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On the Meaning of Grit…and Hope…and Fate Control…and Alienation…and Locus of Control…and…Self-Efficacy…and…Effort Optimism…and…

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Abstract After a long period of emphasis on academic skills, researchers have recently shown growing interest in the importance of noncognitive skills as drivers of life outcomes for poor children. "Grit" and "hope" are among the more popular focal points in this research. This article argues terms like these are most useful when they are thought of as a part of a cluster of concepts related to the idea of alienation, in the sense of powerlessness. Framing the "new" concepts that way helps connect our thinking to a wider range of empirical work and helps identify important unresolved issues for future research. We also argue the most profitable approaches will be those which help us understand how individual characteristics interact with structural context, avoiding an exclusive emphasis on either individual characteristics or structural contexts.

Abbreviations

Alienation	The expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks (Seeman 1959)
Fate control	The extent to which an individual feels he has some control over his own destiny (Coleman et al. 1966)
Locus of control	Whether individuals attribute outcomes to their own actions or to circumstances beyond their control (Rotter 1966)

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| Hope | The belief that the future will be better than the present, along with the belief that you have the power *to make it so* (Lopez 2013) |
| Grit | The tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward long-term goals (Duckworth et al. 2007) |

After decades of scholarly discourse that essentially saw the life chances of low-income children through the lens of academic achievement as measured by tests, recent years have seen burgeoning interest in the importance of "noncognitive" factors (Duckworth and Yeager 2015; Farrington et al. 2012; Goleman 1995, 2011; Heckman and Kautz 2014; Tough 2012). Some of this work, including work centered on ideas like "hope," "grit," and "character skills," has generated considerable research and attracted broad attention beyond the academy. In 2014, more than 875,000 students in 2900 schools took the Gallup Poll measuring their hopefulness (Gallup 2014). Angela Duckworth, who has developed the work on grit, received the MacArthur "Genius" grant; there are now schools that advertise themselves as teaching the Three R's and grit; and at least one group of schools plans to put "grit" on its report cards.

While we recognize the dangers of reducing poor children in particular to their test scores, we also see grounds for caution. Many of these ideas are being presented *de novo*, without reference to the long history of intellectual development of similar ideas. That lack of context can confound the development of theory and the improvement of practice. At the same time, many critiques of these rediscovered ideas assume that either individual traits are important *or* structural context is important. Both proponents and critics of these "new" ideas, we will argue, are missing opportunities to deepen our understanding.

The title of this article recalls Melvin Seeman's (1959) classic article, "On the Meaning of Alienation," where he noted that "alienation," in various meanings, held an honored place in sociological thought. A concept so central, he noted, demands special clarity. Instead, there was much confusion. Seeman (1959) saw five fundamental ways the term was being used: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, normlessness, and self-estrangement. In the sense of powerlessness, alienation was a central theme for both Karl Marx and Max Weber, the former seeing it more in economic terms, the latter in organizational. Seeman (1959) understood powerlessness to mean: "the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks" (p. 784). Marx's interest in powerlessness stemmed from his interest in the *consequences* of alienation in the workplace—that is, the alienation of worker from worker and worker from product, as well as the degradation of workers and their labor into mere commodities. We might say something similar about Weber. To him, the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization were responsible for modern society's alienation. Rationalization left society disenchanted, imprisoned in an "iron cage" of efficiency and calculation with little power to escape. The sheer scale and complexity of modern organizations make individuals feel that they do not matter.

Seeman argued that this idea of powerlessness should figure heavily into "any analysis of the human condition that takes the Marxist tradition with any seriousness" (p. 784) and clearly saw alienation as bridging the social and the psychological: "I would initially limit the applicability of this first meaning of alienation to the arena for which the concept was originally intended, namely the depiction of man's relations to the larger social order" (p. 785). Given Seeman's heroic attempts to impose clarity, it is dismaying that the large family of social science concepts related to alienation in the sense of powerlessness may reflect less clarity today than in 1959. That conceptual family might be considered to include fate control, locus of control, agency, effort optimism, hope, grit, resilience, self-efficacy, fatalism, and attribution theory, among others. There are significant differences among them but all share a concern with attitudes toward the future and one's capacity to affect it. Some recent discussions show little awareness of the underlying conceptual similarities or of the long history that Seeman parsed. Presenting old ideas in new language runs the risk that some theoretical richness is lost with the lack of translation; some powerful ideas may be rendered less usable. At the extreme, ideas that begin as social critique are transformed into an evaluation of individual attributes.

Some of this may be driven by disciplinary priorities. Seeman, the sociologist, recognized that his conception of alienation was very closely related to the notion developed largely by psychologist Julian Rotter, of internal versus external control of reinforcements, and Seeman (1959) saw the intimate association between the ideas as a possible boon to both fields: "The congruence in these formulations leaves the way open for the development of a closer bond between … learning theory and that of alienation" (p. 785).[1] If Seeman's hope was proven false, part of the explanation may be that while psychologists have continued to develop the idea, sociologists have largely abandoned it.

