

The Future of Self-Improvement, Part I: Grit Is More Important Than Talent by *Jocelyn K. Glej*

In the late '60s, Stanford psychologist Walter Mischel performed a now-iconic experiment called the Marshmallow Test, which analyzed the ability of four year olds to exhibit “delayed gratification.” Here’s what happened: Each child was brought into the room and sat down at a table with a delicious treat on it (maybe a marshmallow, maybe a donut). The scientists told the children that they could have a treat now, or, if they waited 15 minutes, they could have two treats. All of the children *wanted* to wait. (Who doesn’t want more treats?) But many couldn’t. After just a few minutes or less, their resolve would break down and they would eat the marshmallow. But some kids were better at delaying gratification: They were able to hold out for the full 15 minutes.

When the researchers subsequently checked in on these same children in high school, it turned out that those with more self-control that is, those who held out for 15 minutes were better behaved, less prone to addiction, and scored higher on the SAT.

Recounting Mischel’s research in an excellent *New Yorker* article (that this piece could not exist without), Jonah Lehrer writes that, after observing hundreds of hours of videotape of the children, Mischel concluded that the kids who resisted temptation used “strategic allocation of attention”:

Instead of getting obsessed with the marshmallow — the “hot stimulus” — the patient children distracted themselves by covering their eyes, pretending to play hide-and-seek underneath the desk, or singing songs from “Sesame Street.” Their desire wasn’t defeated — it was merely forgotten. “If you’re thinking about the marshmallow and how delicious it is, then you’re going to eat it,” Mischel says. “The key is to avoid thinking about it in the first place.”

It’s not difficult to see how self-control would be predictive of success in certain spheres. It means trading short-term gratification for long-term goals, skipping the temptation to go to the movies and working on your novel instead. But that’s a relatively simple example — one that makes the decision to exercise self-control, or not, easy to see. In reality, we are faced with hundreds of these “tradeoff decisions” within the span of a single day. As the thoughtful blogger James Shelley has written, very often when we talk about the skill of “productivity” what we are really talking about is “self-control” — the disciplined ability to choose to do one thing at the cost of not doing another (perhaps more tempting thing).

As the hierarchy of the traditional workplace breaks down, we are all gaining more freedom and flexibility. More and more, we can set our own long-term goals, we can determine our own work schedules, we can work at an office or at a coffee shop, we can make our own decisions about what we focus on today, and what we focus on tomorrow. But this “freedom” also brings responsibility — a responsibility that, I would argue, demands a vastly increased capacity for self-control.

In essence, Twitter is the new marshmallow. (Or Facebook, or Foursquare. Pick your poison.) At any given moment, a host of such “treats” await us. Emails, social media

messages, text messages — discrete little bits of unexpected and novel information that activate our brain's seeking circuitry, titillating it and inciting the desire to search for more. Our ability to resist such temptations, and focus on the hard work of creative labor, is part and parcel of pushing great ideas forward.

And yet: Self-control isn't the whole story.

Intrigued by what qualities would most accurately predict outstanding achievement, Harvard researcher Angela Duckworth picked up where Walter Mischel left off. As she outlines in this [TEDx talk](#), Duckworth found that self-control is an excellent predictor of your ability to follow through on certain types of difficult tasks — staying on your diet, studying for a test, not checking your email — but it's not the most important factor when it comes to predicting success at “extremely high-challenge achievement.”

Duckworth was also suspicious of qualities like talent and intelligence as reliable predictors for remarkable achievement. And with good reason: Way back in 1926, a psychologist named Catherine Morris Cox published a study of 300 recognized geniuses, from Leonardo Da Vinci to Gottfried Leibniz to Mozart to Charles Darwin to Albert Einstein. Cox, who had worked with Lewis M. Terman to develop the Stanford-Binet IQ test, was curious what factors lead to “realized genius,” those people who would really make their mark on the world. After reading about the lives of hundreds historic geniuses, Cox identified a host of qualities, beyond raw intelligence, that predicted “greatness.”

Studying Cox's findings, Duckworth isolated two qualities that she thought might be a better predictor of outstanding achievement:

1. ***The tendency not to abandon tasks from mere changeability.*** *Not seeking something because of novelty. Not “looking for a change.”*
2. ***The tendency not to abandon tasks in the face of obstacles.*** *Perseverance, tenacity, doggedness.*

Duckworth boiled these two characteristics down to a quality she called “grit,” defined as “the perseverance and passion for a long-term goal,” and set about testing it as a predictor for outstanding achievement. Here's a recent [New York Times article](#) summarizing Duckworth's research:

People who accomplished great things, [Duckworth] noticed, often combined a passion for a single mission with an unswerving dedication to achieve that mission, whatever the obstacles and however long it might take.

...She developed a test to measure grit, which she called the Grit Scale. It is a deceptively simple test, in that it requires you to rate yourself on just 12 questions, from “I finish whatever I begin” to “I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.” It takes about three minutes to complete, and it relies entirely on self-report — and yet when Duckworth took it out into the field, she found it was remarkably predictive of success.

At Penn, high grit ratings allowed students with relatively low college-board scores to nonetheless achieve high G.P.A.'s. Duckworth and her collaborators gave their grit test to more than 1,200 freshman cadets as they entered West Point and embarked on the

grueling summer training course known as Beast Barracks. The military has developed its own complex evaluation, called the Whole Candidate Score, to judge incoming cadets and predict which of them will survive the demands of West Point; it includes academic grades, a gauge of physical fitness and a Leadership Potential Score. But at the end of Beast Barracks, the more accurate predictor of which cadets persisted and which ones dropped out turned out to be Duckworth's 12-item grit questionnaire.

Duckworth carried out a similar “success study” with kids who competed in spelling bees. Again, it turned out that grit — in this case, the ability to persist and passionately pursue your goal of winning the spelling bee whatever it takes — was the best predictor of success. Verbal IQ scores were a factor, but they were inversely related to the grit scores. In essence, the smarter kids just didn't try as hard, but still did pretty well sometimes. Self-control was also an influential factor, but not as reliable a predictor of success as grit, and not a completely *necessary* factor. That is, there was a subset of kids who had poor self-control but a lot of grit, who still performed very well. If it was ever in question, we can now rest assured that dogged hard work is the cornerstone of remarkable achievement. That said, Duckworth's findings still raise some nagging questions: Is grit an inborn ability, just like intelligence or talent? Or, can grit be cultivated?

We'll continue to examine the inner workings of remarkable achievement in [Part II of this article series](#). In the meantime, you can [take Duckworth's Grit Scale Test here](#).