

True Grit? Making a Scientific Object and Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract: *The educability of personal qualities has garnered attention for its potential to raise student achievement. This investigation asks how one such quality—grit—has become a commonsensical way to think about differences among students. As a history of the present, grit is approached as a cultural thesis that links individualism to narratives of American exceptionalism and historical progress. This thesis is embodied in contemporary school reforms to “get gritty” in order to close achievement gaps. A danger of these reforms is how pedagogies of grit generate classificatory regimes that divide people by the display of particular attitudes and behaviors. As grit travels globally, it decontextualizes social and economic inequalities, and explains them as owing to the intrinsic qualities of people.*

A fundamental question asked of modern schooling has been why some children succeed while others fail. In recent years, psychologists, economists, and educators have posed answers that seek to go beyond the cognitive dimensions traditionally associated with IQ and achievement testing. Where once the mind's traits were given as fixed and immutable, psychologists today have argued for the need to view human capabilities as more expansive and flexible than that. Recent research, for instance, argues that a “growth mindset” can unlock and transform one's inner abilities (Dweck, 2006). Research on growth mindset dovetails with the burgeoning field of positive psychology, which proposes the study of “positive subjective experiences,” “individual traits,” and “the institutions that enable them” in order to unlock the hidden human potentiality in all (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 5). Whether called virtues, character skills, non-cognitive

traits, or, most recently, personal qualities (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015), the hope is to name and to link what psychologists locate in the mind, what economists correlate with improved life outcomes, and what educators can foster in classrooms.

One of the most important of these personal qualities is called “grit” (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), which psychologists have defined as:

perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining an interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. . . . Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087–88)

This trait is linked to long-term success. To the question, “Why do some individuals accomplish more than others of equal intelligence?” (p. 1087), the psychologists have offered a straightforward and compelling explanation: “We suggest that one personal quality is shared by the most prominent leaders in every field: grit” (p. 1087).

Yet grit is more than a psychological quality; it is also a metonym for the autonomous individual, a notion that is deeply woven into the fabric of what it has historically meant to be American (see, e.g., Cohen-Cole, 2014). Grit links to a venerated narrative of the United States’ development as owing to its pioneers’ unique character—their self-assurance, resilience, and, most of all, hard work. The narrative doubles as a moral guidepost for what schooling should instill in its citizens. Consider, for instance, what a headmaster at an elite private academy has to say about grit in Tough’s (2012) *New York Times* Best Seller, *How Children Succeed*:

Whether it’s the pioneer in the Conestoga wagon or someone coming here in the 1920s from southern Italy, there was always this idea in America that if you worked hard and

you showed real grit, that you could be successful. . . . Strangely, we've now forgotten that. . . . And I think as a result, we are actually setting [students] up for long-term failure. . . . I don't think they've grown the capacities to be able to handle that. (p. 45)

Grit offers a way of speaking about the virtues of hard work and owning up to your challenges. It seamlessly connects a moral outlook to a historical narrative of American exceptionalism that also serves as a universal mission of schooling.

The purpose of this study is to productively invert the questions that have been asked so far about grit. The investigation turns the analytical focus away from grit as an object that explains, and towards grit as an object in need of explanation. At issue is not the internal validity or reliability of test items that psychologists have used to verify grit; at issue is how a cultural value has traveled into school reforms as a scientific way to think about children and to explain their successes and failures. This investigation examines how efforts to make gritty people have unintended consequences. As a strategy to close achievement gaps, grit expresses norms and judgments about the "right" kind of person to succeed. These norms double to mark those perceived as lacking grit-correlated attitudes and behaviors as in need of intervention and correction. As grit and other personal qualities travel beyond the borders of U.S. psychological research and into transnational education reforms, they are emptied of their history and provide ahistorical and decontextualized explanations for why some nations and individuals are supposedly left behind.

Grit as an Object in Need of Explanation: Some Methodological Notes

The investigation is a history of the present (Foucault, 1991). In exploring grit's uptake in school reforms, the method compares the epistemological principles of past and present that order who the child is and should be, and who and what has been excluded from these notions of belonging

and social progress (see, e.g., Popkewitz, 2008). This strategy attends to the social, political, economic, and cultural practices that make grit intelligible as an object of psychological research, as well as the work that this naming and elaborating requires (Danziger, 1997; Rose, 1985). Specifically, the analysis juxtaposes psychologists' statements about the nature of grit alongside the historiography of the U.S. frontier, the professionalization of the U.S. social sciences, and their contemporary translations into school reforms in the U.S. and abroad. Instead of asking what grit can say about the successes or failures of individuals or groups, the method asks how grit has become an object that organizes and explains differences in "all" children. In posing the question in this manner, the history of grit can be analyzed as the assembling and reconfiguring of various elements (see, e.g., Latour, 1999), rather than as a history of errors and misrecognitions culminating in today's discovery of "true" grit. This historicizing approach considers the contingencies and leaps necessary for grit to transform itself from the defining attribute of the pioneer on the American frontier to a quality lying latent in "all" students around the world today.

Historicizing differs from previous critiques that have characterized grit as the representation of a particular political, religious, or economic ideology. These critiques suggest that what is called grit is actually something else: a conservative, Protestant narrative (Kohn, 2014), an expression of the ideology of positive psychology (Anderson, 2014), or a neoliberalism caused by the privatization of schooling (Ellison, 2012). While these accounts situate grit in larger socio-political contexts and theories of hegemonic power, they leave unexamined what makes grit—and personal qualities more generally—sensible as a way of thinking about and administering the child. They obscure rather than explore the interrelation of psychological

research and pedagogical practices in fashioning the kind of child whose personal qualities are assumed to bring about social progress and economic prosperity.

This article is an investigation into how grit works—how it has moved from its historical inscription of frontier individuality into a psychological register; and how it distinguishes gritty and not-so-gritty kinds of people that are tied to learning and school reform. These analytical moves are guided by the insights of philosopher Ian Hacking (1986), who has studied how social sciences such as psychology have participated in making up kinds of people. “Making up” for Hacking refers to how the practices of classifying people simultaneously bring them into existence—a “dynamic nominalism” (p. 223). Intersecting theories, practices, and technologies as tools for knowing and administering people also provide new ways to experience oneself as a kind of person that did not previously exist (Hacking, 2007). In the same gesture that grit makes up, however, it also abjects. The article explores how, in schooling today, those cast out as “not gritty” are impelled to eliminate the qualities that inhibit grit’s “natural” expression. Abjection, in this way, refers to a process of exclusion that is not the politics of segregating or expelling *pre-given* identities from a social space. Cast out are ways of being, thinking, feeling, and acting in the world that are offered as barriers to inclusion, success, or the good life (Popkewitz, 1998; see also Kristeva, 1982). Abjection brings into view how, in past and present, grit differentiates and divides people on a hierarchy of values.

