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Exploring the Grit Narrative through Andragogy: Implications for Adult Education

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Abstract: An exploration of the intersection of andragogy and the grit narrative serves to position *grit* in the adult education literature and considers the unsuitability of this ideology for adult learners.

Keywords: andragogy, grit, self-directed learning

While traveling to a recent conference, we walked through the airport, where we noticed a gigantic poster advertising a local university. We both sighed audibly as we read the slogan: “Grit and Greatness.” As educators at a large community college that serves a diverse body of learners, many of whom manage multiple forms of oppression both historically and currently, we are well aware of the problematic grit narrative. Our work led to the discovery that manuscripts discussing *grit* are abundant in the K-12 literature but nearly absent from the adult and higher education literature. To be sure, the grit narrative undermines the experiences and challenges of the adult learner, who is typically working, has dependents (children or elderly family members), and is less likely than traditional college students to have attained a high school diploma (Layne, Boston, & Ice, 2013). Moreover, one or more structural barriers – such as racism, sexism, or poverty – often challenge these learners. Accordingly, situating *grit* in adult education is overdue.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to use the principles of andragogy to frame a critique of the grit narrative, and to consider how the incorporation of the grit narrative into institutions that serve adult learners is problematic for the adult learner. Moreover, the precepts of the grit narrative reinforce systems and structures of oppression that marginalize the adult learner. Accordingly, we argue that this exploration presents an issue of social justice that cannot be ignored in the field of adult education. The application of andragogy facilitates a critical review of the grit narrative, creating the space to dismantle a seemingly problematic construct in ways that can further emancipate adult learners.

Review of the Literature

This paper considers primarily two bodies of literature: andragogy and grit. Andragogy, defined by Knowles (1980) as “the art and science of helping adults learn,” (p. 43) is foundational in adult education. Initially established in the Psychology literature (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007), grit is now prevalent across the K-12 literature. More recently, grit has become an increasingly popular topic in popular press, such as *The Atlantic* (Useem, 2016) and *The Washington Post* (Strauss, 2016). Grit is nearly absent from the adult education literature, although Olson (2015) considers its relation to work ethic and whether it is germane to adult learners. Similarly, Ruttencutter (2018) examines grit in the context of self-directed learning amongst doctoral students. While she offers a brief critique of the grit literature, that critique overlooks the foundational ways in which adults make meaning in the context of andragogy.

Andragogy. A hallmark of andragogy is its focus on the adult learner and his or her life situation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Knowles (1980) identified several assumptions of adult learners. Among these are that adult learners are capable of self-directed learning, drawing from a “rich reservoir of their own life experiences” (Hansman & Mott, 2010, p. 17); have learning needs that evolve along with their varying life roles; and possess internal motivation to learn in ways that allow for immediate application to their lives (Knowles, 1980).

Grit. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) first introduced the concept of grit, which they defined as trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals. They derive their notion of grit from data sets collected from and later (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) normed on exceptional populations: West Point cadets, Scripps Spelling Bee finalists, and Ivy League undergraduates. From these data sets, Duckworth (2016) presents a supposition that hard work and an unswerving loyalty to predetermined goals are the strongest predictors of student success, without regard to other facets of the students’ lives. Notably, this position diminishes the influence of mitigating life factors that also impact success in higher education, such as socioeconomic status and level of support from families and significant others. Gorski (2016) cautions that “grit ideology is no threat to the existence of educational outcome disparities...[and] can only lead to strategies that sidestep the core causes of those disparities, requiring students to overcome inequities they should not be experiencing” (p. 383).

Considering Grit through the Lens of Andragogy. The fundamental traits of a learner with grit – perseverance and passion – collide with several of the foundational aspects of andragogy as a learning theory. Here, we will delineate several assumptions of andragogy posited by Knowles (1980; 1984), and discuss their intersection with the grit literature.