Where Seeman, Rotter, Marx, and Weber all gave great attention to the role of social structure in individual behavior, modern formulations of ideas like grit and hope have emphasized individual characteristics largely—not entirely—without reference to social context, and the critics of those ideas have done just the opposite, heavily emphasizing the structural. We are thus interested in the way grit, hope, and similar noncognitive factors can be understood as modern expressions of ideas with deep roots in the social sciences, which will also mean seeing them, as Seeman did, as a way to think about the connections between structural and individual factors. This article will briefly review two of the more traditional formulations, "fate control" and "locus of control," and two of the most popular contemporary conceptual cousins, "grit" and "hope," arguing that the recent formulations are best understood as expressions of a longer intellectual tradition. Otherwise, instead of accumulating knowledge, we keep returning to the starting line. We then review some of the criticisms of the recent formulations, which, for the most part, we find lacking. Recent critiques have their own limitations, and many emphasize structural

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[1] Seeman also noted that conceptual resemblance posed a problem—and one that remains germane—of researchers' inability to adequately tease apart the constructs' nuances and therefore run the risk of incorrectly conceptualizing them as the same thing.

factors in a way that misses an important point in the traditional formulations of alienation, where alienation was recognized as a *bridge* between structural and individual characteristics.

James S. Coleman and Fate Control

James S. Coleman and colleagues' *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report (1966) is primarily remembered for what it implied about the power of social class background as a predictor of student achievement and the relative impotence of schools in the face of poverty. What the report had to say about the salience of student attitudes is less well-remembered. On the one hand, Black and white students had similarly high self-concepts and showed high levels of interest in school. They differed, though, on what Coleman et al. (1966) called "fate control," which he measured by asking students whether hard work or good luck was more important for success, whether something tended to stop them when they were trying to get ahead, and whether people like them had much chance to be successful in life. For white and Asian students, self-concept was more strongly related to achievement than students' sense of control over their environment. For Native American, Hispanic, and Black students, the pattern reversed itself:

> [A] pupil attitude factor, which appears to have a stronger relationship to achievement than do all the "school" factors together, is the extent to which an individual feels he has some control over his own destiny…. Minority pupils, except for Orientals, have far less conviction than whites that they can affect their own environments and futures. When they do, however, their achievement is higher than that of whites who lack that conviction. (Coleman et al. 1966, p. 23)

These patterns differed with age, though. Among younger students, sense of control mattered for everyone; as students aged, the association between sense of control and achievement remained strong only for disadvantaged groups. Among older students, Coleman et al. (1966) found that for Blacks, fate control was associated with three times as much variance in reading achievement as for white pupils. The speculation was that the relationship was bi-directional, "with both the attitude and the achievement affecting each other" (Coleman et al. 1966, p. 320). Fate control among Black students seemed little affected by characteristics of the home or school, except that as school composition became more integrated, their sense of fate control strengthened. Interestingly, though, as their sense of control strengthened in more racially integrated environments, their self-concepts deteriorated.

Importantly, while fate control is a characteristic of individuals, Coleman et al. (1966) raised questions about what it told us about how individual beliefs were shaped by social context:

> For children from advantaged groups, achievement or lack of it appears closely related to their self-concept: what they believe about themselves. For children from disadvantaged groups, achievement or lack of achievement

appears closely related to what they believe about their environment: whether they believe the environment will respond to reasonable efforts, or whether they believe it is instead merely random or immovable…. Having experienced an unresponsive environment, the virtues of hard work, of diligent and extended effort toward achievement appear unlikely to be rewarding. (pp. 320–321)

The idea of an unresponsive environment recalls the structural factors that would have underlain alienation for Marx or Weber. One might have imagined that subsequent research would take Coleman's suggestion and flesh out the structural connections of the psychological construct, but we have had less research directly engaging with Coleman than one might have hoped for.

Some of what we do have underscores the importance of race and gender. Kerchhoff and Campbell (1977) discover what they call fatalism has twice the impact on the ambition of Black boys that it has on white boys. Cummings (1977) notes that while Coleman does not have an actual theory of how fate control develops, he assumes it has something to do with family and neighborhood dynamics. In his sample of 241 high school students, Cummings (1977) concludes that the family variables he examines (including permissiveness, size, stability, frequency of praise, emotional support, father's occupational prestige, educational aspirations, school support, and independence training) account for 10 % of the overall variance in fate control, but for 27 % of the variance among girls. Fate control among this sample is being shaped primarily outside the family, as Coleman suggested, but the pattern is significantly gendered. Research on how race and other social characteristics affect the distribution of fate control seems to be rare after the mid-1990s, but Graham's (1994) review of the literature suggests a more consistent pattern of a lower sense of control among Black children, but is still not conclusive. The pattern amongst adults is even more mixed, Graham (1994) concludes, noting that while seven studies found white adults to be more internal than Blacks, five studies found no differences and four found mixed results. Graham (1994) also argues that the relationship of socioeconomic status to locus of control is both unclear and underemphasized in the literature, and that understanding the role of socioeconomic status would be important to disentangle the effects by race, as three studies suggested a race by socioeconomic status interaction.