In what follows, grit is studied as a cultural thesis sedimented into the psychological subject and translated in schooling as a moral imperative. First, grit is located in the frontier thesis at the turn of the 20th century as a quality of the autonomous (viz. rugged) individual who embodied narratives of democracy and American exceptionalism. Second, the cultural thesis of grit is considered alongside notions of developmentalism that proliferated among late 19th and

early 20th century psychological discourses. These discourses entered into the school as dividing practices that distinguished the child who would secure democracy and ensure social progress from those classified as backwards and dangerous. The historical analysis allows today's uptake of grit to be approached not merely as an objective tool for improving life outcomes, but as a set of practices that differentiate children along a continuum according to its thesis of the psychological good life. These historical insights provide analytical leverage for the third and fourth sections of the paper that examine grit's contemporary uses as a pedagogical tool of observation and reflection in schools, and as a universalized quality traveling in transnational school reforms. The questions guiding these analyses are how grit has come to appear as a neutral and value-free tool for ranking who measures up in the display of personal qualities; and, how grit's appearance in international assessments, policy, and transnational school reforms has offered new ways to speak the truth not just of individuals' but also of entire nations' efforts at schooling.

Grit as a Metonym for American Exceptionalism and Historical Progress

In 2007, psychologists identified grit, describing it as a factor correlated with the greater success of some individuals over others of equal intelligence. This identification was linked, the psychologists argued, to scientific inquiries of the past, one of which they described as follows:

In 1907, William James proposed “a program of study that might with proper care be made to cover the whole field of psychology” (p. 322). James encouraged psychologists to address two broad problems: First, what are the types of human abilities and, second, by what diverse means do individuals unleash these abilities? In the century that has passed since James's suggestion, psychological science has made impressive progress in

answering the first of these two questions. . . . In this article, we reiterate James's second question. (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087)

The psychologists of grit cite James within an internalist account of elaboration and correlation of its objects, wherein grit is linked to a forebear's quest a century earlier. In this history, grit is recalled as one of the qualities of the mind revealed by a discipline's specialized inquiries and methods. Yet the historical narrative also begs a number of questions: How did the mapping and unleashing of human abilities become a scientific endeavor? How did grit come to link developmental theories of the individual, the mind, and the nation? Moreover, how did these questions become superfluous, allowing the history of grit to be reducible to a question posed by William James?

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004) has suggested that acts of memory and forgetting are what provide histories their narrative cohesion and sense of testimony. From this point of view, the memorializing of an internalist history of grit has allowed it to stand as the culmination of a discipline's study—a timeless object only recently identified as a factor of individuals' success. As a tale of discovery, grit, loses some of its historicity. It is rendered merely as a fact waiting to be found. To put some history back into grit—to turn it from a matter of fact back into a matter of concern (Latour, 2004)—requires leaving the settled disciplinary truth regimes of the present. It requires tracing the tethers of James's inquiry into human abilities to a broader set of social scientific investigations occurring at the turn of the 20th century. The questions that James and other social scientists were posing concerned how individuals, societies, and “races” develop. These questions appeared in sociological, anthropological, psychological, and pedagogical debates about the nature of progress and the growth of the child, and in experiments that sought to map the mind. In short, what psychologists today name as a Jamesian quest to make

individuals' capacities available to improvement can, in fact, be situated within a set of hopes and fears regarding the perfecting of "Man" and the perceived consequences of the failure to do so (see, e.g., Ross, 1992).

So, how did James's inquiries become a logical starting point for narrating a history of psychologists' identification of grit? The sundering and solidifying of psychology as a discipline occurred during the professionalization of the social sciences in the U.S. at the end of the 19th century, a moment when the perceived failures of industrialization, Reconstruction, and unregulated capitalism were seen to threaten traditional ways of life (Trachtenberg, 2007). Soaring economic and social inequalities, sprawling urban growth, and increased migration from the U.S. South and from eastern and southern Europe challenged long-standing narratives of America as a land of Biblical redemption, making the future of the republic appear less and less certain (Nye, 1994). These societal transformations can be observed in the preoccupations of the early U.S. social sciences, particularly by juxtaposing psychological inquiries with those of historiography. Like psychologists, turn-of-the-century historians sought to make their discipline into a universal science that could indicate to the nation its necessary future steps (Ross, 1992). Historian Frederick Jackson Turner produced one of the most famous of these attempts—"the frontier thesis"—that argued that European-descended settlers' "contact" with a geographical frontier was the source of American exceptionalism. Juxtaposing Turner's nationalist thesis with James's investigations of unleashing individuals' energies can bring into focus how early 20th century psychological and historical inquiries shared a view that progress sprung forth from the innate qualities of a unique kind of individual.

Turner's theory held that American exceptionalism relied a great deal upon the making of the rugged individual: "Here has been developed, not by revolutionary theory, but by growth

among free opportunities, the conception of a vast democracy made up of *mobile ascending individuals, conscious of their power and their responsibilities*” (Turner, 1893/1921, p. 203, emphasis added). At one level, Turner’s thesis was not unique for its time; it drew upon judgments and explanations of what distinguished American pioneers from their European relatives and from “savage” Others. Pointing to one’s grit offered a common shorthand. Grit featured prominently in stories of pioneers claiming and “developing” the North American Midwest and West, such as *Goldglove Gid, the Man of Grit; Phil at Bay, or, True Yankee Grit;* and *Clear-Grit Kirby, or, The Red Cyclone of Texas* published between the 1870s and 90s. Heroes’ individual expressions of hands-on, dirty, and practical labor were linked to their personal mettle. In these and other contemporaneous narratives (such as Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches stories), grit was woven into the very fabric of one’s being (see, e.g., Ris, 2015). Grit taught that hardscrabble individualism should be connected to useful labor. More than one’s physical toil, grit associated labor with self-development. Grit moralized the conditions for social progress—this social progress was imagined to culminate in what Turner (1893/1921) called a “pioneer democracy” (p. 335).

