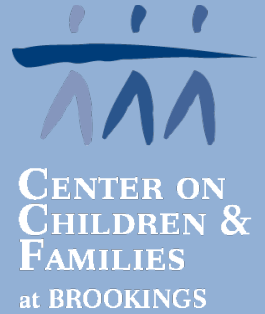


# Essays on Character & Opportunity

October 22, 2014



# Table of Contents

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Introduction <i>Richard V. Reeves</i>	3
Skills and Scaffolding <i>James Heckman</i>	5
Character is Experience <i>Joseph Fishkin</i>	8
Free Will: The Missing Link Between Character and Opportunity <i>Martin E.P. Seligman</i>	11
Conscientiousness: A Primer <i>Brent Roberts</i>	14
Chronic Adversity Shapes Character <i>Ross Thompson</i>	17
Responsible Parenting: A Test of Character? <i>Isabel Sawhill</i>	20
Gendered Character <i>Jen Lexmond</i>	22
Women, Character and Competition <i>Carmit Segal</i>	25
Cultures Build Character <i>Stuart Butler</i>	28
Grit and Community <i>Mark Dunkelman</i>	31
Schools of Character <i>Dominic Randolph</i>	33

# Table of Contents

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Morality Before Performance <i>Marvin Berkowitz</i>	36
Authority and Morality Build Character <i>Lawrence M. Mead</i>	39
We Need Empathy, Too <i>Amitai Etzioni</i>	42
Character Education: A Cautionary Note <i>Mike Rose</i>	45
The Thorny Politics of Mobility <i>Lanae Erickson Hatalsky</i>	48

# Introduction

Richard V. Reeves

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This is a superb collection of essays. I'm biased, of course. But I defy you to find a richer set of writings on the philosophical, empirical and practical issues raised by a focus on character, and in particular its relationship to questions of opportunity.

I am not going to provide a condensed version of the essays. For one thing, it would not be possible to do them justice. Each one is an intellectual pemmican in any case: sharp and to the point. Suffice to say that there are enthusiasts for the public endeavor of character cultivation (Heckman and Randolph) as well as thoughtful skeptics (Rose and Roberts). There are calls, from differing political perspectives, to give at least equal weight to the moral dimensions of character (Etzioni, Brooks, Berkowitz and Mead), as well as strong demands to honor individual free will (Seligman) and individual development (Fishkin).

Two scholars draw attention to the gendered nature of character formation (Segal and Lexmond); others stress the importance of culture (Butler), social norms (Sawhill), and the impact of chronic stress in the early years (Thompson). Construction of a policy agenda for the cultivation of character poses a stark challenge to the partisan culture of contemporary politics (Erickson Hatalsky), but may also alleviate it, by reinvigorating community life (Dunkelman).

Anyway, don't take it from me. Read on and see for yourself. And do let us know what you think. My email is [reeves@brookings.edu](mailto:reeves@brookings.edu).

# Skills and Scaffolding

James Heckman

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Mainstream economic models treat individuals as passive vessels into which human capital investments are poured in the hope of boosting cognitive abilities. The persistence of this approach, most clearly articulated by Becker and Tomes,<sup>1</sup> is frustrating given recent progress in understanding the complex dynamics of skill development. Too much emphasis continues to be placed on one side of the human capital coin – namely cognitive skills, variously equated with IQ and scores on achievement tests – to the detriment of character skills.

In the Becker-Tomes model, the only limitations on investments in the human capital of children by parents come in the form of credit constraints and genetic inheritance. And childhood is typically treated as a single period, during which any investments are equally productive.

The focus in the traditional model is misleading. Character skills matter as much as cognitive skills. Returns on investments made at different stages in a child’s development result in different returns. Credit constraints are much less important than parenting. And, far from being passive receptacles, children develop in the very process of learning, with implications for subsequent skill development.

