ON THE MEANING OF GRIT...

BACKGROUND: Our paper explores the growing interest in the importance of noncognitive skills as drivers of life outcomes for poor children. "Grit" and "hope" are among the more popular focal points of this research.

WE ARGUE: Terms like "grit" and "hope" are most useful when they are thought of as a part of a cluster of concepts (e.g., locus of control, fate control) related to the idea of alienation, in the sense of powerlessness (Seeman, 1959).

Framing the "new" concepts that way helps connect our thinking to a wider range of empirical work and helps identify important unresolved issues for future research.

The most profitable approaches will be those which help us understand how individual characteristics interact with structural context, avoiding an exclusive emphasis on either individual characteristics or structural contexts.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Ideas like grit and hope have potential for helping us think about how to support the development of disadvantaged youth, potential which is enhanced if we are mindful of the point Seeman made 50 years ago about the centrality of the social experience of powerlessness.

- Failure to think about potential similarities among differently-labeled ideas (e.g., fate control, locus of control, grit, hope) makes it more difficult to appreciate the underlying power of the core idea, in this case the impact of feeling that one can or cannot shape one’s future.

- The fact that important relationships remain even after the core idea has been spun a variety of ways should only make the core idea more intriguing. Instead, it may be getting lost among its specifications.

- Framing the problem in terms of a family of ideas related to alienation should make it easier to isolate important cross-cutting problems and to build on prior knowledge. This is especially the case if, rather than succumbing to either/or debates about the salience of individual traits as opposed to that of structure, we think of the human experience of powerlessness as guiding our inquiries into individual choices.

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