The frontier thesis helps to contextualize how the psychology of the individual became essential to a millennial vision of progress that was simultaneously religious, economic, and nationalist. For Turner (1893/1921), the frontier was a “crucible” that “Americanized” and “liberated” the pioneers from the old class systems of Europe, fusing disparate (but exclusively Western European) immigrant groups “into a mixed race” (p. 23). He argued that, “the very essence of the American frontier is that it is the graphic line which records the expansive energies of the people behind it” (p. 52). In other word, European-descended settlers’ contact with “the frontier” produced a new material struggle that transformed a “savage” land into a

“civilized” one that would enable mankind’s gradual perfectionment (p. 30). The frontier thesis both demarcated a nation’s progress in time, and located the source of that progress in the “consciousness” who carried “pioneer ideals” (p. 269). The thesis conflated an individual’s material wealth with a religious spirit that bestowed ownership rights by revelation. Lands seized from Native American tribes by the U.S. government were imbued with Biblical qualities—described as a “New World,” a new “Zion,” or a new “Canaan.” The capacity to, desire for, and persistence in “developing” these lands in terms of capitalist-industrial resource exploitation distinguished one’s “true grit.” At the same moment, the frontier thesis inscribed a divide between those who occupied the side of civilization and progress and those who represented savagery and backwardness. These kinds of people—Native Americans who persisted in “traditional” modes of life (p. 21), African Americans terrorized by rampant lynching and legally and extra-legally prevented from acquiring land, and women whose roles were to support the domestication of the land (Campbell & Kean, 2006)—became the frontier thesis’s constitutive Others.

Written at the turn of the 20th century, the frontier thesis offered a triumphalist narrative of a national past that doubled as a jeremiad about the future of the republic. For Turner, the closing of the U.S.’s geographical frontier represented the end of the “first period” of American history (Turner, 1893/1921, p. 38). Where once land provided an open space for individual competitiveness, the rapidly industrializing world of the 20th century offered no such guarantee. Turner argued that the ending of one developmental stage marked the beginning of another; in this next stage, recreating the “natural” conditions of individual competitiveness fell upon the institutions of the republic—in particular, its rapidly growing universities—to maintain the “new social order” generated on the frontier and its civilizing spirit (p. 204). Grit embodied the frontier

thesis. Grit was more than just a distinguishing mark of hard-working individuals; it came to represent the hope of perfecting the kind of person necessary for national salvation and historical progress, while also generating new fears of those presumed to lack this seemingly essential quality.

Linking grit “back” to the frontier thesis brings into view the relations between the fraught and violent history of a nation’s emergence and its social sciences that sought to provide the conditions for stability and planning. Turner (1893/1921) envisioned that the new land-grant universities of the Midwest could “[sink] deep shafts through the social strata to find the gold of real ability in the underlying rock of the masses” (p. 283), and could continue to “foster that due degree of individualism” even after the geographical frontier ceased to exist (p. 282). These universities were to generate the decentralized democratic governance that characterized the frontier in order to “safeguard democracy” (p. 286). This historiography enshrined liberal individualism as owing to one’s contact with the frontier, but also made its existence conditional upon an individual’s contact with “nature” (i.e., “savage” lands and people). When this “nature” no longer existed, the research university would have to provide the planning and knowledge for this kind of person to (re)emerge through individual competition.

While Turner imagined the research university as responsible for reproducing the rugged individual, educational reform discourses for decades to come took up the frontier thesis in widely ranged ways. Consider, as just one example, the writings of prominent U.S. intellectual, James Bryant Conant. A scientist who served for decades as president of Harvard University, Conant spent his later years writing extensively on education reform and the democratic potential of schooling (see Rury, 2002). In writing about the postwar high school, Conant (1959) drew

upon the frontier thesis to explain the exceptional character of American democracy, contrasting the ideal American school system with those of Europe:

[T]he American frontier has in fact shaped our institutions. To a large extent, it was responsible for widening the concept of equality. For the American of the nineteenth century equality became, above all, equality of opportunity—*an equal start in a competitive struggle*. This aspect of equality acted like a magnet on inhabitants of other lands and attracted those immigrants whose settling on this continent so enriched our culture and invigorated our stock. And this wave of immigration placed on our tax-supported schools many educational tasks of a special nature. . . . Equality thus came to mean for many new Americans *not only political equality but equality of opportunity*.

(Conant, 1959, p. 5, emphasis added)

The insertion of the frontier in postwar education idealized equality in U.S. schooling as comparable to the myth of the prairie that greeted the pioneers a century prior—a purportedly empty space where individuals confronted “nature” and where one’s true grit would tell. Brought into schooling, an equality of opportunity would likewise require “competition” between individual students’ “academic talent” and their ability to summon and maintain the effort necessary to materialize this talent as “honest labor” (Conant, 1959, p. 6).

To recall grit’s history as integral to an ongoing narrative of American exceptionalism is, at one level, obvious. Angela Duckworth, one of the psychologists chiefly responsible for grit’s newfound prominence in education, has observed that grit is a very “American idea in some ways—really pursuing something against all odds” (Smith, 2014). Yet, what makes grit “American” is not reducible to mere perseverance or John Wayne’s role in a famous Hollywood film. Embedded in grit is also a cultural thesis that has linked an individual’s change to a theory

of democracy, national exceptionalism, and historical progress. Grit's narrative—of the rugged individual who resolves to develop a harsh and unforgiving land—offered comfort to a republic in peril. The frontier's disappearance signaled the need to systematically identify and preserve the qualities it had seemingly forged. Turner's historiography of American exceptionalism abstracted the past so as to generate scientific "laws" of human nature that would help manage economic and demographic transformations to come. "Grit" offered one such relay between past and present. Whereas pioneer grit was inscribed by the mud and sweat of windswept toil on the plains, school grit could now be seen in the furrowed brows of young children and the eraser smudges of a second and third attempt. In the movement from historiographical thesis to social science imperative, grit emerged in the 20th century as not just a cultural value, but as a metonym for the kind of person given as essential to reason, democracy, and progress. In that gesture, grit also signaled who and what were not essential to that progress, marking those cast as lacking this quality as dangerous to the future of the republic.