On the issue of how families can help develop a sense of control, perhaps the most suggestive work is Reginald M. Clark's (1983) ethnographic study of ten low-income Black families in Chicago—half of whom had low-achieving students and half high-achievers. Clark sought to understand why some poor Black students succeed while others fail. He discovered striking differences between the families of high and low achievers: parents of high achievers maintained an optimistic attitude and activist orientation toward the future—i.e., a higher sense of fate control—while the parents of low achievers were pessimistic and demoralized, demonstrating a lower sense of fate control. In both cases, these orientations were transmitted to the household's children and appeared to be related to their academic achievement.

Locus of Control

Although Coleman does not seem to refer to their work, psychologists had been talking about ideas similar to fate control at least a decade before the Coleman Report appeared. Julian Rotter (1966) published a seminal article pulling together what was known about what he called locus of control:

> A series of studies provides strong support for the hypotheses that the individual who has a strong belief that he can control his own destiny is likely to (a) be more alert to those aspects of the environment which provide useful information for his future behavior; (b) take steps to improve his environmental condition; (c) place greater value on skill or achievement reinforcements and be generally more concerned with his ability, particularly his failures; and (d) be resistive to subtle attempts to influence him. (p. 25)

"Fate control" faded as a research priority in sociology by the 1980's but psychologists continued to churn out hundreds of studies elaborating and extending Rotter's findings. A search of "fate control" in SocINDEX revealed that usage of the term in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals has been meager at best during *any* period. From 1950 to 2014, "fate control" yielded of total of just 20 results—two during the period of 1960–1969 and seven from 1970 to 1979. A search of the 1980s yielded only one entry for "fate control" and three during the 1990s. The period of 2000–2014 yielded seven results, perhaps revealing a renewed interest—albeit very small—among sociologists. An identical search in PsycARTICLES revealed a total of five usages of "fate control" from 1950 to 2014, with three of those during 1970–1979.

On the other hand, "locus of control" gained considerable traction among psychologists and sociologists from the 1960s onward. A search for the term in SocINDEX yielded a total of 2017 results, the bulk of which occurred in the 1970s (324), 1980s (519), 1990s (540), and from 2000 to 2009 (474). An identical search in PsycARTICLES revealed a similar pattern of usage among psychologists. From 1950 to 2014, "locus of control" generated 1022 results and, again, the bulk of those were from the 1970s (343), the 1980s (248), and the 1990s (181). All told, "fate control" did not persist as a research priority among sociologists, while use of "locus of control" exploded in the 1970s and remains popular among psychologists and sociologists today. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the structural side of these questions has gone undeveloped compared to the psychological side.

We cannot do a full review of this voluminous research, but we want to do enough of an illustrative survey to suggest the richness of the findings to date, the many ways they may help us understand youth development across important domains. In terms of educational outcomes, an internal locus of control has been positively associated with academic achievement (including grades and standardized test scores) in numerous studies (e.g., Bartel 1971; Buriel 1982; Clifford and Cleary 1972; Finch et al. 1991; Henderson et al. 1992; Lewis et al. 1999; Mone et al. 1995; Morris and Messer 1978; Ross and Broh 2000). For both middle and high school students, for example, internal locus of control is a positive predictor of

achievement (Novick et al. 1990). Among low-income African American and Latino students, high internal locus of control is correlated with better school performance (Finn and Rock 1997) and in one study was the strongest predictor among variables examined for Latino youth (Sciarra and Whitson 2007). Unfortunately, lower income school-aged children appear to be more external in locus of control than middle-class children (e.g., Battle and Rotter 1963; Crandall et al. 1965; Garner and Cole 1986; Graves 1961; Nowicki and Strickland 1973). There are several possible pathways to explain these findings, but it seems that students with a higher internal locus of control may be likely to take greater initiative, to have greater motivation and persistence, and to seek out help (Eccles and Wigfield 1995; Harter 1992). Internality also seems to be associated with the likelihood that adolescents will be responsive to counseling efforts (Trice 1990). On the other hand, high externality is associated with learned helplessness and the absence of resiliency (Seligman 1975).

Research on parenting shows comparable patterns. Parental locus of control is the extent to which parents feel a sense of power and efficacy in child-rearing, and much of this work is concerned with the social location of its subjects. In general, the higher parents are in efficacy, the more likely they seem able to persist in the face of parenting challenges (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Parents who feel less efficacious are more likely to have children who exhibit problem behavior and are more likely to report maternal depression (e.g., Freed and Tompson 2011; Sanders and Woolley 2005). Looking at a sample of over 900 families, Shumow and Lomax (2002) found that neighborhood quality predicted parental efficacy, which predicted reported parental involvement and monitoring. Both of those predicted academic and social-emotional adjustment of children.

