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EDUCATING THE GRITTY

A photograph of a small green seedling with four leaves growing out of a crack in a grey concrete surface. The background is a blurred, dark grey surface.

**GRIT IS PASSION AND
PERSEVERANCE OVER TIME**

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental part of keeping the “American Dream” alive. The idea of this dream is that anybody in America has access to opportunities that provide socio-economic improvement or stability. This ideal that we strive for as a nation has been increasingly tied with education. Higher education, specifically, is one of the main tools that most in America use to climb the socio-economic ladder. Even those that are not from America come to our institutions of higher education for the promised value that these universities bring.

The life-changing nature of education, therefore, puts a large emphasis on the importance of admissions. The gatekeepers into higher education dictate the lives of many people, often having a large impact on a person’s life trajectory. It is important then, that these gatekeepers are doing their best to pass accurate and fair judgements on the applicants to their institutions. There is no basis to claim that this is

not what admissions committees in America’s universities are doing. Actually, I believe that admissions committees have been doing as much as they can to think about criteria from multiple perspectives and dimensions. But this does not mean that their judgements are perfect. Controversy surrounds this opaque process as evidenced by lawsuits and the changing of admissions criteria (SAT optional, adversity scores, etc.).

In this paper, I hope to explore a term coined by professor and researcher Angela Duckworth called “grit.” I hope to provide some context and nuance about what grit is, what it isn’t, its importance, and its potential use in admissions.

WHAT IS GRIT?

Grit, as defined by Prof. Angela Duckworth is made up of two parts, “passion” and “perseverance.”

Grit is a term that has been coined by University of Pennsylvania professor Angela Duckworth.

Prof. Duckworth has been long obsessed with the idea of predicting success. Who becomes successful in their fields, across many disciplines, and how we may be able to foster this trait. For the longest time in her childhood, and I suspect for many of us as well, the idea of talent, IQ, or genius has always been stressed. She claims that the statements of “Michael Phelps was born to be a swimmer” or “the valedictorian of our class is just smarter than the rest of us” are too simplistic.

Prof. Duckworth argues that we are distracted by this idea of natural talent but love to tell those stories because it simplifies their journey. The problematic thing is that it discredits what her research says is even more important, a specifically defined idea of “grit.”



THE IMPORTANCE OF GRIT

Grit came to prominence through two of Prof. Duckworth's more famous research experiments. One with the United States Military Academy at West Point and the other with the national spelling bee competition. In both, grittier people found more success. In addition to this, Prof. Duckworth makes the assertion that grit counts twice. It takes grit to practice and hone a skill to mastery. It then also takes grit to produce/perform when it really matters.

Being gritty is more important than being talented when framed in this way. The equation that Prof. Duckworth outlines is as follows:
 $\text{talent} \times \text{effort} = \text{skill}$ and $\text{skill} \times \text{effort} = \text{achievement}$

Grit, as defined by Prof. Duckworth is made up of two parts, “passion” and “perseverance.”

I find her word choice a bit odd here because she defines passion, not as the white-hot fire that we typically think of, the passion of love or lust, the passion that erupts in us and quickly dissipates. Rather, in her book “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance” she has the following to say about passion:

“The common metaphor of passion as fireworks doesn't make sense...fireworks erupt in a blaze of glory but quickly fizzle, leaving just wisps of smoke and a memory of what was once spectacular...passion [is] a compass - that thing that takes you some time to build, tinker with, and finally get right, and that then guides you on your long and winding road to where, ultimately, you want to be” (pg. 60).

DEFINING PASSION

Passion is a north star that helps guide individuals. Duckworth argues that passion, especially when younger, is not always specific but is something that drives the very sense of who you are and the things that you do.