Grit as Developmentalism, Universal History, and the Child's Mind

The frontier thesis posited history as the development of the autonomous individual who brought progress and an ideal form of democracy. History, in fact, could be studied as the development of the "consciousness" of this kind of person. In this way, the pioneer became both the prime mover within a narrative of historical change and the beating heart of American exceptionalism. At the same moment, the very qualities that marked the pioneer were coming under scrutiny by early psychologists seeking to identify and harness exceptional mental states. These investigations began to employ methods and standards of proof that drew from the natural sciences by creating "laboratory conditions" (Carson, 2007; Danziger, 1997; Rose, 1985). Narrated today as two discrete disciplinary pursuits, early 20th century history and psychology

nonetheless shared a concern with identifying the personal qualities of the autonomous individual. These resemblances can be brought into sharper relief by exploring the psychological theories and practices that sought to describe the growth of an individual in linear time, and that made the child's mind an object of investigation.

At the turn of the 20th century, both history and psychology drew upon modes of seeing, thinking, and ordering change that have been studied as “developmentalism” (see, e.g., Baker, 1999; Burman, 1994/2016; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984/1998). Developmentalism gives focus to a heterogeneous set of practices in the ordering of the natural and social sciences in the U.S. and Europe during the latter half of the 19th century. The representational truths of classical taxonomical systems were given new meaning in narratives of growth and development. These narratives percolated in various forms in the social sciences, figuring into the study of economics, anthropology, and sociology, as well as psychology and pedagogy. Its traces can even be observed in a narrative genre of the period—the *bildungsroman*—that made a character's “coming of age” an organizing outcome that explained all prior events as its necessary steps (Steedman, 1995). The frontier thesis, likewise, reinterpreted the exceptional character of the American pioneer as not merely innate and static, but as an organic and restless spirit catalyzed by hardships in an unforgiving environment. As an analytical frame, developmentalism offers a springboard from which to consider how notions of individual growth and species' evolution were brought into otherwise disparate studies of the child and the mind, linking biological determinism, nation formation, and historical progress (Baker, 1999). This productive conflation is evident in Turner's (1893/1921) succinct account of American history:

The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution. It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization . . . and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system. (p. 11)

From simple to complex, savage to civilized, the gritty, self-reliant individual was not just there, but was assumed to emerge experientially and exceptionally. Developmentalism makes visible how the various social sciences of the early 20th century sought to find the hidden rules and principles that ordered society and could be harnessed to accelerate “natural” historical processes by establishing standards for the qualities and conduct of the individual.

Whereas U.S. historiography etched a romanticized portrait of the rugged individual’s abilities, early 20th century inquiries into the psyche sought to unleash them. Several prominent U.S. psychologists and philosophers of the time were central to these efforts: William James, G. Stanley Hall, and John Dewey. While these figures’ theories, methods, and conclusions differed significantly, they shared an insistence that psychology could speak the truth of the self, and that this truth should be based on empirical fact produced in experimental settings. Moreover, they shared a set of cultural principles and standards about the child, nature and development that connected experimental observations with theories of development and change that made the child a crucial “switching station” between an individual’s maturation and an evolutionary history that could reveal the steps necessary for social progress (Lesko, 2012). What follows is an exploration of how the cultural thesis of the autonomous individual offered a foundation for early psychological theorization and experimentation, naturalizing the conditions for grit as a personal quality of the mind and as an objective of pedagogy.

Cited by today's psychologists of grit as their intellectual antecedent (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007), the pragmatism of William James offers a useful starting point to explore the relationship between psychology and modern schooling with respect to grit. Like Duckworth et al., James's (1907) psychological research was notable for its insistence on empirical verification. James claimed that one's ability to modify habit and conduct was evidence of free will, and that self-transformation and self-mastery could be a catalyst to social change (Sklansky, 2002). James was clear on the subject:

So far as we are thus mere bundles of habit, we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves. And since this, under any circumstance, is what we always tend to become, it follows first of all that the teacher's prime concern should be to ingrain into the pupil that assortment of habits that shall be most useful to him throughout life. Education is for behavior, and habits are the stuff of which behavior consists. (James, 1899, p. 66)

James's primary categories (the mind, behavior, bundles of habit) and values (unleashing individual abilities, a lifelong and useful education) mark a shift in the early-20th century U.S. social sciences from merely describing social phenomena to directing the tides of human development as a theory of social change. James, like Turner, sought to find the scientific laws that could direct individual action in order to overcome old class systems, religious dogma, and decrepit institutions (see, e.g., Bordogna, 2008; Baker, 2013). Jamesian psychology of the individual doubled as social reform, which he individualized as mastery of the mind.

The cultural thesis that links individual development to social (i.e., historical) progress was also present in the psychology of G. Stanley Hall. For Hall, the key to unlocking the full potential of the individual lay in correctly steering the child's interiority. The child's growth was

explained through theories of biology and racial evolution, and could be verified through naturalist observational practices (Baker, 1999; Fallace, 2015). Hall's (1904/1924) child was one whose growth followed the development of its species—“ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”—and whose potential varied by the quality of its “racial stock” (p. *viii*). Hall wrote that, “Primitive races are either hopelessly decadent and moribund, or at best have demonstrated their inability to domesticate or civilize themselves” (p. 651). He claimed further that history shows “that each of the great races has developed upon a basis of a lower one, and our own progress has been so amazing that in it we read our title clear to dominion” (p. 652). Hall's theories were foundational to the child-study movement of early 20th century schooling; knowledge of the child would come from close examination of its supposed nature and needs (see, e.g., Felmley, 1896). Brought into questions of pedagogy, Hall suggested that young children should learn Native American arts and crafts as they aligned best to their interests and instincts at that age (Fallace, 2015). Hall (1904/1924) claimed that the science of child study was essential to avoid “not only arrest, but perversion, at every stage, and hoodlumism, juvenile crime, and secret vice” that he claimed accompanied “urban life with its temptations, prematurities, sedentary occupations, and passive stimuli” (pp. *xiv–xv*). Hall posited that at adolescence and “never again will there be such susceptibility to drill and discipline, such plasticity to habituation, or such ready adjustment to new conditions” (p. *xii*). He contrasted the decadence of the “urban” with the pastoral qualities of the frontier, where the ideal youth would be “the pioneer, often the discoverer, capable of passionate love of truth, [who] turns naturally to expert mastery as the best way of forging out a new and recognized place for himself in the intellectual world near the frontier which it is his very nature to love” (p. 554). Child-study revisioned the teacher as a taskmaster and goal setter, whose knowledge of the psychological principles of developmental stages would best determine

the form and content of the child's moral and character education (e.g., McMurry, 1901). The frontier becomes a space for Hall's child to learn "expert mastery," exemplified by the examples of the pioneer and discoverer, which also signify its proper maturation. This scientific planning of the child was linked, like the frontier thesis, to a theory of progress that entailed planned pedagogical encounters with "savage" and "natural" elements. These would help ensure the catalyzing of the child's inner qualities as a racialized theory for the gradual perfectionment of mankind (Hall, 1901).

