



Beautiful Minds

Grit: Bringing Passion Back

Passion is an essential element of grit

By [Scott Barry Kaufman](#) on September 19, 2018

"I think the misunderstanding — or, at least, one of them — is that it's only the perseverance part that matters. But I think that the passion piece is at least as important. I mean, if you are really, really tenacious and dogged about a goal that's not meaningful to you, and not interesting to you — then that's just drudgery. It's not just determination — it's having a direction that you care about." -- [Angela Duckworth](#)

Although I didn't have a word for it then, I knew as a kid that there was *some* characteristic that was propelling me to transform my life from a kid diagnosed with auditory processing difficulties and severe anxiety to a human being who could actually thrive in life. In graduate school when I came across Angela Duckworth's burgeoning research on grit, I was like "heck yeah!" Finally I had a real tangible name for the fierce determination I had to keep moving forward despite the obstacles.*

I was not alone by being inspired by grit. Right now, Angela Duckworth's 2013 [TED talk on grit](#) has nearly 15 million views, and her book on the same topic was a *New York Times* Best Seller, and is [still highly ranked on Amazon](#). Folks in sports and fitness are particularly crazy about grit. Pete Carroll, coach of the Seattle Seahawks, was so excited when he heard of Duckworth's research, that he called her up on the phone and invited her to come give a talk to his squad (see discussion between Carroll and Duckworth [here](#)). Grit is also very popular in education policy, and lots of educators are deeply interested in building grit in their students.

Within the scientific community, however, the construct of grit has much more mixed and temperate reviews.

The Science of Grit

On the one hand, studies have found that grit relates to several intermediaries of performance, including increased [deliberate practice](#), [risky task persistence](#), and [sustained retention in the military, the workplace, school, and marriage](#). On the other hand, there is reason to question whether grit really adds any predictive value above and beyond long-standing measures of "conscientiousness", one of the main factors of personality.

[Brent Roberts and his colleagues](#) have done a terrific job charting the terrain and hierarchal structure of this important domain of personality, and one replicable finding is that conscientiousness consists of both proactive and inhibitive aspects. In a recent study, [Fabian Schmidt and colleagues](#) found that the perseverance facet of Duckworth's [grit scale](#) (e.g., "setbacks

don't discourage me", "I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge") is strongly correlated with the overall personality trait of conscientiousness and is virtually identical with the proactive industriousness factor of conscientiousness in particular.

In contrast, Duckworth's consistency of interests facet of grit (e.g., "I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete", "new ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones") is less related to global conscientiousness, and is more tied to narrow indicators of self-discipline (which are more inhibitive). The researchers conclude that while "grit and its facets can be fully integrated into the hierarchical structure of conscientiousness", "the measure to assess grit could possibly represent one of the most economic ways to assess proactive conscientiousness that is currently available."

While both facets of the grit scale-- perseverance and consistency of interests-- are significantly related to each other, there is an emerging consensus that most of grit's predictive power lies in the perseverance facet. [Marcus Crede](#) and colleagues analyzed a large number of studies and found that the utility of the grit construct for predicting performance seems to lie particularly with the perseverance facet. [David Disabato and colleagues](#) found across 7 regions of the world that perseverance was moderately related to happiness, beliefs about well-being, and personality strengths, whereas consistency of interests had weak or even *negative* correlations with these outcomes.

Therefore, while the phrase "grit" definitely resonates more with the general public more than "conscientiousness" or "industriousness", the jury is still out whether grit, *as currently measured*, predicts anything meaningful above and beyond already longstanding measures of conscientiousness.

Bringing Passion Back

Something that seems to be missing in these scientific studies, however, is the fact that Duckworth has never defined grit as merely perseverance. She has always conceptually thought of grit as both passion *and* perseverance for long-term goals. Scientists can't be at fault, however, for focusing on the perseverance aspect of grit in their scientific research.

For one, despite the word "passion" appearing in the title of [Duckworth's paper introducing grit](#), the word only appears again in the definition of grit, and as a reference to a scale the authors decided to discard. What's more, it does seem that the items that were purported to initially measure passion on the grit scale really measure self-discipline (see above). Duckworth has acknowledged this, saying in an interview with Anya Kamenetz that she is contemplating revising the grit scale, "[specially the questions about passion](#)."

Does the omission of passion from the grit scale matter? Recent research suggests it does. In a study conducted in collaboration with my colleagues [Magdalene Grohman](#), [Zorana Ivcevic](#), and [Paul Silvia](#), we found that the perseverance facet of the grit scale was related to teacher nominations of persistence, but the consistency of interests facet was totally uncorrelated with teacher nominations of passion. What's more, teacher nominations of both passion and perseverance were important in predicting multiple measures of creativity and creative achievement. These findings highlight the fact that self-discipline is a very different beast than genuine passion. One

can be very consistent in completing tasks but not actually care all that much about the goals they are accomplishing. Authentic creativity requires a spark in addition to doggedness.

