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Abstract

Recent research in psychology introduces "grit" as a characteristic observable in successful students (Duckworth, 2016). Popular applications of the grit framework can further the notion of "rugged individualism," placing the onus of achievement upon the individual. This perspective can lead failures to be considered the result of deficiencies, overlooking effects of structural factors associated with learning. Sociologically, certain applications of grit can be limited in explaining mobility: they may not address the social contexts of the people they assess; or, they may lack a dynamic understanding of students' cultures. This article applies a qualitative, sociological framework offering "agency" as a concept to complement grit and understand social structures, which facilitate student mobility. Through in-depth interviews, this research gives voice to students who experienced significant upward mobility, despite low-income backgrounds. These cases suggest that interplay between personal agency and a supportive social structure is necessary for students to navigate barriers towards academic and professional success.

Keywords

achievement, grit, agency, achievement gap, education, inequality, race

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Grit and Agency: A Framework for Helping Students in Poverty to Achieve Academic Greatness

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The United States celebrates "rugged individualism" as a cultural value believed to be tied to success. This longstanding notion implies that Americans reap what they sow and that individual effort is the key determinant for one's future outcomes. Relatedly, recent research in psychology has introduced "grit" as an important characteristic observable in successful students (Duckworth, 2016). Grit highlights the importance that "passion and persistence towards long-term goals" can have to help students overcome difficulties. Some popular interpretations of this framework reinforce the idea that the onus of academic achievement should rest upon the individual student (Tough, 2013), which could lead failures to be considered a result of a deficiency in the student, rather than problems with the system (McWhorter, 2000; Patterson & Fosse, 2015).

Sociologically, certain *applications* of grit can be limited in understanding the academic achievement of students: (a) they do not address the social contexts (e.g., families, networks, demographics) or structural challenges of the young people whose achievements they assess, and (b) they are not necessarily rooted in a dynamic understanding of these students' cultures, which can change and adapt under different environmental contexts. It is important to realize that students in poverty may have setbacks that keep them from realizing what goals to be passionate and persistent towards in their lives.

This article is based on a research study that applies a social frame to grit research, through locating and recognizing *agency*, in order to more broadly understand factors which constitute the success of students of color from low-income households. The qualitative study consists of interviewing students (*n* = 40) who have increased their personal agency through experiencing high levels of academic and/or professional success. Empirical evidence in social sciences indicates that structural inequalities faced by students with disadvantages can make it more difficult for them to succeed than for those from more advantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Fruchter, Hester, Mokhtar, & Shahn, 2012). This implies that successful students from troubled backgrounds likely benefit from both personal and social factors that facilitate their upward mobility. This paper offers contemporary hypotheses on how an interplay exists between grit and agency, which if fostered, can increase student achievement. To unlock this interplay, the guiding question in this study has been: How do students with initial disadvantages, who experience levels of success, navigate obstacles to succeed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an ongoing debate about whether structural conditions or individuals' abilities are more influential upon one's educational outcomes. Within sociology, structure versus agency can be considered the classic disciplinary dilemma. In the context of education, some scholars emphasize that schools provide enough opportunity for students with personal and structural disadvantages to succeed, attributing students' failures to exhibiting cultures that reject academics or individual lack of effort (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1992). Cultural deficit models and similar approaches have been widely used to explain underachievement, with

popular outlets sometimes claiming that low-performing students are prone to self-sabotage and victimization (Henry, 1994; McWhorter, 2000; Tough, 2013).

Other camps, focused primarily on structural inequalities, contend that social origin and socioeconomic status (SES) trump schooling effects in predicting educational attainment and SES returns (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Structural and neo-Marxian accounts often find that within the capitalist ideology and economic system of American societies, schools can serve to reproduce inequity and maintain the status quo (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Giroux, 1983). And micro-level, interactionist accounts show that disciplinary measures and teacher expectations are often shaped by race and class biases, which can negatively affect the academic tracks that students are on, as well as their likelihood for attending college (Delpit, 2012; Oakes, 1985). As such, demographic characteristics continue to be dominant predictors of college-readiness levels—with students' race, home zip code, and income levels at the top of the list (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Fruchter et al., 2012; Sharkey, 2013).