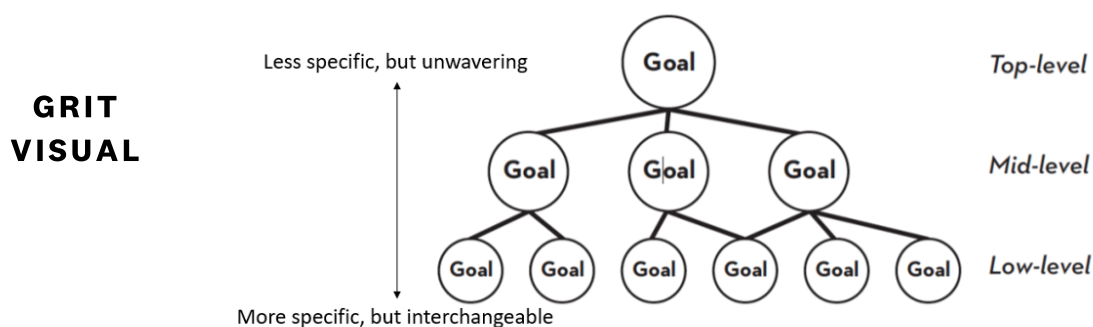
Analyzing the second part of grit is the idea of perseverance. I find that this word choice to be better. The idea of perseverance that she describes is one of “stick-to-it-ivness” of being able to roll with the punches, not let setbacks deter you from your passion nor let anything distract you from achieving it.

In a recent podcast with Brené Brown, Prof. Duckworth is quoted saying that the simplest definition of grit is “passion and perseverance over time.”

Passion is essentially having an idea of what the top of your goal pyramid is and

perseverance is knowing that your goals are structured in such a way that they lead up one layer at a time towards the top.

The top-level goal is your passion. As we go through life, this passion becomes more and more clear but as we are starting out it may seem vague. I recall hearing many of my MBA peers describe to me their “long-term post-MBA goal” as “making an impact on sustainability, making an impact on social issues, leading an organization, etc.” As we get older these goals start to materialize to goals such as “I will join XYZ company and lead their carbon reduction efforts by implementing ABC strategy.” But the key here is that the idea of sustainability has never wavered, from a time when somebody is young until they grow old, they are still chasing after their top-level goal, it just becomes clearer and more specific.



A visual representation of grit is presented as a goal pyramid.

GRIT GROWS WITH AGE

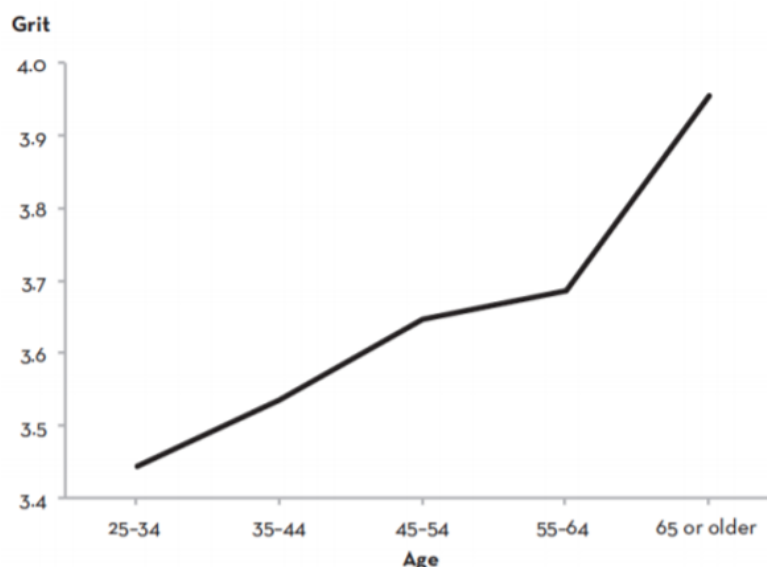
The opposite is true for lower-level goals. These are specific but are not integral for you achieving your top-level goal, they can waver and be replaced. An MBA example I think of here is that many of us come into the MBA hoping to join XYZ firm in ABC industry. Many of us face disappointment when we get dinged by our most favored employer. Gritty people understand that this is just a low-level goal that can be replaced with another low-level goal that can still lead to your passion. One might have come into an MBA program thinking that they will make an impact on sustainability long term by first joining McKinsey. If this person is instead rejected from McKinsey but ends up at Walmart, a gritty version of this person will still realize that this path leads to their top-level goal. Lower-level goals are interchangeable.

One who lacks passion but has perseverance may have a visual that looks more like a list. A bunch of to-dos, many ambitious, but not really tying together or working towards a common top-level goal.

One who lacks perseverance but has passion may simply just have a short goal list with one or two big items. Many of us in reality are stronger in one vs the other (passion or perseverance).

Prof. Duckworth's research shows that many of us have more perseverance than passion, but this can change. Her research also shows that not only can passion change, but overall grit can grow and it gets stronger over time.

A chart presented below is from Prof. Duckworth's research showing that grit grows with age.



