* and *openness* to experiences. Does grit have incremental validity in predicting significant life outcomes beyond these two well-entrenched constructs? A [recent study](#) of 4,642 British 16-year olds suggests that it does not add anything substantial to conscientiousness. And what about self-regulation and self-efficacy, concepts with considerable academic credibility: how much of the work of grit do they already perform?

There is also the danger here of conceptual platitudes resulting in empirical vacuity. Suppose that the perseverance part of the Grit Scale really identifies persevering individuals. The most impressive pieces of research cited by Duckworth, such as about the varying attrition rates of West Point cadets (Chapter 1), suggests that people who score high on the Grit Scale persist on a task rather than giving up. But what does that then really tell us except that those with a perseverance trait tend to persevere? Bigger questions go unanswered about whether persevering on tasks is always conducive to human flourishing. There is clearly need for some further clarificatory work on what Duckworth’s core concepts really mean and what they tell us that we did not know beforehand.

4. ‘Gritty Villains’?

There has been an eerie tendency of late, both in academic and policy circles, to co-opt the concept of character to the cause of an amoral instrumentalist agenda, thus denuding it of its historic moral content, [harking back to Aristotle](#). In a recent [review in the New York Times](#), Judith Shulevitz expresses those very concerns by saying that ‘a focus on grit decouples character education from moral development. Duckworth never questions the values of a society geared toward winning’. There are certainly no references to ‘moral’ or ‘virtues’ in the Index, and Duckworth bites the instrumentalist bullet explicitly on p. 149 when she admits that ‘it is possible to be a gritty villain’.

Duckworth covers her bases, however, in the Conclusion (pp. 273–274) where she suddenly makes the following confession: ‘As a psychologist, I can confirm that grit is far from the only – or even the most important – aspect of a person’s character. In fact [...] morality trumps all other aspects of character in importance’. Duckworth then lists a number of moral qualities, correctly refers to them as ‘virtues’, and admiringly cites [David Brooks’s](#) helpful distinction between ‘resume’ (performance) virtues and ‘eulogy’ (moral) virtues. But

if the latter are overridingly important for positive life outcomes, why did she wait until the Conclusion to tell us?

5. A Golden Mean of Grit?

Psychologists Grant and Schwartz have [reminded us](#) of the old Aristotelian truth that positive character qualities have an inverse U-shaped curve. They have a tendency to veer into the extremes of deficiency on the one end or excess on the other. The trick is to hit the golden mean. Duckworth is singularly cavalier about those concerns in the case of grit, simply pointing out that her research so far has not identified any sort of ‘inverse U’ (p. 272).

The claim that grit has no visible excess seems to go against common sense. We all know people whose obstinacy and bullheadedness keeps them going beyond the point where they should have stopped. A [recent psychological experiment](#) seems to indicate that, in a game of luck, grittier subjects have a higher tendency to play past the point at which they should rationally have known to ‘fold ‘em’, as it says in the old Kenny Rogers song. While this is only a single experiment, similar findings abound in psychology about similar traits. For example, [‘loss aversion’](#) has been identified as an unfortunate trait, which is characterised by a dislike of losses relative to gains and can lead people to cling doggedly to bad decisions. Some forms of obsessive compulsive behaviour might even be seen as examples of grit gone pathological. As [one critic](#) has pointed out, Sisyphus had plenty of grit, but it did not take him very far.

Duckworth and her husband apply a ‘Hard Thing Rule’ to themselves and their kids: each family member must choose a discipline or an interest and apply themselves to it, not being allowed to quit until the activity has run its course. Far be it from us to question Duckworth’s method of bringing up her own children. However, what if you find out after a week that an activity you have chosen to pursue does not really fit your character? Why should it count as a character weakness, rather than simple good sense, to give this activity up and choose something else?

6. Where is the Wisdom?

Not only is there reason to cultivate medial, rather than excessive, forms of individual traits. We also have to ask how they fit into the holistic framework of a well-rounded life. Consider an orchestra. There might be powerful trumpet players in the orchestra who can blow the roof off a house, but we would not want them to simply blow away. Rather, an orchestra must perform in harmony, and we need a conductor to orchestrate it.

In the field of character, *phronesis* or practical wisdom is traditionally considered to occupy the role of an orchestrator and integrator. There will, for instance, be inevitable trade-offs to adjudicate between one character strength and another, when those happen to be at odds in a given situation. We rue the omission of any discussion of *phronesis* or wisdom from Duckworth's book. Those two words have not even found their way into the Index of *GRIT*.

