

Chapter 13

More Than Achievement: Grit as a Key Component of Positive Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary interest in the concept of grit (i.e., “perseverance and passion for long-term goals”). Grit has garnered widespread attention in both the research and public spheres due to its association with lifetime educational and professional achievement. However, research indicates that grit has more far-reaching implications than simply educational and professional achievement; in fact, the literature suggests that grit is a key component of positive psychology, which aims to promote well-being more broadly. The current chapter will explore grit in the context of the positive psychology by reviewing the literature that supports grit as an important component of positive psychology. This chapter will also highlight the limitations of our current understanding of grit, discuss how these limitations implicate the field of positive psychology, and discuss next steps for grit research in light of these limitations.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary interest in the concept of grit; i.e., “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). This burgeoning fascination initially stemmed from intelligence researchers seeking to address why certain individuals accomplish more in life than others with equal intelligence (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). Although measures of effortful persistence (e.g., conscientiousness) have long been recognized as important components of success, grit has garnered specific attention in both the research and public spheres because it is suggested to predict lifetime outcomes above and beyond traditional measures of effortful persistence. In fact, research suggests that grit accounts for an average of 4% of the variance in success outcomes (Abuhassan & Bates, 2015, p. 2; Duckworth et al., 2007).

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More Than Achievement

Indeed, numerous studies have found that grit is predictive of educational success (e.g., first-year grade point average [GPA] in college; Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2013) and this effect has been found to be predictive above and beyond IQ, standardized test scores, and high school grades (Akos & Kretchmar, 2017; Duckworth et al., 2007). Angela Duckworth, the foremost researcher on grit, noted in an interview that grit “beats the pants off of IQ, SAT scores, physical fitness, and a bazillion other measures to help us know in advance which individuals will be successful in some situations” (Scelfo, April 8, 2016).

In addition to educational success, grit has been found to be predictive of professional success later in life. For example, in a series of six studies, Duckworth et al. (2007) found that grit is an important predictor of professional success after college. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of grit not only attained higher levels of education and scored higher GPAs, but also reported making fewer career changes when surveyed at age 25 or older. Beyond basic educational and professional measures of success, grit has also been found to predict cadet retention at West Point and competitor ranking in the Scripps National Spelling Bee (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011).

However, the implications of grit are farther reaching than simply predicting educational and professional success. In addition to these metrics, grit has been linked with personality traits (i.e., lower levels of neuroticism and higher levels of extraversion; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), as well as positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction (Singh & Duggal Jha, 2008). Indeed, grit is among the widely discussed soft or non-cognitive skills (i.e., “personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences,” Heckman & Kautz, 2012, p. 2). These soft skills (e.g., conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy) have been shown to foster hard academic skills as well as a diverse array of meaningful life outcomes across a range of domains (Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014; Kautz & Heckman, 2012).

In fact, grit has been found to be an important quality to consider in the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology is “the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005 p. 630). Broadly speaking, the field of positive psychology aims to shift the emphasis of psychology away from pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) toward building “human resilience, strength, and growth,” as a means to achieving well-being, or other desired outcomes (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 107). Given this focus, it is clear that the construct of grit aligns well with the goals of positive psychology. As a result, it is a fruitful endeavor to look toward positive psychology as a framework to understand predictors of and associations with grit. In doing so, we can better understand how grit can be cultivated as well as the implications of grit more broadly.

The current chapter will review grit in the context of positive psychology in order to address the overarching goal of this textbook to utilize positive psychology as a means to offer best practices and practical ingredients for living a positive, happy, meaningful, and fulfilled life. Specifically, this chapter will address the following aims:

1. To discuss how grit is defined and conceptualized;
2. To review empirical and theoretical literature that supports grit as an important component of positive psychology; and
3. To highlight the limitations of our understanding of grit, discuss how these limitations implicate the field of positive psychology, and discuss next steps for grit research in light of these limitations.

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