However, popular applications of recent research on grit can further the belief that individual aptitude is the key determinant for one's future outcomes and mobility. Agency may be more context-sensitive than grit in understanding how individuals can impact their lives, especially in the social context of education. This article offers the following definition for agency, adopting and synthesizing the work of scholars in sociology and psychology: Agency must be context-specific. While it can manifest through action and outcome, agency can also be promoted by internalized qualities like self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Agency can exhibit resistance, as a means of expressing individualism (Genovese, 1976; Kelley, 1996), but more importantly, *successful* agency benefits from critical thinking on one's social position

and deliberate efforts taken to change one's circumstances for the better (Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2016; MacLeod, 2010). It is related to the unique circumstances and social position of each person to assess their specific capacities for change (Giroux, 1983; Kundu, 2016).

It is critical to acknowledge that schools are primary sites in the development of children: they teach students to be culturally acclimated and provide them with cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Durkheim, 1972). The school ecosystem causes some students to be increasingly marginalized, as they face greater threats to their social identity formation in academic settings (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). This makes it more difficult for these students to simultaneously maintain a cultural identity and succeed in schools, where the non-dominant forms of capital they express are often shunned by school administrators (Carter, 2005). At the same time, society can be considered in a blurred state of "liquid modernity," with less clear boundaries between social institutions, like schools, and traditional groups, like families (Bauman, 2013). With these shifting spheres in children's lives, there is a greater need for novel approaches to make sense of pedagogy that can shape sense of self and subsequent achievement.

Also, while students who are able to defy expectations of failure likely possess high levels of grit, grit frameworks currently do not address how they reconcile their identities with achievement ideologies in the face of structural disadvantages. At the same time, attention towards psychological capital (Seligman, 2002) is quite important in achievement discourse. Aligned to perspectives in positive psychology, psychological capital views individuals as constantly in a positive developmental state. This involves locating where people have room for growth (not where they are deficient), paying attention to their self-efficacy, confidence, hope, and resilience (Seligman, 2002).

In education, research—which offers a bridge between these various perspectives and disciplines—is needed. Psychological, social, and cultural capital must each be observed and accounted for together, to make sense of what constitutes the success and mobility of students. This paper reconciles these divided discourses by expanding upon grit research to include the voices of young adults who make for exceptional cases, *experiencing levels of success* in their lives *despite initial disadvantages*. Exceptional cases sometimes serve to substantiate deficit models, viewing achievers as outliers and ostracizing the wider spectrum of students that underachieve. This research rejects such a narrow view of achievement culture, aiming to show instead, that success is possible over wide variability in disadvantages.

METHOD

This paper adds two components to grit-related considerations through characteristics associated with agency: (a) observing how individuals can learn to navigate opportunity structures (schools, higher education, and enrichment programs) and exhibit help-seeking behavior, and (b) investigating the role of support systems through identifying the role of social and cultural capital in these individuals' lives (Bourdieu, 2011) and hypothesizing how other students can learn to acquire them. Social capital (or resources gained through networks and relationships) and cultural capital (the behavior, knowledge and skills that are gained and signaled through membership in different groups) are used together as the main theoretical framework for this study to understand how students can increase their social mobility.

This study follows sociological methods and student-level analysis of qualitative data that focuses on achievement mindsets and mobility. The data consist of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a sample of mostly young adult participants (ages 18–25) and a few adult participants (ages 25–40), 10% of the sample, who became college students later in life. Students were interviewed with the intention of learning about the individual and social factors that may have fostered their characteristics of grit and agency, while remaining open-ended enough for participants to direct the conversation about their lives and disclose what they felt comfortable. The semi-structured method allowed the interviewer to probe at emerging themes when necessary. Interviews were chosen as a data source because the research intended to learn about their life from childhood to present day, including formative events and individuals.