The parallel literature in health suggests that internal locus of control is associated with more positive health behaviors, as people who believe that good outcomes are contingent upon behavior are more apt to engage in behaviors that facilitate physical well-being (Wallston et al. 1987). Health-related consequences of perceived control are of two forms: perceived locus of control may influence health behavior (e.g., dieting and exercising) and/or health status (e.g., weight loss or obesity). Therefore, the effects of perceived control on health status are mediated by changes in health behavior. For example, locus of control plays a role in smoking reduction, weight loss, and adherence to medication regimes (MacDonald 1970; Wallston and Wallston 1978). Similarly, Lefcourt and Davidson-Katz (1991) focus on the relationship between control beliefs and coping styles, interpreting locus of control as a stress-moderator as well as a mechanism for predicting the onset of illness. Evans et al. (2005) conclude that the weight of the research supports the idea that there is a relationship between locus of control and the likelihood of adolescent suicide, although there is much to learn about the nature and strength of the relationship. Few studies have focused on the health of children, but Malcarne et al. (2005) administered a Multidimensional Health Locus of Control scale to Caucasian American, Latino American, and African American children ($N = 167$). Their findings again suggest that Latino American and African American children endorsed stronger chance beliefs than white children. Finally, Cobb-Clark et al. (2014) analyzed the relationship between individuals' locus of control and their

decisions to exercise regularly, eat well, drink moderately, and avoid smoking. The authors assessed the relative importance of the alternative pathways that potentially link locus of control to healthy habits and concluded that individuals with an internal locus of control are more likely to eat well and exercise regularly.

Locus of control has also been a focus of research in the workplace, consistently indicating that more internal control is associated with a variety of work-related outcomes. In a meta-analysis by Spector (1986), higher perceived control was associated with higher job satisfaction, commitment, performance, evaluation scores, and motivation. Alternatively, it was associated with lower levels of emotional distress, role stress, absenteeism, intent to leave the job, and job turnover (Spector 1986). A more recent meta-analysis by Ng et al. (2006) again found higher perceived control to be associated with job satisfaction, motivation, and performance, as well as with career success and use of coping strategies.

To take one additional domain of activity, it would seem that a higher sense of internal control predicts political participation. In the early 1960s, Strickland (1965) found that students who were heavily involved in civil rights demonstrations in the Deep South scored higher on a scale of internal control than students who did not participate. Rosen and Salling (1971) similarly found that more internal control was associated with a number of political activities, such as signing petitions, participating in rallies or demonstrations, or joining political groups. Echohawk and Parsons (1977) found that among Cherokee students, those scoring higher on a scale of internality were also more likely to be considered leaders by the adults who knew them. However, this relationship may be complicated by political ideology and operationalization. In one contrasting study, Levenson and Miller (1976) found that liberal college students with a more external sense of control were more involved in political activities, whereas conservative students with more external control were less involved.

For some, that latter finding makes the point that internal locus of control is not always associated with positive outcomes. To say that internality may spur political participation says nothing about the kind of politics. It may activate skinheads as well as civil rights workers. Then, too, one can feel that one has control over consequences when that is objectively not the case. The subsequent failure can then become a source of self-blame which may have ramifications for future behavior (Hunter and Allen 2002).

Again, this is not intended to be an exhaustive literature review. Our purpose has been to suggest the broad reach of two of the older social science concepts that touch on one's sense of control over the environment. Indeed, we would suggest that we should regard it as a significant outcome in itself, rather than something that is important because it may encourage better test scores or the like. If, taking Seeman's advice, we try to put together what we know about fate control and locus of control that seems relevant to helping us understand youth development, we could say they seem related, sometimes very strongly related, to some of the outcomes and behaviors we are most concerned about: academic growth, student behavior, health behavior, mental health, parenting behavior, workplace behavior, and political involvement. In some cases, we have reason to believe that feelings of powerlessness are partly causal vis-à-vis these outcomes; in others there is evidence

that they may matter more for some vulnerable populations. There are certainly structural limitations that cannot be overcome by attitudes of any kind, but the sheer embeddedness of the idea implies that perhaps we should be thinking in a more systematic way about how sense of control can shape youth development. In fact, what we are getting is continued development of the psychological side of the conversation, while the more social side has developed little beyond what Coleman left us. Fifty years after Coleman, it is scandalous that we cannot say with confidence how a sense of control over one's future is connected to race, social class or gender—the particular lenses of the sociologist.

Grit and Hope

A report by the US Department of Education (2013), referring to noncognitive factors generally, highlighted the need for "conceptual clarity and theoretical refinement," adding that researchers interviewed for the report asserted that, "This lack of consistent terminology presents a barrier to collaboration and progress. The confusing terminology makes it difficult to (1) decide what exactly to address in practice, (2) know how to assess impacts, and (3) synthesize research findings" (US Department of Education 2013, pp. 87–88). Duckworth and Yeager (2015) similarly conclude that the continued debate about terminology obscures the scholarly consensus about the quality and importance of noncognitive factors. If this is true of noncognitive factors generally, it may apply with special force to the myriad concepts that largely focus on one's effort and beliefs about how they connect to one's future, among the most popular of which for contemporary audiences would be "hope" and, particularly, "grit." If we suppose that people who think they have power over their future are more likely to persist, then it is reasonable to think of grit—perseverance toward long-term goals—as a conceptual relative of alienation.

Grit research is associated primarily with Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania.[2] In a 2007 study, Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly tested the importance of grit in six contexts and found that the trait accounted for an average of 4 % of the variance in success outcomes, including educational attainment among two samples of adults ($N = 1545$ and $N = 690$), grade point average among undergraduates of an Ivy League college ($N = 138$), retention in two classes of United States Military Academy and West Point cadets ($N = 1218$ and $N = 1308$), and ranking in the National Spelling Bee ($N = 175$).