Like James and Hall, John Dewey's thesis of the child was one who required a rational ordering of thought and action in order to reform society. Pedagogically, this child demanded the insertion of scientific principles into daily life in order to eliminate the traditions and superstitions that would otherwise impede individual development and social progress. In one of his most cited works, *How We Think*, Dewey (1910) explained his pragmatic notion of science as "the possibility of systemized foresight" (p. 15)—a method for maturing the child's habits of mind so as to furnish the conditions for a "civilized culture" (p. 16):

By thought man also develops and arranges artificial signs to remind him in advance of consequences, and of ways of securing and avoiding them. . . . [T]his trait makes the difference between civilized and savage. (Dewey, 1910, p. 15)

For Dewey, civilized thought required not simply living within a natural world, but making nature into an object. He contrasted "the savage," who merely reads nature's signs, with "the civilized man," who creates sign systems in order to take proper actions in light of an anticipated future. For Dewey (1910), the civilized man engaged in "reflection," which was equated to "traveling in an unfamiliar region" (p. 10). Dewey described the desired kind of "thinking agent" (p. 15) as possessing a "willingness to *endure* a condition of mental unrest and disturbance

likely to be somewhat painful,” (p. 13, emphasis added), and as “*mastering* the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur” (p. 13, emphasis added). For Dewey, the essentials of thinking required one “to *maintain* the state of doubt and to *carry on* systematic and *protracted* inquiry” (p. 13, emphasis added). This person who persists and endures in their thought and action in spite of external challenge is contrasted with the “savage,” who lacks “capacity for thought” and is “moved only by instincts and appetites, as these are called forth by outward conditions” (p. 14). Dewey concluded that one who does not engage in a rigorous and persistent mode of thought “does not ‘know what he is about’” (p. 14).

Developmentalism offered psychologists and pedagogues a prism for identifying and comparing the stages of children’s growth with differences arrayed in linear time. Particular personal qualities were enshrined as an organizing telos for individual, national, and economic development. These norms and judgments about the kind of person essential to progress were set against a backdrop of sociological and anthropological fears of the kinds of people assumed to lack the necessary qualities. Portraits of fatalism, superstition, and tradition-bound thinking were often ascribed to immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, African Americans migrating from the U.S. South, and Native Americans (see, e.g., Grant, 1916; Jones, 1917). These qualities, inscribed onto particular groups, were made abject in contrast with those of the “thinking agent” who gave “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (Dewey, 1910, p. 6). Psychological distinctions offered new markers and practices for identifying individuals and groups failing to embody the habits associated with active and persistent thought.

Juxtaposing Turner's historiography with early 20th century psychology makes visible how a cultural thesis of the individual imagined to enable social and moral development transgressed disciplinary boundaries. The desired individual was one whose qualities—given by James as willful self-mastery, by Hall as expert mastery, and by Dewey as active and persistent thought—bear a striking resemblance to what the frontier thesis described as individuals “conscious of their power and their responsibilities,” and who “learned that unrestrained competition . . . meant the triumph of the strongest, the seizure in the interest of the dominant class of the strategic points of the nation's life” (Turner, 1893/1921, p. 203). Early psychology, however, did not merely reflect but buttressed a cultural thesis of the autonomous individual with observable rules that would guide its development in strategies of planning and administration. The professionalization of the discipline was as much the creation and standardization of experimental conditions as it was a consensus on the attitudes, sensibilities, and beliefs that could be made subject to intervention and correction when found out of bounds.

Putting the history of a cultural thesis “back” into the contemporary understanding of grit—and personal qualities more broadly—has required moving beyond the history of a discipline as a self-propelled engine of discovery. That internalist history effaces the conditions of psychology's emergence within broader patterns of knowledge production given focus here as developmentalism; moreover, it effaces the aspirations and anxieties of an imperiled republic and the hopes of the social sciences to plan the future of modern society. Reattaching these tethers demonstrates how the activities of early 20th century psychologists performed as social engineering that sought to design and administer the child's mind according to particular values and principles linked to progress and civilization. This social engineering also cast out those categorically presumed as fatalist, tradition-bound, and prone to idle thought. What now remains

to explore is how these elements of the autonomous individual remain integral to contemporary translations of grit, and how it travels, is translated, and is embodied as a cultural thesis in both U.S. and transnational school reforms today.

Grit as a Pedagogical Tool of Self-Management and Inscribing Difference

Today's grit has changed from the kinds discussed in early 20th century history and psychology. No longer assumed as a virtue found only in the pioneer or "civilized" thinker, grit is taught as an objective personal quality that can be cultivated in all. Uprooted from the geography of the frontier, the gritty individual is now associated with credentialed achievement and career advancement: "Our hypothesis that grit is essential to high achievement evolved during interviews with professionals in investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law . . . whose sustained commitment to their ambitions was exceptional" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1088). Today's psychological grit has become something to identify and realize through pedagogical observations and assessments in an increasing number of classrooms and schools.

One way to explore how today's grit makes up gritty and non-gritty people is to analyze its use in the character report card—a pedagogical tool that aims to guide the development of desirable personal qualities. The report card was featured in a U.S. Department of Education (2013) report that highlighted its development by the Relay Graduate School of Education (RGSE) and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). According to the report, the character report card is intended to help close "achievement gaps" that go beyond "intellectual aspects of success" (p. v), and includes students' "grit," "self-control," and other personal qualities (p. 38). More recently, the report card's development has been taken over by the Character Lab (a

collaboration between Duckworth and KIPP co-founder Dave Levin, among others), retitled the Character Growth Card (CGC), and designed for use in the general classroom.

In the CGC, grit is given as a personal quality located on a rubric that is correlated with observable behaviors. The rubric is a common diagnostic tool in schooling today, standardizing ratings to support a student's self-reflection about progress towards particular performance objectives (Popkewitz & Kirchgasser, 2014). On the CGC, for example, grit is a developmental norm to be observed and rated. Evidence of grit includes the extent to which one "finished whatever s/he began," "stuck with a project or activity for more than a few weeks," "stayed committed to goals," and "tried very hard even after experiencing failure" (Character Lab, 2014). The CGC uses Likert scale scores from multiple reporters (i.e., teachers, along with the student) to calculate and average the degree to which the student displays grit. This standardized, norm-referenced behavioral rating scale is recommended for use in profiling students for intervention, and in monitoring and measuring student change (RGSE, 2014).