GRIT

Grit grows with age

GRIT OVER TALENT

"Being distracted by talent is something that we have in our nature as human beings."

We consistently talk about genius, IQ, test scores, grades, etc.

When we see athletes or somebody who excels in the arts, we typically say something along the lines of "wow, look how talented they are." This is problematic for two reasons:

- 1. It discounts the hard work that successful people put behind the scenes when they engage in "deliberate practice"**
- 2. It has a psychological effect on us where we assign success to natural ability/talent which gives us personally, an excuse to not try harder**

Let me dive deeper into these two reasons:

- First, successful people often put in thousands and thousands of hours into "deliberate practice" (discussed by both professors Herbert Simon and K. Anders Ericsson). This term of deliberate practice is essentially about practicing by reaching beyond your limits in a painful yet purposeful way.
- On the flip side, another thing that experts exemplify is a state of "flow," a term made famous by researcher and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This is a state of complete concentration "that leads to a feeling of spontaneity... effortless...like you don't have to think about it, you're just doing it." This is most likely what we are witnessing when we watch experts during performance game time. We see the flow, the effortlessness, and think "wow, it comes so naturally to them." We fail to attribute this level of skill to the hours of deliberate practice. This too is problematic because we can then come to the conclusion that we simply should not try or put effort into something because there are others out there that are just so naturally more gifted than us.

DISTRACTION OF TALENT AND OUTCOMES

This distraction is consistent throughout our entire time in the educational system. We are obsessed with measuring outcomes. How well a student does on a test, in a class, in a sporting event, in a performance, etc. Rarely do we measure/reward effort like how many hours a student spends studying, how deliberate they were in their practice/learning, how many shot puts one threw before they broke the school record, or how many times she painstakingly sang that song to excel in her solo, etc. Especially as it comes to admissions, this is a huge problem.

Admissions committees in various colleges (if they haven't done so already) need to destroy^[1] the predominant point of view that students who have had successful results in high school (grades, test scores, extracurriculars) are bound to excel in college. As we know, past performance is not an indicator of future success. Admissions would find more success for their institutions if instead, they focused on understanding an individual's grit and potential grit score.

[1] This destruction is an activity that would be defined as a "box 2" activity under Prof. Vijay Govindarajan's "Three Box Solution"

IDEA OF "POTENTIAL GRIT"

When conducting my research for this paper, I started to develop my own ideas for something called “potential grit.” As Prof. Duckworth has pointed out in her research, grit grows over time. It is therefore unrealistic to expect high school seniors to have paragon levels of grit itself. The implication for admissions is that they are essentially looking for traits/activities that young adults do that eventually lead to levels of high grit and success.

Prof. Duckworth mentions that there are three main steps in developing grit overtime outlined below:

- 1. Discovery – taking time to explore various interests, figuring out what you like and do not like**
- 2. Development – sticking with one or two things to develop skills and insights (learning how to find novelty in developing interests, not just new various interests)**
- 3. Deepening – committing to one high-level passion that you will continue to deepen throughout life**

If we agree, generally, to the three-step process above, it would be nearly impossible for us to find a high school senior who has already reached step three. Instead, where we might unearth

for grit is their progress in steps one and two. Here I want to recognize that people from differing backgrounds such as cultural, social, gender, etc. will all have various levels of opportunity to develop grit. The major caution or critique of Prof. Duckworth’s work is that teaching ideas of grit may sound like a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” type of victim-blaming. That the term grit is used to blame victims of systemic oppression or abuse. While there are very valid cautionary tales and insights in many critiques, I believe that the best way to counter these critiques is in the implementation of the idea of grit. When using an idea of grit or potential grit, we must recognize the inequality that is pervasive in our society and understand how grit may be developed across as many differing backgrounds as possible.





GRIT IN YOUNG ADULTS OF VARIOUS BACKGROUNDS

In some ways, our interpretation of how gritty a student is may very well be biased based on socio-economic background. Grit more easily presents itself for individuals who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds as they have more time and money to spend exploring their interests and pursuing them (step 1). For example, excelling in an extra-curricular like the robotics team is a luxury. Having the time to dedicate to robotics, having the finances to afford such a hobby, and to be at a school that offers such a thing are all indicative of a higher socio-economic background. But excelling in robotics, learning about circuits and parts, building, competing, trying to win/overcoming failure, are all evidence of a gritty student who may have higher level goals in the field of STEM.