More recently, Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014) examined the relationship between grit, other individual difference variables (e.g., intelligence, physical aptitude, Big Five personality traits, job tenure), and retention in four distinct contexts—the military, workplace sales, high school, and marriage.[3] Across the four studies, Eskreis-Winkler et al. (2014) found that grittier soldiers were more apt to complete

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[2] Duckworth's project focuses on the implications of both grit and self-control, but the former seems to be drawing the lion's share of the attention, even though the predictive power of self-control rivals that of socioeconomic status.

[3] The Big Five are a broad cluster of traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—used among contemporary psychologists to model and evaluate personalities.

their rigorous three-week Army Special Operations Forces selection course, gritty salespeople were more likely to remain in their positions after 3 months, gritty high school juniors in Chicago Public Schools were more likely to graduate a year later, and gritty men—not women—were more likely to remain married. Unlike earlier studies by Duckworth et al. (2007) that focused on high achievers in elite contexts, these findings are an initial step toward examining grit in a variety of life contexts, including those like marriage, which are outside of the typical "achievement" context (Eskreis-Winkler et al. 2014). Interestingly, grit was *not* positively related to IQ in the aforementioned studies—which is also true for some locus of control studies—but nevertheless showed incremental predictive validity of success measures beyond IQ and conscientiousness. Among novice teachers, grit shows promise for predicting who will be more effective with students (Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth 2014).

Perhaps because it is a catchy term and one that captures much of what Americans have traditionally thought important about character, grit has been receiving widespread attention, but there is actually more research around the idea of "hope," defined by Lopez (2013) as "the belief that *the future will be better than the present*, along with the belief that *you have the power to make it so*" (p. 18). Some of that research suggests hope is potentially more impactful than grit. Under Lopez's direction, the Gallup Poll is in the midst of a 10-year project to track hope, engagement, and well-being among American students in grades 5 through 12. They have already collected over 3 million student surveys. The measures of hope include expectation of high school graduation, having access to a caring adult, being able to think of many ways to get good grades, energetically pursuing one's goals, finding lots of ways around problems, and expecting to land a good job (Gallup Student Poll 2014). While the concept retains the core idea of a sense of control over one's future, its operationalization is different in the emphasis on caring adults and specific goals and pathways rather than generalized attitudes about how effort relates to rewards.

Hope research dates back at least to the late 1980's, and the findings largely parallel those from the related concepts. Hopeful high school and college students have higher overall grade point averages (Gallagher and Lopez 2008; Gallup 2009; Snyder et al. 1991, 2002; Worrell and Hale 2001). The predictive power of hope remains significant even when controlling for intelligence (Snyder et al. 1997), prior grades (Gallagher and Lopez 2008; Snyder et al. 1991, 2002), self-esteem (Snyder et al. 2002), and college entrance exam scores (Gallagher and Lopez 2008; Snyder et al. 2002). Hopeful students are also more creative (Snyder and Lopez 2002). In contrast, students with low hope exhibit high anxiety in test-taking situations and are less likely to use feedback constructively (Snyder and Lopez 2002). Lopez (2013) argues that hope also matters because it affects excitement about the future, the likelihood that children will come to school, and the likelihood they will be engaged while there. (Note that "excitement" is not something often mentioned under other conceptualizations.) About 12 % of the variance in academic achievement seems associated with hope (Lopez 2013), suggesting a stronger relationship than those typically found in the grit literature.

About half of American students are characterized as hopeful and the distribution of hope does not seem to change as children age. Fifth graders and high school seniors are about equally hopeful. Nor does it seem to vary significantly with income (Gallup 2009). Gender does not seem to be related to hope, either for younger persons or older ones. Racially, it would seem that minorities have slightly higher hope scores than do whites (Lopez et al. 2009). Recall that the locus of control literature seems divided on the question of correlations with race and class, while Coleman and colleagues found very strong correlations. Hope seems largely unconnected to social locations. These discrepancies are provocative and important. They may be due to differences in measurement, conceptualization, or changes over time or differences in populations studied. The fact that these literatures so seldom talk to one another, let alone to earlier concepts, makes it that more difficult to understand what might be going on.

Perhaps the most important missed opportunity for shared learning concerns what we know about the degree sense of control over one's future can be taught, the extent to which it is malleable. Thus, at one point, Duckworth mused:

> People often ask me if you can teach these things… This is the answer I'd like to give—I think so. But we know very little about how to do that… We don't have enough to say, very convincingly, that you just have to do x, y, z. We don't know what parenting interactions are important. We don't know which early educational experiences are crucial. We don't know what kind of teacher you need. Maybe it's none of those things. Maybe it's having a lot of hardship. Maybe adversity is better than success. It could be the opposite. So our ignorance is vast. (Nasterak 2013, n.p.)

If we think about the problem through the lens of related concepts, our ignorance is considerably less. Most of the work on interventions has been done using the locus of control language, and it suggests strongly that some youth, including some who begin with low levels of efficacy, can be taught to think differently, and this seems to be true of older as well as younger youth.