Grit's appearance on the CGC makes visible important transformations in its use. No longer does grit merely explain individuals' success after the fact (in the manner of the early 20th century social sciences). Rather, the rubric continually invokes and guides self-reflection according to its rules and standards. The CGC demands observations from one's teachers but also from oneself. The CGC incites students to reveal their inner thoughts in what philosopher Michel Foucault (1988) has described as a form of "the confessional," where a private self is made public for the purposes of evaluation and transformation. Both teachers and student are privy to the rubric's contents and use them to guide discussion of the student's progress. Teachers use the rubric as a clinical encouragement for students to speak of their failures and of their plans to improve (Popkewitz & Kirchgasser, 2014). The CGC links categories of behavior

to observable acts and makes explicit what the student must do in order “to be” a “gritty,” “self-controlled,” and “grateful” person. Through the CGC, an individual’s internal attitudes and behaviors are made into qualities of decorum—how one should properly think, act, and feel—for the purposes of their monitoring and modification.

The shift from evaluation to continuous optimization characterizes a broader transformation occurring in psychology (Rose, 2007). For example, grit is often paired in pedagogical discussions with a notion of “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006) in order to suggest that “all” children already have the potential to develop grit. Educators are to use the CGC to focus feedback on how students need to maintain or change certain behaviors linked to the development of desired personal qualities. Self-report surveys and questionnaires guide the growth of what is assumed to lie latent as potential. The CGC places students’ self-assessments in dialogue with those of teachers in order to calibrate perceptions of self and other that are to facilitate students’ growth over time. Grit, routinized as pedagogical practice, becomes a condition that requires continual verification, enables comparison (between raters and against other students), and entails deliberation in order to verify whether one can mentally endure failure and boredom on the way to achieving internalized goals and benchmarks. In a training video, one of the educators who teaches grit puts it in the following way:

There’s a bucket of behaviors that correspond to grit, self-control, and optimism that are really all about the student regulating themselves in order to accomplish their own goals and objectives. You can call it self-management. . . . That group of behaviors predicts over one year later things like GPA, standardized test scores, etcetera. We now directly have that evidence from the Character Growth Card. (RGSE, 2014)

The CGC's calibration and quantification of observed behaviors would seem to make grit visible for the purposes of evidence-based discussion. The CGC also makes possible the aggregation and correlation of these behaviors with other quantified measures of student achievement. The CGC provides a useful administrative tool through which users can both observe and guide a student's development as a moral person in ways that can be linked with other performance indicators.

The CGC is offered as a democratic practice in the pedagogy of grit. Rather than impose grit as a set of prescriptive rules, the CGC would seem to propose that multiple assessors and numbers encourage precision, transparency, and dialogue. At the same moment, the rubric constitutes limits that order and direct change according to its standards and rules. Students' inner thoughts are made intelligible to the extent and degree they correspond with the attitudes and behaviors associated with grit and other personal qualities. In this, the psychological good life is not a question but a directive. The pedagogical procedures of the CGC differentiate and divide children along a continuum of values and norms that teachers and children are to use as explanations for achievement, or lack thereof.

Contemporary grit may appear far from the frontier. Yet grit remains a metonym for the rules and standards of who the child is and should be that recall its prior invocations in early 20th century history and psychology. This rearticulation of grit, then, is not a reflexive repetition of the past, but is what Foucault (1961/2001) has described as a "torsion within the same anxiety" (p. 13). What was given as a cultural thesis of pioneers' contact with "nature" is now a scientific truth. That truth is instrumentalized through pedagogical tools like the CGC to realize a developmental norm by examining and comparing students' relative degrees of grit—and to foster it where it is found lacking. Those seen as further from this goal become the targets for

increased focus and remediation. These students must learn to “get gritty.” Grit is now something to be continuously monitored and evaluated. Grit’s avowals, checks, and ratings link observer and observed, generating a new way to experience being a person as one who has more or less grit, and who calibrates one’s thoughts and actions in accordance with this fact.

At this point, it becomes possible to observe a paradox in grit’s deployment in school reforms to close achievement gaps. On the one hand, grit offers an optimistic explanation for children’s success or failure—those who succeed have grit, and those who lack it can grow it. This message of inclusion and uplift appears as a scientific certitude that explains inequalities between children and how to mitigate them. Yet this pedagogical form of grit leaves unquestioned a cultural thesis about the “right” kind of child, which grit reinscribes through its practices of dividing gritty and non-gritty attitudes and behaviors. In the gesture to qualify all for inclusion in the psychological good life, grit *already* excludes those perceived as lacking it, and makes the inclusion of all as sufficiently gritty a question of who does and does not yet measure up.

As the CGC demonstrates, what enters classrooms as grit today is not a frontier value preserved in amber; it is different. Grit has become a psychological norm related to self-management instantiated in techniques of observation and self-reporting. Through the CGC, grit organizes pedagogy as a set of confessional and calculative practices. In these associations, grit draws together an enduring cultural thesis of the autonomous individual with new tactics and practices that allow it to travel into schools to differentiate and divide “all”—locating success or failure in the individual’s ability to manage emotion, to train disorderly attention, and to deny the influences of peers or media. What remains to explore is how grit continues to gather and discard

associations as it travels into school reforms worldwide as a new explanation for not only individual but also international and populational inequalities.

Grit as the Exporting of a Cultural Thesis and Its Universalisms

Grit's empirical status as a psychological object has allowed it to travel into global education reform discourses in recent years; it has begun to offer a new explanatory factor for differences in individual and demographic group achievement—in spite of psychologists' cautions (see, e.g., Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Grit's travels can be explored in three related domains: first, as a quantification that explains students' drive and motivation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); second, as a "character quality" in the World Bank's Skills Towards Employability and Productivity (STEP) Skills Measurement Program; and, third, as a potential learning outcome in ongoing transnational school reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa. While hardly exhaustive, these analyses demonstrate grit's entanglement in multiple overlapping and self-reinforcing discourses. Together, they make visible how grit has become a desirable way to tell the comparative truths about organizations' and reform programs' efforts to improve schooling by describing problems in terms of a "skills gap" that is leaving some nations and marginalized groups behind.