One of the foundational traits of andragogy suggests that adult learners are self-directed in identifying their learning goals and assessing their learning needs (Knowles, 1980). Grit ideology, however, undermines adults’ self-directedness. In order to be “gritty” and thereby successful, one must abandon the self-direction of her own learning in order to comply with the instructor or institution’s path to success. While it stands to reason that diligence and effort will lead to academic success (Wolters & Hussain, 2014), that the instructor defines the benchmarks for effort and achievement undercuts the adult learner’s self-direction. Even if the learner chooses to comply with the instructor’s requirements, this is not an authentic self-directed choice; compliance with authority is not the same as self-directed learning. Discounting the adult learner’s self-direction disempowers the individual, while reinforcing the maintenance of power at the instructor and institutional level. Kohn (2014) suggests that asking the learner to comply with the instructor or institution’s requirements in order to be successful leads to a lack of challenging the status quo. The grit ideology’s insistence on compliance with structural and institutional requisites leaves the adult learner with a substantial challenge: should she insist on employing her self-directedness in order to learn in ways that are meaningful for adult learners? Or should she demonstrate “grittiness” by complying with the demands of the instructor and institution, thus reproducing the status quo? Grit and self-directed learning, a foundational assumption of adult learning, are in opposition.

Knowles has also suggested that adults thrive in a community of mutuality between teachers and learners, where the power rests with the adult learner. Elsewhere, Knowles (1984) suggests that intrinsic motivators are stronger for adult learners than those external to the individual. However, the overarching lens within the grit literature speaks of completion of external goals, like completion of a degree. With the completion of external goals as the measure of success, the adult learner no longer has agency to set her own goals or assess her own needs.

This diminished agency weakens the community of mutuality between teacher and learner. Adult learners are likely to be balancing various roles and challenges, such as being a single parent, providing care for aging parents, working full-time, and managing unanticipated life disruptions, such as medical bills (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2018; Layne, Boston, & Ice, 2013). Arguably, a cooperative relationship between the teacher and learner promotes the learner's self-direction to decide what constitutes her own success and how to go about achieving it, particularly given competing life demands.

The grit narrative expects the learner to persist to completion, regardless of barriers. Arya and Lal (2018) distinguish "gritty" students from "less gritty" ones: "Individuals who are gritty are diligent, hard-working, maintain focus on a particular project, not affected by setbacks..." (p. 169). Proponents of grit advocate for teaching learners to be more motivated and reduce procrastination (Wolters & Hussain, 2015), but the underlying assumption is that this increased motivation and decreased procrastination are around academic work; adult learners have additional goals other than graduation. When a student considers her own goals and needs – both academic and otherwise – and makes a choice that she feels is best, she may be viewed as less gritty. For example, an instructor may view a learner who misses a class due to a work obligation or comes to class without completing the reading after being up all night with a sick child as less motivated than a student who attends every class, fully prepared. The grit narrative ignores the competing goals and expectations of the adult learner, undermining her autonomy; what may follow is the erosion of the relationship between learner and teacher, who prefers a "grittier" student who experiences fewer barriers but persists nonetheless. Kohn (2014) notes that "gritty" students may engage in "nonproductive persistence" (p. 105); they persist to complete the goal – often constructed by the instructor or institution – regardless of the detriment to self or others. Thus, as in her original data sets, Duckworth (2007) conflates learning with completion of goals constructed by someone other than the learner.

Grit is problematic for the most privileged learner, but it is an even greater issue for adult learners from marginalized groups. The research from which Duckworth (2007) identified the qualities that comprise grit includes participants from remarkably privileged populations. The resulting narrative – that sustained effort and perseverance results in success – is reminiscent of the myth of meritocracy (Thomas, 2015). Thomas (2015) compiled data that refute the notion that hard work leads to success: people of color face economic and employment barriers, and economic mobility is uncommon – especially for those born in the top or bottom economic 20 percent. Indeed, hard work does not diminish the impact of racism, classism, sexism, and other sources of oppression. The belief that being "gritty" is the key to success, Thomas argues, "masks for race and class biases" (p. 3).

Gorski (2016) has written extensively about deficit ideology as it applies to education. Supporters of deficit ideology believe that challenges – particularly experiencing poverty – are due to ethical, dispositional, and spiritual shortcomings. Pointing to individual deficiencies as the reason for educational, professional, or other difficulties places the onus on the individual alter her identity and beliefs to overcome those struggles. Adhering to deficit ideology allows one to overlook the influence of socioeconomic, race-, and sex-based injustices and inequities that have played a role in an individual's success. Gorski (2016) identifies grit ideology as the cousin of deficit ideology:

The idea that there are particular personal attributes that enable some people to overcome adversity that might overwhelm others, grit ideology differs from deficit ideology in one important way. Unlike people who adhere to deficit ideology, who must wholly ignore

structural barriers in order to attribute outcome inequalities to the mindsets of the targets of those barriers, adherents to grit ideology recognize the structural barriers. However, rather than cultivating policy and practice to eradicate those barriers, they enact strategies to bolster the grit of economically marginalized students. (p. 382)

The grit narrative, then, places the burden of “grittiness” on the learner while ignoring systemic and structural barriers and inequities. Asking the learner to be responsible for developing her own “grittiness” first places all of the responsibility on her, freeing the institution from any accountability in supporting her success, and ignores the many ways she is already “gritty” as she has adapted to having to navigate years of marginalizing forces.