At the preschool level, it appears that a sustained intervention around efficacy can affect both locus of control and achievement. Walden and Ramey (1983) randomly assigned students to different kinds of preschool experiences, lasting 5 years, from the time they were 3 months old to the time they started kindergarten. One group of Black students from adverse socioeconomic circumstances was exposed to an efficacy curriculum: "The program was positive and success-oriented, and the child's ability to control his or her own outcomes was emphasized. The child was consistently rewarded for desired responses" (Walden and Ramey 1983, p. 350). Initially, high-risk children had lower perceptions of control over their academic futures than their lower-risk classmates. Children assigned to the efficacy experience did, on average, develop a stronger sense that their efforts shaped their achievement so that their control beliefs came to approximate those of lower-risk students. For them, IQ was not significantly related to achievement scores, as if their belief in their own capability swamped other factors. Children who believed strongly in their personal control were also better classroom citizens, more task-oriented, and less distractible.

At the high school level, Ashton (1986) developed a model for increasing students' internality. Her sample consisted of 300 high school juniors, all of whom tended to be high on feelings of external control, who were randomly assigned to four different treatment groups. Those assigned to the experimental group were exposed to 6 h of training to develop stronger locus of control, which included exposure to the relevant research, analysis of autobiographical writing, and discussions of case histories and goal-setting exercises. Those exposed to the curriculum performed significantly better on tests of both creativity and verbal skill, even though those concepts were not explicitly taught.

Dweck (2006, 2010) has drawn attention to the fact that students do better when they believe intelligence is malleable. Her research divides individuals into two camps: those who believe intelligence and other skills are static and thus possess a "fixed mindset" and those who believe such skills can be shaped and improved and therefore possess a "growth mindset." Her results show that students' mindsets predict their trajectories: those who believe they can improve actually do. Students who believe they can improve their abilities are better able to accommodate setbacks (a hallmark of both grit and locus of control), as well as apply themselves to challenging tasks (again, reminiscent of grit), and all of the aforementioned skills are useful both in the academic arena as well as in the wider realm of life outside of school. Blackwell et al. (2007) followed over 400 students as they moved to seventh grade. Students who believed in fixed intelligence fared most poorly across the transition; they demonstrated less motivation, less resilience in the face of adversity, and got lower grades over the following 2 years. Students who believed their intelligence was malleable demonstrated increasing grades over the same time period. Reinforcing the value of effort and downplaying the importance of intelligence—fostering "growth mindsets"—appears to be one of the most promising interventions.

In addition to fostering stronger senses of fate control and grit, a growth mindset may also help to assuage student anxieties embedded in stereotype threat. Aronson et al. (2002) tested a method of helping college students resist stereotype threat. The researchers placed students in an experimental condition where they were encouraged to see intelligence as malleable rather than fixed. After just three sessions focused on the growth mindset, African American students "created an enduring and beneficial change in their own attitudes about intelligence" (p. 123). Compared to their peers in control conditions, African American students reported enjoying and valuing academics more and received higher grades. The intervention had some of the same positive effects for white students, although not to the same degree.

Good et al. (2003) designed a growth mindset intervention for female, racial minority, and low-income seventh graders to test methods of helping them surmount the mentally distressing effects of stereotype threat and improve their standardized test scores. Students who were taught about the malleability of intelligence demonstrated increased math performance, but the increase was particularly striking for females, virtually removing the gender gap in achievement. Students in the experimental conditions, whom the authors note were mostly low-income and racial minorities, also earned significantly higher reading standardized test scores than

students in the control condition. These are especially important findings for students who face negative stereotypes about their academic abilities.

In laboratory settings and educational ones, in communities and families, it is pretty clear there are things we can do to give young people a different sense of their ability to shape a future. This appears to be true from the preschool level through college and it seems to be true for interventions at varying levels of intensity and duration, ranging from five-year interventions to a few hours. Many of the interventions seem to have an element of reflection, which may consist of asking students to think more about the consequences of their actions for their futures or asking them to think more about the consequences of their actions for social change, or asking them to focus on their own values. There may also be a relational component; individuals who feel supported by caring individuals may develop a stronger sense of their own capacities. Some interventions involve very direct, didactic instruction in which explicit lessons about personal control are taught and reinforced. Others are more open-ended, relying on discussion and role-play. Increasing internality seems to be associated with statistically significant academic and behavioral changes, and in some cases there are grounds for thinking it causes those changes. There is a great deal we do not know about how stable these changes are over time, the precise mechanisms which leverage them, effects on different populations, limitations of scale, and whether changes in one domain of activity extend into other domains. As we shall see in a moment, some of the most impactful interventions seem to be remarkably cost-effective.

Bridging the Structural and the Individual

Grit, in particular, has become a controversial concept, and the controversy says something about the current state of social science inquiry into persistent inequality. Indeed, the sheer excitement over the term opens the possibility of its being treated as some kind of cure-all variable. Having a measurement of grit and other character domains on student report cards, as the influential Knowledge is Power Program charter schools are reportedly doing (Sparks 2014b), seems likely to result in more "scientistic" versions of the discourses holding poor children responsible for their own situation. It is not at all clear that we can measure these ideas with the kind of precision that can help us talk about individuals.