Grit is brought into PISA as a quantification of self-reported data about students' "stamina, capacity for hard work and perception that success or failure depends on their behaviour" (OECD, 2013, p. 65). A report of the 2012 PISA, for example, examines differences between boys' and girls' math performance based on their "self-perception" of grit-related behaviors, where test items treat grit synonymously with perseverance and persistence (p. 66). Students used a modified Likert scale to describe their identification as someone who "gives up easily when confronted with a problem," "who puts off difficult problems," and "who remains

interested in the tasks that he or she starts,” among others (p. 65). The equivalencies and disparities in grit-associated behaviors become “what the data tell us” about grit (p. 88): Boys reported higher levels of perseverance than girls; socio-economically advantaged students reported higher levels of grit than less-advantaged students; and, those with greater grit attained higher scores in mathematics.

PISA’s manner of quantifying grit composes a new space of governance by generating equivalencies among different nations’ school systems, students, and demographic groups. Historian of science Theodore Porter (1995) has argued that numbers embody trust and objectivity in making complex realities sensible. The numerical data taken to indicate girls’ and lower socio-economic groups’ lack of grit, for example, can be correlated with their failure to measure up with boys’ and higher socio-economic groups’ academic achievement. In the gesture to raise achievement in “all,” girls’ and lower socio-economic groups’ performance is explained as owing, at least partially, to their insufficient grit. Quantification gives a perceived precision and objectivity to differences between boys and girls and between those of distinct socio-economic status that now can be stated as fact. These differences provide the basis for policy recommendations that embody aspirations for the future. That future is a (mostly) unspoken cultural thesis: higher grit correlates with higher PISA performance; higher PISA performance correlates with higher economic productivity; higher economic productivity accelerates social (i.e., historical) progress. In this way, quantified grit marks the spot for policy prescriptions that cast the psychological qualities of underperforming groups as threats to social progress.

Likewise, the graphs and charts that accompany PISA data tell “at a glance” the story of nations’ progress towards “global” educational goals (Kim, 2017). Through PISA scores, grit becomes one of the ingredients in making “the global citizen”—a kind of person with the

sensibilities and dispositions hoped to bring about economic progress and social cohesion irrespective of nationality (Kim, 2017; Green & Janmaat, 2016). Grit reclassifies cultural and historical distinctions into a single metric. Grit makes the problems of schooling technical in order to transcend national boundaries and cultural particularities. Lower grit levels, for example, can be connected to existing issues of teacher professionalism and the need for institutional and policy reforms. Grit universalizes the development of personal qualities as a recipe for progress. This is the frontier thesis, but with a twist: the hope for national exceptionalism is now located within a global evaluation tool that would speak to the universal nature of people and their differences with a view to transforming them according to its logic.

More recently, the evaluation of personal qualities (or “skills”) and their relation to employability and productivity have come to “middle- and low-income countries” through the activities of the World Bank and its Skills Towards Employability and Productivity (STEP) Skills Measurement Program. STEP uses surveys to generate comparable data that will drive country-level policy analysis. The surveys assess personal qualities that go “beyond educational attainment to capture human capital more comprehensively” (Pierre, Sanchez Puerta, Valerio, & Rajadel, 2014, p. 7). In this framework of human capital, grit is studied within social, emotional, personality, behavioral, and attitudinal “soft skills” (p. 8). Together, these “21st Century Skills” are to be inculcated as “foundational” for school reforms (World Economic Forum, 2015; see also Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). They are offered as innovations in “instructional delivery” that can ensure even students in a “low-income country significantly lacking in resources and infrastructure” are able to achieve “progress,” as measured on standardized assessments (World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 15).

In evaluating grit, STEP has developed household surveys for administration in “developing countries” around the world that seek to identify objective measures of professional and educational achievement with predictive validity. Drawing on Duckworth and Quinn’s (2009) “Grit Scale,” the survey poses items such as, “Do you work very hard? For example, do you keep working when others stop to take a break?” and “Do you enjoy working on things that take a very long time (at least several months) to complete?” (Pierre et al., 2014, p. 78). These questions are linked with the “Big Five” soft skills familiar to positive psychology (see, e.g., McCrae & John, 1992), which include “openness to experience,” “neuroticism,” “agreeableness,” and “extraversion,” in order to identify correlations between education and the labor market. In adapting the STEP survey to various national contexts, the authors describe employing translators when necessary in order to ensure that test items “reflect local idioms” (Pierre et al., 2014, p. 58). While the tests were modified for linguistic differences, underlying concepts were assumed to be universal. Whether administered in Macedonia, China, or Kenya, grit is seen to offer a univocal way to speak of the kind of person desired as human capital.

In both its uptake in the OECD’s PISA and in the World Bank’s STEP Skills, grit participates in generating comparative differences between nations and demographic groups that double as statements of what some already have and what others need to learn. In transnational school reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa, this is now explicit curriculum. The non-profit Kepler Kigali in Rwanda and its for-profit sister venture, Spire, in Kenya invoke grit within the broader aim of developing students’ “non-cognitive abilities” (Kepler Kigali, 2014; Spire, 2014). These abilities are given as necessary to produce “a competent, analytical, expert professional” for the labor market (Kepler Kigali, 2014; Spire, 2014). These programs locate grit as an essential part of “character,” noting that “attributes such as creativity, social intelligence, and persistence (or

‘grit’) . . . can play a key role in many modern jobs as well as in life more broadly” (Sabot, 2012). Grit offers school reforms a seamless way to connect job skills to a cultural thesis of individual growth that can also be linked to national goals of becoming a middle-income economy (see, e.g., Kenyan Ministry of Education, 2008).

Similarly, the for-profit corporation, Bridge International Academies (2016), has raised the question of instructing their students in Kenya, India, Liberia, Nigeria, and Uganda in grit and other “character skills.” This chain of low-fee private schools currently enrolls more than 100,000 students and seeks to cater to families living on less than \$2 USD per day. In 2013, Bridge’s Chief Academic Officer (CAO) referenced grit during the opening of hundreds of new academies across Kenya (Goldstein, 2013), as part of the “character skills” Bridge students may need to acquire. To prove his point, he cited the white paper of economists James Heckman and Tim Kautz (2013), who argued:

Our emphasis on character skills does not arise from any agenda to impose Western middle-class values on society. A strong base of cognitive and character skills is universally valued across different cultures, religions, and societies. There are reliable ways to measure them, and there are proven ways to enhance them and to evaluate efforts to foster them. (p. 6)

The empirical status of character skills—given as their “reliable measurement” and “proven enhancement”—seem to preclude questions of cultural imperialism. Responding to this new common sense, Bridge’s CAO asks, “To what extent should Bridge seek to enhance character? And if so, how?” (Goldstein, 2013).