The latest literature, summarized in my paper with Stefano Mosso,<sup>2</sup> establishes eight important facts:

1. Character skills matter at least as much as cognitive skills. A multiplicity of skills is needed for success in life. The power of personality, or character, has been demonstrated in numerous studies in addition to the longer-established power of cognitive traits like IQ and scores on achievement tests. If anything, character strengths matter more.<sup>3</sup>
2. Important skills are not innate “traits” solely acquired by genetic inheritance. This is not a question of semantics: skills, or capacities to function, can be both acquired and developed. Both cognitive and non-cognitive skills can be shaped and change over the life cycle. This suggests new and productive avenues for public policy.
3. For skill development, timing matters. There are both sensitive and critical periods for the formation of skills. Sensitive periods are those periods where investment is especially productive. Critical periods are now-or-never periods, when investment is essential since investment at other stages yields no return. Particular investment strategies (policies) differ in their effectiveness at different stages of childhood.
4. The early years are the most effective period for investments in both cognitive and non-

cognitive skills. Humans are most malleable, flexible and able to learn and be imprinted by parents and culture during their first years of life. Interventions during these years are therefore likely to yield the best results, as evaluations of quality early years programs, including the Perry Preschool Program, demonstrate.

5. Successful adolescent interventions largely operate through promoting character skills, since cognitive skills tend to be solidified before adolescence.

6. Skills beget skills. The benefit of an investment in human capital depends in part on the existing level of skills – a phenomenon that economists call static complementarity. So, more motivated children benefit the most from additional investments. But in addition, investments today increase the stock of future skills, which in turn increases the return to future investments – a phenomenon known as dynamic complementarity. This is one reason early investments have high returns: they make future investments more productive. Narrowly focused policies risk failing to capture these synergisms in the expression and development of skills.

7. The development of skills takes place within a vital “scaffolding.” Successful investment strategies at all stages of the life cycle engage the child and investors (parent, teacher, mentor) in an interactive process. Scaffolding consists of an adaptive strategy that recognizes the current capacities of the child (trainee) and guides him or her to further learning without too much frustration. Activities are tailored to the individual child’s current ability – it must be neither too hard nor too easy – in order to keep them in the “zone of proximal development,” the level of difficulty at which the child can learn the most. Good schools, preschools and apprenticeship programs do what good parents do: engage the child actively within the right scaffolding for their skill development.

8. Credit constraints are not very important. There is a strong empirical relationship between educational attainment and parental income. However, parental income is a proxy for many attributes of the parental environment. The causal evidence of an importance role for credit constraints is weak. Parenting matters much more than parental income.

Our knowledge of the process of skills development has advanced rapidly in recent years. Policy-making, however, lags far behind. It is time to bring the development of policy up to date with the development of empirical knowledge. This is not an academic exercise: skills foster social inclusion and promote economic and social mobility, economic productivity, and well-being. Skills give agency to people to shape their lives, to create new skills. Skills lie at the very center of human flourishing.

For one thing, the powerful role of parents, families, and general social environments in shaping skills must be integrated into policy formation. The engagement of parents, in particular, is central to the creation of the right environment – the correctly constructed scaffolding – for developing both stronger cognitive abilities and character skills.

Current debates about inequality focus on end results, rather than early investments. Redistribution is therefore seen as the main vehicle for promoting economic opportunity and social mobility. A fuller understanding of the dynamics of skill development suggests that pre-

distribution, in terms of ameliorative public policy to level the opportunities for learning, would be an economically efficient and socially fair alternative to redistribution.

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2 Heckman, James J., and Stefano Mosso. "The Economics of Human Development and Social Mobility." *Annual Review of Economics* 6 (2014): 689-733.

3 Almlund, Mathilde, Duckworth, Angela Lee, Heckman, James J., and Tim Kautz. "Personality Psychology and Economics." In *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, ed. Eric A. Hanushek et al. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2011).

# Character is Experience

Joseph Fishkin

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Much of the modern debate about equal opportunity has been taken up with the following question: which elements of a person's successes and failures are the result of her inner abilities or inner character, and which are the result, instead, of experience – in particular, the advantages and disadvantages the person soaked up from her family, school, and society?