7. Misidentifying the Target Group?

Duckworth considers grit to be of particular importance for under-privileged kids. In the KIPP schools (over 180 in the USA), which her philosophy has informed, grit is seen as magic elixir for kids from low socio-economic backgrounds: students who often have no army of friends and family to spur them on in their school work. The statistics from the KIPP schools are impressive, although we do not know how much of their effectiveness can be attributed to grit education.

There is something historically very odd about the use of grit as an anti-poverty tool, however. As Valerie Strauss pointed out recently in [The Washington Post](#), a much older discourse about 'grit' in the 19th century never focused on at-risk-children from the category of the poor. Rather, grit was seen as an antidote to the ease and comfort of wealth, which produced spoiled brats. The prevailing assumption was that the last thing children brought up in poverty needed was grit because they displayed ample amounts of it already. Obviously, times might have changed, and perhaps there is a grit deficit among today's disadvantaged groups. However, pondering the work that the Jubilee Centre is doing with [marginalised youth](#), we must admit that when we think of the resources that those seem to lack, grit is not the first thing which comes to mind.

8. Grit while 'Broken on the Wheel'?

Aristotle offered the sobering thought 2,300 years ago that those who maintain we can flourish 'when we are broken on the wheel, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good [...] are talking nonsense' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1153b19–21). For individuals to be able to cultivate character traits and to flourish, some external enabling conditions must be in place. Ignoring those betrays an individualist bias which unreasonably de-politicises the cultivation of character.

In Duckworth's defence it must be said that not a single word she has written in *GRIT* suggests that she is ignorant of structural problems, such as poverty and other hardships. It is

more what is left off the agenda that troubles us. Readers may thus possibly fall prey to the following illicit [romanticisation of hardship](#): if grit provides the pathway to success, and it stems from persevering through hardships, then the best way to produce grit is to secure continued hardships.

This inference is nowhere as much as hinted at by Duckworth, but she would have been well served by an explicit pre-emptive move in her book that pushed it off the table once and for all.

9. Educating Grit

One of our biggest disappointments with *GRIT* is how under-researched its educational message is. To be sure, the book includes a sensible discussion of the interplay of genes and education in the development of character traits; and the plethora of individual stories that Duckworth offers provide broad hints about how grit is ideally educated and/or acquired. However, those who expect breath-taking research results about the effectiveness of grit interventions – say, at the primary or secondary school levels – will look in vain. Duckworth admits that most of what she has learnt about the development of grit so far comes from qualitative interviews (p. 90), but that admission seems to be at odds with the focus in positive psychology (to whose camp Duckworth belongs) on avoiding the ‘grandmotherly tone’ of humanistic psychology and supplanting it with hard data. Some of Duckworth’s own observations about education boil down to mere truism, such as ‘One reason we change is that we learn something we simply didn’t know before’ (p. 87). The formula given in Chapter 5, of finding an *interest*, *practising* it relentlessly, inspired by a higher *purpose* and *hope* of attainment, is sound but simplistic. At least Duckworth admits that ‘we need more research on the topic’ (p. 201).

Not only do we need much more nuanced and better researched *general* educational advice, we also require information about the potential *individualisation* of grit education. As Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, hitting the golden mean of character (recall Section 5 above) is all about learning to steer clear of the more contrary extreme by dragging ourselves off in the opposite direction ‘as they do in straightening bent wood’ (1109b6–7). But what is the ‘more contrary extreme’ depends on the individual. Hence, every attempt to develop a character trait such as grit must be geared towards specific individual needs. This is one more important topic not dealt with in *GRIT*.

10. Concluding Remarks

Despite all the above qualms and queries, we do not think that *GRIT* has been written in vain. It provides considerable food for thought and suggests exciting venues for future research. It also does well in reminding us of the proverbial truth of how far sheer determination can take you in life even if the odds are stacked against you. We particularly appreciate pages 273–274, about the limited scope of grit and the need for a moral compass. If Duckworth had started, rather than ended, with the content of those pages, and used it as a springboard of her argumentation, the core message of the book would have been much more persuasive.

Suppose a nutritionist had written a book about the need to eat porridge every day, and then concluded with a couple of paragraphs about how porridge is not enough but only works as part of a balanced diet. No one would object to such a presentation because most people know about the need for a balanced diet anyway and only require gentle reminders, from time to time, of that truth. Here is the disanalogy, however. There is a powerful agenda in the field of character and character education which misconceives ‘character’ as comprising *exclusively* resilience, grit and other performance virtues. Unfortunately, despite her belated caveat, Duckworth’s *GRIT* does little to dispel that misconception but much to fuel it.

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