Participants and Sampling

The data derive from 40 interviews of participants from very low-income levels, at or below poverty, mostly of Black and Latino descent. The sample pool is evenly split between male and female participants with 20 males and 20 females. All students voluntarily opted-in to be interviewed, learning about this project from programs that assisted in recruitment. This includes two after-school enrichment programs in New York City, which select participants through need-based considerations that fit the researcher's selection criteria, and one selective honors program at a New York City community college where the majority of students also are from low-income, and often immigrant households. As such, all participants grew up in poverty. This selection process located young adults who exhibited grit-mindsets and levels of success amidst adversity through the help of support systems. They are all on a path of upward social mobility. By exhibiting these characteristics, these participants also demonstrate agency and improvement of circumstances in their lives.

Data Analysis

Locating and grouping similarities in recurring themes allowed data to cluster and aggregate into social levels. Approximately 50 hours of interview data were documented through a

coding phase, charting phase, and mapping/ interpretation phase. Data were collected and transcribed individually, which helped to identify possible themes. Interview data from the subjects were analyzed using open coding and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The codebook continued to develop until the last interview was conducted, as new themes continued to emerge. The final codebook included the most prevalent and emphasized themes mentioned. Patterns from the data were used to form theories on individual and social factors that contribute to the academic success of students with disadvantaged situations, as well as the interplay between grit and agency.

Three of the major themes uncovered during the coding process included "Mental Health," "Networking," and "Goal Formation," all of which are particularly important for helping students in poverty succeed academically and professionally. Within each theme, categories were created based on the most prevalent concepts mentioned by participants as important. While the larger research project uncovered more than six overarching themes (yielding more categories and subcategories), this paper focuses on three themes and 10 categories, which present a more succinct overview for educators and mentors, on factors for helping youth in poverty who are placed "at-risk" to succeed and attain socially mobility.

FINDINGS

Through studying this unique population's ability to succeed and increase agency, this research-framework was hypothesis-generating; this research developed ideas to understand how students with initial disadvantages learn to critically think about challenges and their abilities to overcome them. The stories explained how low-income students first became aware of systemic problems that directly affected their lives, and then how they conceptualized navigating around them. This is closely related

to Freire's (1970) concept of praxis: students reflect on their limit situations in the process of becoming emancipated from them, while also expanding their worldview. Not only this, but they hold onto what they have learned, influencing their future thinking and action in new circumstances as they continue to strive for mobility in their lives.

Attempting to understand students, their views, and their actions on such a dynamic scale implies respecting their identity and personhood. Each person's unique, empirical realities and social origin are important to consider and address when crafting scaffolded, effective strategies for growing their grit and agency towards specific goals. This can be a particularly important perspective to have in educational contexts, where teaching and learning are social processes between students and teachers (Freire, 1970). Poor students of color do not simply underperform because of socioeconomic factors and because wealthier students attend wealthier schools. Rather there is also an intricate interexchange of lifelong knowledge, skills, and social networks and other factors between schools, families, and students that contributes to the disparate outcomes (Noguera, 2003; Patterson & Fosse, 2015).

The table of themes and categories (see Appendix) is presented to show a detailed overview of the many factors, influences, and considerations that facilitate the success of youth who are initially "at-risk." The first theme "Mental Health" indicates that students often have a keen self-awareness of their emotions as well as ability to monitor happiness and depression. This often is the result of having dealt with many complex responsibilities from an early age, including but not limited to, taking care of one's siblings while parents work, being responsible for helping pay the family's rent, or overcoming a drug-addiction or traumatic experience. This ability to take one's own mental health-temperature is related to resilience, knowing that negative feelings are fleeting, but

also to let them run their course. The trauma—violent or sexual—that some students have faced is not viewed as something that will eventually disappear, but rather something for which the student strives to continually grow fortitude to address. Since mental health is an invisible characteristic, not easily noticed on the surface by adults like educators, students often keep their emotions bottled-up. Happiness is seen as a *dynamic* concept, a thing that cannot be had at all times, but is worth striving for.