Indeed, issues of method and measurement are among the more frequent criticisms raised. West (2014) notes that although there is little agreement on how to reliably measure noncognitive skills, researchers typically use students' self-reports and, less frequently, teacher-reported questionnaires—both of which are susceptible to social desirability bias and reference bias, the latter referring to cases where responses are influenced by differing standards of comparison. Thus, a paper by (West et al. 2014) looks at a sample of over 1300 eighth graders across 32 of Boston's public schools—both traditional public schools and five "no excuses" charter schools. At the individual level, noncognitive skills (including conscientiousness, self-control, grit, and growth mindset) were positively correlated with

attendance, behavior, and test score gains, but not at the school level, suggesting that students at different schools were using different standards.

Another criticism of grit is that it may not lead to creative success. Zorana Pringle, of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, compared the academic records and the reports of high school students, their peers, and teachers. Pringle found that neither students' scores on tests of grit nor their teachers' ratings of persistence were related to how creative they were on group projects. Instead, individual ratings of students' openness to new experiences and teachers' ratings of students with passion for their work predicted who would be the most creative (Sparks 2014a).

Other critics see grit in its current incarnation as amoral and careerist and say it limits the purposes of education to college and career preparation (Cohen 2015). Snyder (2014) notes "While it takes grit and self-control to be a heart surgeon, the same could be said about a suicide bomber" (n.p.). Kohn (2014) similarly argues that not everything is worth doing, especially for long periods of time, and can even be counterproductive. He cites a study of 90 female Canadian teenagers by Miller and Wrosch (2007) who found that that the teens' inability to disengage from unattainable goals was a significant predictor of health problems.

Some of these points seem overstated. Virtually any human characteristic can have negative consequences under some circumstance. Suggesting that a characteristic affects some life outcomes positively doesn't imply that it affects others that way or works the same way for all people. More concerning, we would say, are the frequent charges that discourse on noncognitive factors is drawing attention away from structural forces impeding student success. Kohn (2014), one of the most vocal critics of grit, argues that the concept is "philosophically conservative in its premises" and "politically conservative in its consequences" because "the more we focus on levels of grit … the less likely we'll be to question larger policies and institutions" (n.p.). Thomas (2014) goes so far as to label the grit narrative as "racist" and argues that it is largely directed at high-poverty African American and Latino/a students (n.p.). Undergirding the education reform movement's press for grit is the "misguided assumption" that more affluent, higher performing, mostly white students and schools are distinguishable from poorer students of color because of "effort … instead of the pervasive fact that achievement data are more strongly correlated with socioeconomic status than effort and commitment" (n.p.). In response to these arguments, Duckworth stated, "I'm sorry my work is perceived in that light. It certainly isn't intended as such. I don't believe we've ever written a single word that would suggest we are ignorant of structural problems, including poverty" (Herold 2015, n.p.).

Many of these arguments assume an either-or posture: Either the education reform movement works to ameliorate the structural forces that contribute to the failure of low-income students of color *or* it works to cultivate students' noncognitive skills. While we agree that the developing discourse around noncognitive skills does tend to treat them in isolation from structural factors, which takes us back to the heuristic potential of stressing that many of the most intriguing noncognitive factors can be related to a much older and very rich discourse on alienation, we find it more illuminating to think of a sense of

powerlessness as the central idea. Our reading of the research is that it is related to several important life outcomes across domains and that the pathways of connection can include:

- how likely people are to take initiative;
- whether they seek help;
- whether they recover from adversity;
- whether they attend to advice;
- whether they are committed to their work;
- how they attend to other information in their environment;
- how much they value a given domain of activity;
- how likely they are to persist long-term.

Thus, grit would be treated less as a stand-alone variable and more as one of many important patterns related to the social experience of powerlessness. Maintaining, as a kind of standing hypothesis, that many important noncognitive traits may be connected to powerlessness invites a series of questions that connect individual psychological traits to the larger social order, as Coleman did by positing that fate control was shaped by encounters with an unresponsive social environment. How do actors experience powerlessness, objectively and subjectively? How does the experience change over time? How does it facilitate or impede the capacity of people to take advantage of such opportunities as are in their reach? How does its distribution vary with social status? It is particularly important to ask how people of different social statuses react to powerlessness because we suspect that we are all more like than unlike, undercutting widespread tendencies to see the socially marginal as fundamentally different. The possibility that the burgeoning discourse on noncognitive factors will be absorbed into older conservative discourses may be real, but that is partly a matter of how we frame the inquiry.

It is of particular importance to ask a series of questions about transactions between the individual and the context, to think about how they affect one another. For example, self-efficacy is recognized to be either fostered (Pajares 1996; Schunk and Zimmerman 2007) or limited by students' context (Good et al. 2003; Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995). Subtle and explicit messages from instructors can affect the beliefs of young people about the malleability of personal characteristics (Dweck et al. 2011; Mueller and Dweck 1998; Yeager and Dweck 2012). Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) expectancy-value theory of motivation posits that beliefs about ability, expectancies of success, and the value youth place on tasks is derived greatly from environmental messages about value and the young person's past performance.

Looking at social psychological interventions more broadly, Yeager and Walton (2011) identify a sizeable number of micro-interventions that seem to have large and, in some cases, lasting effects. Many of the interventions address issues of self-efficacy, and many seem to address the presumably overlapping issues of racial stigma. A one-hour session designed to support African American college students' sense of social belonging in school increased their GPA over the next 3 years, reducing the racial achievement gap by half. Among middle schoolers, a brief

exercise asking them to reflect on their core values, believed to be a buffer against stereotype threat, reduced the Black-white grade gap by 40 % at the end of the term.