The grit narrative, then, is especially problematic for the adult learner who is balancing multiple roles while carrying the baggage of systemic and structural oppression. When grit is the ideology at play, the adult learner – in order to succeed – must dismiss her own experience as knowledge and give up her autonomy to persist toward goals set by others; all of this diminishes the relationship between teacher and learner and works to reproduce hegemonic methods and narratives.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Reviewing the grit literature through a lens of andragogy has significant implications for the practice of adult education. As noted above, few adult educators have addressed grit in the scholarly literature. The K-12 education subfield has embraced the grit narrative, with minimal critique (Kohn, 2014); there remains no significant critique of the grit narrative in adult education. This paper serves to create a foundation for adult educators to examine the influence of grit in a variety of theoretical orientations in our field. Once data are available, it will be possible to extrapolate to related fields to influence higher education policy, student affairs, and leadership studies.

As well, this discussion informs how some adult learners may experience the grit narrative as a barrier to success in their educational pursuits. The grit mindset suggests that hard work predicts success; a hard-working learner who is unsuccessful due to mitigating circumstances may internalize the grit narrative to understand that she or he just may not have the traits necessary to be successful. When institutions push grit ideology, instructors and administrators view students who take longer to complete or who struggle academically as “remedial.” In other words, the focus is on the “broken” learner who needs to be “fixed,” and oftentimes the learner herself is responsible for jumping through institutional hoops in order to be “fixed.” These may include paying for a sequence of developmental courses before being allowed to enroll in credit classes (despite known cultural biases in the tests that place students in a developmental sequence); being required to participate in a study skills course that includes a unit on financial literacy to help a student learn how to save money for school (ignoring that the student has been managing a household budget); or being assigned a mentor with whom the student must meet to discuss time management (which requires the student to come to campus during business hours, thus missing a portion of her own work day). Conceivably, we must redefine “grittiness” for the adult learner (Olson, 2015). Their existing reservoir of knowledge and experience affords them plenty of grit if educators are willing to view it as such.

Exploring the grit narrative through the lens of andragogy highlights the need for adult educators to embrace a structural ideology (Gorski, 2016). Rather than focus on identifying and fixing apparent deficits in the adult learner, educational institutions must recognize how classist,

racist, and sexist paradigms shape programming and take action to rectify these offensive agenda. Of course, the adult learner has a wealth of experience (Knowles, 1980), so educators must include learners in the planning and implementation of resources and curricula that espouse a structural ideology.

Consistent with this notion, a large survey of adult learners attending college in Atlanta Metropolitan State College System, respondents identified areas for improvement efforts to serve adult learners. Among these are the offering of required courses during times that are suitable for working adults, increased engagement between faculty and adult students, and improved dissemination of and access to available support services (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2018). These identified needs are consistent with the work of Thompson and Barcinas (2014), who found that mothers who are adult learners identify such overlap between their roles of mother and student that to fail at one indicates failing at the other. Thus, a student who is juggling her academic and parental roles may benefit from support services, such as on-campus childcare. While women tend to believe they deserve to pursue a college education, the lack of support services for adult learners who are mothers – and the view that students who struggle to balance these two roles indicates a lack of dedication to their education – reveals a structural ideology steeped in sexism (Thompson & Barcinas, 2014). Institutions that serve adult learners must recognize that these perceived shortcomings are not due to deficits in the learner, but rather structural and systemic failure. To be sure, simply shifting the paradigm from a deficit-based to structural one is not enough; institutions must take action in the form of meeting the needs of adult learners.

Finally, this paper calls for a re-examination of the grit narrative as it has been framed in content area education literature, such as the health and medical fields, legal studies, and e-learning, or through different lenses of adult education, such as feminist and critical theories.

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