The concern with “imposing Western middle-class values” recalls positive psychology’s incipient foray into naming “universal” virtues, and the critiques this has generated (see, e.g.,

Held, 2005; Taylor, 2001). In their diagnostic handbook of positive psychology, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) took up the question of how to speak of “universal virtues” (p. 34). Their solution was to survey “lessons from history” and ancient cultures—given as “Chinese,” “Indian,” and “Western”—in order to ensure they would be “including strengths and virtues valued across all cultures” (p. 34), a rationale they explained as follows:

We are empirically minded. Is it really the case that there is no consensus about the strengths and virtues that are most valued? We undertook a thought experiment and tried to imagine a culture or subculture that did not stress the cultivation of courage, honesty, perseverance, hope, or kindness. Done another way, the experiment requires that we envision parents looking at their newborn infant and being indifferent to the possibility that the child would grow up to be cowardly, dishonest, easily discouraged, pessimistic, and cruel. (p. 34)

The thought experiment is, of course, a tautology. In considering another “culture or subculture,” difference in virtue can only be recognized as the absence of the categories the psychologists have presupposed to be universal. The dualisms the psychologists have posited—courage/cowardice, honesty/dishonesty, perseverance/easy discouragement, hope/pessimism, and kindness/cruelty—reflect how, in the gesture to recognize and include “all,” the thought experiment paradoxically reinscribes “itself” as the author of virtue and abjects other possible ways of being as outside the bounds of reason.

The politics of translation, comparison, and abjection entailed by grit’s travels in school reforms can be studied by staying in Kenya and comparing grit with what could be its plausible Kikuyu counterpart, *wĩathi*. Suppose in this thought experiment that positive psychologists have

decided to describe *wĩathi* as synonymous with grit. This is no grand leap, for both words would seem to denote the idea of persevering through challenging circumstances. Yet, to conflate *wĩathi* as another form of grit would erase *wĩathi*'s particular historical referents, which differ significantly from grit's. *Wĩathi*'s first recorded use referred to Kikuyu pre-colonial settlement patterns in the Mount Kenya region, where men gained a relational self-worth by clearing heavily forested areas for homes (Peterson, 2004). During the oppressive British colonization of the area in the 1930s, Kikuyu school leaders invoked *wĩathi* again, this time in a different sense, using it as a political tool of Kikuyu identity in struggles against colonial domination of their schooling (Peterson, 2004).

The counter memory of *wĩathi* within a struggle against colonial domination is not to assert what *wĩathi* "really" means, but to recall that words are historical. There is no "natural," transcendental, or "true" grit (or *wĩathi*). Rather, words are tools; what they do changes in the contexts considered and the uses to which they have been put. The very act of comparing and translating *wĩathi* as merely another kind of grit, then, would constitute an epistemic violence, divorcing it from the network of historical referents that have given it its unique political valences. As grit travels, it would not only subsume *wĩathi* as a version of itself, it would also negate the possibility that standards of comparison can "originate" from anywhere outside its own thesis of the good life. By making evidence of grit's display contingent upon survey results that correlate with international assessment performance and increased economic productivity, all but assumed is that middle- and low-income countries are not yet gritty.

Grit, or the Dangers of the Psychological Good Life

There is no shortage of reasons of why to hope that grit holds the answer to the question of how children succeed. Rather than pose the question anew, this analysis has sought to turn the

question back on itself—not in order to ask how children succeed, but to ask how grit has explained success. This has entailed tracing grit’s history of associations—first, from the idealized consciousness of the pioneer, to a psychologization of the child’s nature, to a pedagogical tool for observing and modifying behaviors, to a metric that universalizes notions of sameness and difference—in order to recognize that what grit “is” has never been stable. In a frontier past, grit was the proof of pioneers’ “civilizing” energies that enabled expropriation and genocide. Today, it is a scientific object that tells you, “Be gritty!” and to maximize your hidden potential. This grit proliferates among assessments, policy, and school reforms worldwide as an explanation for one’s internal capacities that carries potentially enormous consequences for children’s lives, as if getting gritty has been the only proper way of being and being seen as a person all along.

Grit’s traveling in global school reforms requires an effacement of its history. Its universalizing quality makes up those individuals, groups, and nations supposedly lacking it as delinquent. The pedagogy of the modern school amplifies these truth effects by layering on more individualizing techniques to encourage its “natural” development. Schools are compelled to develop curricula with grit as an organizing principle of how to teach and assess students’ attitudes and behaviors, making personal qualities into objects of self-reflection and action in order to foster the psychological good life. Classrooms double as sites to surveil students’ development as gritty, and therefore “proper,” kinds of people. As pedagogical grit goes global, so does an apparatus of practices and expertise required to grow grit as a natural quality of all.

Studying grit as a series of associations and transformations makes its emergence provincial and historical rather than universal and transcendental. Putting history back into grit highlights the politics of the dividing practices in school reforms that make up gritty and non-

gritty people. It makes visible a paradox when grit is deployed as a tool to reduce social inequalities. Getting gritty is not so simple. As a pedagogical tool, grit reinscribes difference through the judgments and norms presumed in its cultural thesis. The very practices of teaching, monitoring, and assessing grit generate new classificatory regimes that divide people by their decorum—their observed attitudes and behaviors—which could inadvertently function as explanations for prevailing social and economic inequalities. As a gesture to include, grit *excludes* by explaining inequalities as owing to an individual's level of grit and by obscuring the cultural judgments and moral imperatives this entails. This way of thinking about people and social problems impedes reflexivity towards what constitutes ethical, caring, or just forms of research, policy, and pedagogy.

Putting history back into grit raises questions that its psychological status might otherwise preclude: What are the grounds for speaking truthfully about what constitutes the good life? Is it possible to imagine a notion of the good life that does not require some individual or group to be made up as comparatively deficient? Is it possible that this good life does not entail attitudinal precepts, but structural critique and institutional change? The danger of grit is not that it is wrong to work hard, persevere, or hold fast to goals. The danger is that in this univocal and universalized enunciation of an individual's moral obligations, it becomes easy to think that there is or has been no other acceptable way for people, institutions, or societies to be. It becomes easy to reduce democracy to unfettered competition, and equality to the opportunity to compete. It becomes easy to see resistance to or refusal of this narrative as inability or indifference. Grit erases the very grounds for its possible contestation as it redraws the frontier that separates civilized and savage, this time in the minds of children in classrooms around the world.

Notes

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