We now have over 25 years of work, much of it very careful methodologically, that shows robust effects from seemingly modest interventions. Given the general difficulty of finding effects from social interventions, we can hardly afford to ignore this work and that doesn't mean ignoring the salience of structure. On the contrary, Yeager and Walton (2011) emphasize that these interventions have to be understood as interactions with their context:

> This analysis draws on a core tenet of social psychology, namely, that every attitude and behavior exists in a complex field of forces—a tension system—in which some forces promote a behavior whereas other forces restrain that behavior… One lesson from this analysis is that the structure of the system determines its potential for change—an intervention that increases students' motivation to learn or that removes barriers to learning will improve academic outcomes only when learning opportunities exist in the educational environment. (pp. 274–275)

A student who receives an effective message countering racial stigma—e.g., Blacks can't do math—may make a different kind of effort in school. And if the stars are appropriately aligned, the school may then respond to the student differently and with that reinforcement, the student may be even more encouraged to increase her effort, and so on, in a self-reinforcing pattern that means the environment and the person are changing each other. At some point, all parties may forget the original stimulus.

It might also be useful to think about the problem from the viewpoint of social activists and people living in disadvantaged circumstances. Given the objective features of economic and social life which teach subordinate groups to understand themselves as powerless, how do such groups generate counter-narratives? This is one way to think about what Clark is saying about families in the housing project he studied or, in grander terms, it overlaps with the problem of class consciousness in Marxist theory. One approach to this is the literature on critical consciousness, a phrase often associated with Paulo Freire's attempts to empower disenfranchised adults in Brazil. Critical consciousness can be understood as having three components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action (Watts et al. 2011). The emphasis on reflection recalls a similar emphasis in many of the studies we have on enhancing internality, but here it is more likely to be associated with some form of collective rather than individual empowerment—*We* can change the future, rather than *I* can change the future—and it will be embedded in some form of structural understanding of society. The development of critical consciousness has been found to predict academic achievement (Watts et al. 2003) and the quality of jobs obtained (Diemer and Blustein 2006). A related literature on intentional ethnic-racial socialization by parents has been called underdeveloped in many respects (Hughes et al. 2006), but it seems clear that students with stronger racial identities seem to have stronger outcomes on a number of psychosocial measures, including resilience in the face of discrimination (Mandara et al. 2009; Wong et al. 2003). The review by Hughes et al. (2006) finds that parents who promote pride in the culture

and history of their group have children who show better cognitive outcomes and lower levels of negative behavior such as fighting.

There is an interesting hypothesis embedded in Clark's (1983) ethnography of low-income Black families. He quotes one boy as saying of his mother:

> I've noticed that from times way back—from times way back. When I was very young, like people of this caliber, she'd invite them in to have breakfast. She'd always try to help them with their kids, like clothes we weren't wearing, she'd give them to them. Anything she could help out with. She'd often take them grocery shopping and oftentimes give them food if they didn't have anything to eat. She'd always talk to the boys around here. … I can remember one time the cops were standing there with a boy around the store. He was running off at the mouth and the cop pulled his gun on him and my mother jumped in front of the boy and told the officer, "Please don't shoot him." (p. 65)

It may be that repeated acts of kindness and generosity by poor parents in particular convey a message about efficacy to their children. In the midst of poverty, altruism itself may be a counter-narrative. Parents like this mother have to face the very real restrictions on the lives of their children without conveying messages of hopelessness. They cannot afford either/or thinking. We also need to be mindful here of the narrow conceptions of human development which dominate social science imagery of poor youth, which, as various critics have suggested, are often focused on academics and social mobility to the exclusion of all else. Presumably, virtually all forms of human development, including the deep commitment to others shown by this mother, are likely to be facilitated by the feeling that what we do can matter.

Conclusion

Critiques notwithstanding, we conclude that newly popular ideas like grit and hope have potential for helping us think about how to support the development of disadvantaged youth, potential which is enhanced if we are mindful of the point Seeman made 50 years ago about the centrality of the social experience of powerlessness. Seeman reminds us of the dangers of theoretically narrow conceptualization. Failure to think about potential similarities among differently-labeled ideas makes it more difficult to appreciate the underlying power of the core idea, in this case the impact of feeling that one can or cannot shape one's future. The fact that important relationships remain even after the core idea has been spun a variety of ways—seen as having an affective component or not, seen as connected to all goals or just long-term goals, understood in social or psychological terms—should only make the core idea more intriguing. Instead, it may be getting lost among its specifications. Framing the problem in terms of a family of ideas related to alienation should make it easier to isolate important cross-cutting problems and to build on prior knowledge. This is especially the case if, rather than succumbing to either/or debates about the salience of individual traits as opposed to that of

structure, we think of the human experience of powerlessness as guiding our inquiries into individual choices. The long history of abusing the study of individual traits (Payne 1984) cannot mean that we abandon their study. As developed by Marx, Weber, and others, alienation functioned as a bridge between social structure and individual characteristics and working within that tradition can help us off the either/or treadmill, which obscures both the power of structure to shape lives and the power of people to push back.

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