The second theme of "Networking" highlights how students in poverty have to learn the skill for themselves, compared to students from more advantaged backgrounds who are often parented in ways that intrinsically teach networking (Lareau, 2011). As different networks help these students beget various rewards, the value of networking becomes more apparent through positive reinforcement. Networks were the most frequently mentioned theme in this research project when participants were asked about important life lessons. These students grew up with access to a very small network of family and peers who shared their social class. Through the help of various mentors (educators and other influencers), these students were able to expand their networks. In particular, circle-jumping, a phenomenon coined in this project, highlights how social and cultural capital can tangibly be used to navigate from one network to another, as individuals pick up skills and characteristics, like using proper email etiquette, to propel themselves towards various goals.

The third theme of "Goal Formation" is particularly important when considering the grit and effort students try to put towards achieving goals. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often find it harder to set realistic yet also challenging goals for themselves. As illustrated in the "Horse to Water" category and example, this can be the result of lack of experience and understanding of available opportunities to take advantage of. At the same time, when students who are "at-risk" are

provided clearer pathways for striving, they tend to realize the importance of them and not stray, not fully content until a goal is achieved. These opportunities and pathways become clearer and most effective to students when they are associated with the student's background, making them easier to relate to. This idea will be elaborated upon in the following discussion section, which provides concrete takeaways for educators from these themes.

DISCUSSION

This research highlights strategies and pedagogical approaches that can be used to help young scholars achieve and foster agency, increasing their ability to enact their own free will towards success. This is unique from popular applications of grit research, which sometimes argue, that students who fail lack this "gritty" resiliency (Tough, 2013). There are specific takeaways for educators and other stakeholders in the lives of youth from the three themes mentioned in this paper.

"Mental Health" and the sub-categories of "Happiness," "Optimism and Contentedness," and "Trauma" intend to show just how complex the socioemotional lives of young people can be. Students from poor backgrounds who are also "at-risk," tend to be resilient, having faced a number of challenges at home early on, such as hunger, but at the same time may also keep feelings to themselves at young ages. If, and when possible, adults and educators should try to understand their students' emotional states from a non-overbearing perspective. Simply being there as a sounding board is seen as immensely valuable to students who are at greater risk than others. If possible, teachers and school leaders should work to avoid excessive disciplinary punishment, but focus on increasing access to mental health resources for youth who may be "at-risk." In general, students of minority backgrounds are found to be disproportionately tracked towards suspension, expulsion, and eventual drop out (Ransaw & Majors, 2016).

The students of the current study also placed a large value on counseling services.

For "Networking" it is important to remember that teachers are often the first link for students in poverty to expand their network. Teachers, whether they realize it or not, have many opportunities to connect their students to other networks. Teachers can work to connect their students to resources that align with their interests, using academic motivators and incentives. One participant in this study mentioned that his English teacher started his "circle-jumping" process, whereby she connected him to her friend in the music industry for an internship after he turned in all of his homework for her class. An internship in the recording studio expanded his interest in finance, and eventually led him down a path to his current lucrative career in investment banking.

Students benefit from being connected to other adults who can serve as mentors and role models or structured environments including after-school programs, which can be immensely beneficial for students' positive behavior adjustments and academic performance (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). Once students with disadvantages are able to see their network expand, they can keep growing their list of contacts and subsequent skills. Through mentors and new opportunities, students can increase their social and cultural capital, signaling cues that tend to be rewarded by greater society. In this project, mentors were mentioned as being the most important factor that helped students realize their interests.

Finally, "Goal Formation" may be the closest concept associated with grit and agency and the subsequent mobility of students. The way in which educators craft curricula can have an influence in students being able to form realistic yet challenging goals, as well as follow through with them. As indicated by the quote in the "Passion related to origin" category, when students are provided access to mentors who

resemble them (by race and background), they are more likely to form academic goals and mindsets. Even if principals and teachers do not live in the communities where they teach, if they can bring similar striving role-models to their schools, students stand to reap great benefits. This can be particularly important to take note of, as on some level, teaching and learning processes can be considered having undergone a *deinstitutionalization*, where teachers are not the formal gatekeepers of knowledge (Bauman, 2005). Novel approaches to deformalize classrooms may strike a chord with students who face academic challenges.