In a more recent, [hot off the press paper](#) in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Jon Jachimowicz and colleagues at Columbia Business School suggest that one reason why findings on grit have been so mixed in the scientific community is because the grit scale focuses on perseverance but does not measure passion. They argue that a shortcoming of the grit research is that it never made contact with the already existing passion literature from either theoretical, methodological, or empirical perspectives. Further, they argue that it's the *particular combination* of perseverance and passion that predicts performance.

They conducted three studies to support their claim. First they conducted a grand analysis of 127 studies (consisting of 45, 4885 people) that used the grit scale and assessed performance. They found that the size of the effect of the association between grit and performance was larger for those studies in which *people were actually more passionate for their performance domain*.

Then they conducted two studies with employees and students where they measured perseverance (through the grit scale), passion attainment (through a new scale they created), and performance (as measured through supervisor-ratings among employees and Major GPAs among students). The researchers defined passion as "a strong feeling toward a personally important value/preference that motivates intentions and behaviors to express that value/preference." They measured passion through items such as "I often feel as if I have to be more passionate for my work".

They found that it was particularly the *combination of perseverance and passion attainment that predicted performance*. They also showed support for one specific mechanism that can help explain these findings: *absorption*. In particular, they found that students who were high on both perseverance and passion also reported higher levels of immersion and absorption in pursuits relating to their passion.

These results strongly suggest that grit-- defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals-- really does matter, and that this unique configuration of characteristics is not simply the same as conscientiousness. Duckworth really was on to something when she proposed this construct. However, the findings do highlight the fact that if grit is ever going to fully live up to its promise, passion absolutely cannot be excluded from the measurement of grit.

Why Should I Care?

Now, you may be wondering: *why do such nerdy measurement issues matter?* Why should the Seattle Seahawks or Chicago inner city school teachers care that there is a major discrepancy between the conceptualization of grit and the measurement of grit? Isn't this only of interest to a certain small community of nitipicky, uptight, scientific intellectuals?

Fair question, but I actually think the science matters quite a bit. I assume people who embrace grit want to know how they can build more grit in themselves and others. Without proper measurement of this construct, we won't know if the needle on the dial is moving in the

direction we want it to. We might even be misled to think that grit doesn't matter, when in fact grit might matter quite a bit when the assessment better matches the definition.

Indeed, the findings reviewed above suggest that if we want to build grit, neither passion nor perseverance alone is enough. If you're just building perseverance, you're becoming better at being dutiful and resilient, but may lose sight of the fact that what you are persevering toward really isn't personally meaningful. On the flipside, if you're just building passion, that's great, but all the passion in the world won't actually *get it done* (despite what commencement speakers might lead you to believe).

The findings also suggest that an important source of grit is immersion or full absorption in a task relating to your long-term goals. If we want to build grit, it seems that providing external rewards or forcing students to just have more self-control won't be as effective as increasing methods to help people get genuinely excited and engaged about the material.

Also, I assume people are not just interested in whether grit matters or can be built, but are curious about the finer details. *In what fields does grit matter the most? In what fields can grit actually hamper performance? Is there such a thing as too much grit? What's the relationship between grit and other important traits, such as kindness and curiosity? In what ways can grit impede the development of other important characteristics (e.g., creativity)?* Only an accurate assessment of grit can allow us to properly investigate these finer details.

At the end of the day, I still believe in grit. I think Duckworth introduced an important construct to the field, and grit is a characteristic that can help people from a wide variety of backgrounds and life experiences overcome obstacles and move toward a meaningful life (along with crucial support structures that encourage the grit). However, I completely agree with Jachimowicz and colleagues that if grit is going to actually realize its promise, it's time to *bring passion back*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)



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Scott Barry Kaufman, Ph.D., is a humanistic psychologist exploring the depths of human potential. He has taught courses on intelligence, creativity, and well-being at Columbia University, NYU, the University of Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. In addition to writing the column *Beautiful Minds for Scientific American*, he also hosts *The Psychology Podcast*, and is author and/or editor of 9 books, including *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization*, *Wired to Create: Unravelling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind* (with Carolyn Gregoire), and *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*. In 2015, he was named one of "50 Groundbreaking Scientists who are changing the way we see the world" by *Business Insider*. Find out more at <http://ScottBarryKaufman.com>.

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