**What about those of lower socio-economic backgrounds?
How does grit manifest itself in them?**

I recall my own story to think through examples of this. When I first moved to Honolulu Hawaii, we did not have a permanent place to live. My dad did odd jobs for a motel in exchange for a room. Oftentimes we would have to move from one room to another based on hotel demand. All the while my father was continually looking for a stable permanent job. Financial insecurity has been part of my life since I can remember. And growing up, I always did everything I could to help my parents whether it be saving money by forgoing an excursion or interest or working a part-time job throughout high school to be able to contribute to the family. So even though I went to Punahou Academy (because my parents pushed me knowing it would help), I still did not have the finances to be involved with the robotics team nor did I have the time with my part-time job.

GRIT CAN MANIFEST ITSELF IN EVERYBODY

But I was gritty, I just did not know grit was important for colleges nor did I really know how to talk about it. At that time, my highest level goal was to help secure financial stability for my family (my passion you could say) and I did everything I could along the way, big or small, to make that happen (perseverance). Some extracurriculars were cheaper such as certain sports or choir, but my lack of time still held me back from fully exploring those avenues.

So what does grit look like in those of lower socio-economic backgrounds? It is deeply personal and profound. It deals with finances, health, safety, abuse, oppression, and many other obstacles.

It is about overcoming more difficulty to talk about topics. I do not contend that these examples of grit are only reserved for those of lower socio-economic backgrounds. Those that are more well off might still have many personal issues and obstacles to overcome with really challenging high-level goals. But these might be some of the ONLY ways for those less fortunate to showcase grit. Regardless of race, gender, geography, nor socio-economic background, grit can manifest itself in everybody.

We (as a society, admissions committees, future leaders) must know how to and work hard to look for deeper levels of grit for those who face disadvantages.

USING GRIT IN ADMISSIONS

Grit and its principles are not exactly new. Universities have been looking for more and more ways to eliminate racial and socio-economic biases in their processes for years now. But I believe that they can be more effective in their cause by taking an approach based on grit by being more intentional.

The first step is to signal that these are criteria that are important, maybe even more important, than standardized test scores. We see the beginning of this happening accelerated due to COVID-19, universities are not requiring standardized tests. But does this hurt or help most applicants? Are we putting more emphasis on extracurriculars that look impressive, alumni connections who can vouch for families/students, or other dimensions that also benefit those of higher socio-economic background? Colleges and universities need to work with high schools and governments in order to signal to young students the importance of grit in order to help foster grit growth earlier on in life.

In lieu of standardized tests, universities and private companies should help to accelerate the use of a grit-based system that is deeply personal that gets to truly understand the individual.

This is not an easy ask but the use of technology can definitely help achieve this goal. Currently, on the market, there are resumé reading software programs that employers and universities use. The software uses machine learning, artificial intelligence, natural language processing, and a large amount of data to read a resume, interpret it, and give a score along multiple dimensions. When I used VMock for example, it analyzed the verbs I used, the stories I told, to score me along various dimensions such as leadership, skills, creativity, etc. With further time and research, we as a society should be able to use technology to read and analyze student essays to rate their stories on dimensions related to grit!

Software programs such as this can be used both in the coaching of students, helping them write more personal and relevant stories that showcase strength along important dimensions customized to their story, and also in the admissions committees at universities themselves to help select who to accept.

EDUCATION AND GRIT

Providing equity and opportunity through education

However, we must also be cautious to not bake into our technologies biases we already perpetuate. We do this by being conscious when implementing such technologies to understand, as I've mentioned above, exactly how to look for grit in people of various backgrounds and to help people grow their grit.

Alfred North Whitehead wrote a book called *Nature and Needs of Higher Education* (1952) in which he claimed that the purpose of higher education "is to take those students who demonstrate intellectual promise and interest and to carry their formal education to the highest level of development of which they are capable." I disagree with Whitehead that intellectual promise comes first, if even at all. But I do agree with Whitehead that interest/grit should be used as a criterion because the grittiest people are more sure to come into an institution, make the most out of the vast accumulation of assets, in order to excel in whatever chosen field and become leaders who contribute to society.

From my point of view, the purpose of higher education is to take young adults with the highest potential grit, help them to make the most use of the institution, and help them grow their passion and perseverance. It is not about intellect nor about socio-economic status. It is about providing equity and opportunity.

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