Also, even though students who are "at-risk" may actually believe schools work for most students, they may have trouble seeing education benefiting their own lives (Mickelson, 1990). To resolve this discrepancy and also foster students' feelings of self-worth, educators should try and incorporate relatable subject material into their lessons. For instance, Black students are found to benefit greatly from learning about historical Black figures across disciplines, which allows them to envision themselves succeeding in different fields (Kafele, 2009).

CONCLUSION

This research serves to show that success is possible over a wide range of disadvantages, including but not limited to: very low-income and single-parent households; parents who have struggled with substance abuse, or participants who themselves have struggled with substance abuse; and subjects who have been previously homeless, incarcerated, or suffered from ongoing trauma from very sensitive life experiences. As such, individuals in this sample possess high levels of grit, yet their grit towards certain goals was found to increase over time as they learned to navigate success in different settings. This is important for educators and adults in the lives of youth who are "at-risk" to acknowledge; instead of pinning underachievement primarily as the result of individual-level factors such as laziness

or lack of motivation, it can be argued that with the right systems of support, all students can learn to thrive.

Because students who are marginalized (e.g., students of color from low-income backgrounds) experience greater threats to forming their academic identities (Hanselman et al., 2014; Ransaw & Majors, 2016), grit alone is unlikely to account for increased upward mobility. Students from low-income households typically begin school with less social and cultural capital than their more advantaged peers, as well as the ability to exhibit capital-related cues critical for academic success. This research highlights that poorer students can greatly benefit from support systems that enable them to think critically about their disadvantages and act accordingly to overcome them. Such opportunities can increase their agency and subsequent grit.

Finding commonalities among students who defy expectations is a fairly unique approach in sociology. In fact, much existing research takes a strong structural viewpoint, asking why students fail, not how they are able to succeed (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Within existing research that seeks to address what makes academic success possible, relatively few projects synthesize both social and individual factors by allowing them to build off each other. There is an inherent flaw in positioning structures, psychological traits, and human agency in competition when determining and accessing life outcomes. This project has aspired to synthesize these factors and present a more holistic understanding of what factors constitute scholastic success within dynamic and social educational environments.

The importance of structured school-environments that are productive and inspiring for children growing up in poverty cannot be overstated. These students are in greater need for safe spaces that facilitate their developmental growth and provide enriching resources like adult-supervision (Noguera, 2003). While it is true that schools in low-resource communities have a plethora of factors that make the jobs of

educational leaders very challenging, they should take solace in recognizing the potential for their schools and classrooms to positively benefit the lives of many youth. By focusing on increasing the agency and grit of students who are placed "at-risk," educators can meet students' needs on a more direct and individualized basis as well as foster students' abilities to achieve goals and increase their social mobility.

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NOTE

[1]A term first coined by Herbert Hoover during his presidency, also associated with "Social Darwinism."

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Appendix

Three Primary Coding Themes: Mental Health, Networking, Goal Formation

Theme	Category	Definition	Direct Quotes
Mental Health	Happiness	A definition of happiness which is fluid, quite reasonable, often seen as fleeting, and stated as more important than financial gain. Participants saw happiness as both an end-goal in life, but also a means to an end.	My health is important to me. I'm focused on being my best self in my, career and outside of it. Working out, eating better, overall mental health and being happy is important. You have to be happy with yourself before being happy in any situation with others.
	Optimism and Contentedness	A sense of hope rooted in having overcome unimaginable circumstances already in life. A steady recognition that even the most difficult of times are transient, especially with the right forward-thinking attitude. This was often accompanied by an ability to put oneself in others' shoes and show empathy and charity towards those in disadvantaged situations.	I haven't had the hardest road to travel, when compared to other people. Who am I to complain? There's always solutions—everything has a solution. Even when I'm weak or I feel like I didn't do enough and failed, I feel like it's okay because I'll do better tomorrow. I got air in my lungs, I'm breathing. I got my kid next to me and family. That's what I focus on if I have negative thoughts. Obstacles make you stronger. The tougher the obstacle, the stronger you come out on the end.
	Trauma	A burden that continues to linger long after traumatic experiences are experienced. Participants stated that there is no completely overcoming such trauma; just learning to acknowledge one's mental health and learn ways to practice being uninhibited. A form of grit and resilience, knowing that depression will pass, and not to act impulsively on sad emotions.	I don't feel optimistic always. I have my struggles. I have anxiety and PTSD. I still see someone, and I'm about to start group therapy, which I'm super excited about. This past month was rough, though. It's hard not to dwell on and get negative, but it does pass.

Theme	Category	Definition	Direct Quotes
Networking	Intimate over disparate	The importance of trust cannot be overstated: a network of reliable, close-knit peers is more valuable than a widespread network of somewhat familiar people. This was associated with helping mental happiness and contentedness.	One of the most important things I've learned is that it's not so important to have lots of people around you or friends, but more important to have real relationships—meaningful ones with friends or people in your network.
	Circle-jumping	Learn to navigate from one network to another. Through signaling cultural capital gains from one group, students can "jump" into other circles comfortably, thereby also increasing their social capital and ability to formulate future goals, from meeting new people. This is a reproductive phenomenon.	I learned things about myself and learned what I didn't know. When you first go in they help you fine tune skills: time management, email etiquette, communication. I learned I was good at it. Especially good at relationship building. My instructor told me that I was great at networking.
	Value realized over time	The value of networks and networking was stated as a lesson learned over time. The more that networks benefitted participants, the more they have learned to use networks to their advantage. Once results of networking are positively reinforced by rewards, networks are seen as critical to mobility.	I actually draw my network out. I put "network" in the middle and then put little lines to say, 'I know this person that works here. It's something that I use as a tool. The goal is to add two to three people every year.
	Luck	Participants often gave much credit to luck for their ability to meet the right people at the right time in their lives. People who have been good influences are almost viewed as sacred or the most important factors in participants' lives.	I honestly don't know how else to say it, other than I got really lucky to be here. So lucky that so many people and factors had to come together at the right time to make this work.

Theme	Category	Definition	Direct Quotes
Goal Formation	Horse to water	The concept that students need to be made aware of the vast array of potential opportunities in front of them. Still, this realization cannot be forced and requires guided, first-hand experiences. Sometimes goals are hard to visualize, if students can't imagine themselves in other shoes.	They say you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. But, it's even more scary when you lead a horse to water and they say, 'What water?' I was the horse who didn't see the *ocean* in front of them. You tell me to drink, it's not a *conscious* decision that I'm making. I really am ignorant to the fact that what is in front of me is water. In every story, we have to understand that the person may not see that this is a *good* option. They may not understand that this is *water* that they're looking at. So when we say, 'Drink the water. Go to college. Don't commit crime. Listen to your parents.' They're like, 'What? What water? I don't get it.'
	Un-satisfaction	An incessant feeling of inadequacy and also feeling like there is more work to be done before achieving success or feeling accomplished. This is closely related to one's grit and motivation to keep striving for more.	I don't know if I've completely succeeded. I won't feel like I've succeeded until I'm out of school. I don't even mean these four years, I think I will continue my education. And not until then will I feel like I've succeeded.
	Passion related to origin	Students are more able to form goals to be passionate towards, if they are somehow relatable to their origin and heritage. Helps with the visualization necessary in "Horse to water theme."	We'd have students from NYU teach us the SATs. They were students of color. They looked like us, they sounded like us, and they were in *college*, doing *big things*. They were *adults*, they were *cool*, they were *suave*, and we wanted to be *just like them*. And we didn't see that. I didn't see any kids from college or anything like that. So just seeing these kids was amazing.