In general, conservatives insist that inner abilities and character are most of the story. Liberals insist that it's mostly social advantages and disadvantages. But both sides agree that this is the right question.

And both sides are wrong.

There is no such thing as inner ability or character that sits separate and apart from experience. Every experience we have, every advantage or disadvantage, is filtered through the particular character and other traits of the person who experiences it. And all of those traits are themselves a product of what has come before. In other words: We are all sedimentary creatures. Our abilities and disabilities, our preferences and values, and our character traits all arise through layer upon layer of dynamic interaction between self and environment that build us, gradually over time, into the people we are.<sup>1</sup>

All this is unsettling for a certain type of egalitarian. One of the more thoroughgoing strands of egalitarian thought in contemporary political theory is called luck egalitarianism. The idea is that society ought to do its best to eliminate the effects of brute luck on a person's prospects, so that where she ends up in life depends on her own decisions – and her own character – rather than on the vicissitudes of chance. There is much that is appealing about this ideal. But its core turns out to be hollow. When we strip away the effects of luck, such as the luck of where a person grew up, the luck of where and to whom she was born, and so on, we strip away her character, too.

The current conversation about character is in many respects a welcome departure. The fundamental premise of the Character & Opportunity Project at Brookings is almost certainly correct, and important: character is an important factor that influences how well people do at various important junctures in life when they face particular challenges. It seems likely that character traits therefore affect many people's socioeconomic trajectories. It will be useful to develop a clearer picture of which character traits matter when – and how those character traits are built.

But as this research agenda proceeds, we ought to keep in mind, as a cautionary tale,



Americans' long and surprisingly unilluminating debate about the origins of ability. From the early promise of IQ testing – the shattered hope that scientists might isolate some inner variable, invariant with age or schooling or life experience – through the meltdown of the Bell Curve, Americans have found highly seductive the idea that if something about a person's mind shows up in a scientific test, it is probably inborn. Our embrace of this odd premise seems firmest when images are involved. If people differ in a manner that is visible on a bright and colorful MRI, we tend to conclude that the difference is deep, probably innate. This is just laziness on our part. We would never think this way of any organ besides the brain. When you measure the muscles of professional athlete, you are obviously observing the result of a lifetime of training and experience. The brain is no different.

That is not to say that every brain will react the same way to every experience. We are all different. But our differences are not in any simple way innate. There is no way, through any test or scan or other device, to isolate any hidden core of the self that is immune from the interactive process by which each of us is built.

Lately in the ability debate, the twin study has emerged as an ostensible trump card. By comparing identical with fraternal twins, some hope to isolate the component of the variation of a given variable that is hereditary from the component that is environmental. But those who tout this work tend not to say what philosophers of science know: the range of variation of any outcome is a function of the range of variation of the inputs. The more similar the range of environments (with twin studies, it's often relatively narrow), the larger the purportedly separate contribution of genetics appears. Whenever the environment changes, the supposedly separate contribution of genes narrows. In the end, heredity and environment make no independent contributions to our abilities; they are not really separate factors at all.<sup>2</sup>

Let us avoid making the same mistakes in the study of character that we are only beginning to recover from in the study of ability. Everyone knows that some experiences “build character.” Researchers are now beginning to show, in a more rigorous way, how some experiences, especially some forms of trauma, shape aspects of people's character down to the level of biochemical and genetic activity. (See Ross Thompson's contribution to this collection). What we need is a research agenda that will help us better understand how these processes of interaction work, and which ones matter – and in the case of the more pathological processes, how they might be interrupted.

In other words, we need to learn which character traits matter in which settings and how to build those traits. That research agenda would have policy-guiding implications. And it would avoid miring us once again in those ultimately nonsensical questions Americans seem to love—about just how much of the winners' winnings and the losers' losses are due to the cards of ability and character that we imagine we were permanently dealt before the game began.

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1 For a fuller version of this argument, see Joseph Fishkin, *Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal*



*Opportunity* (Oxford University Press 2014), Chapter Two.

<sup>2</sup> See Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space Between Nature and Nurture* (Duke University Press 2010).

# Free Will is the Missing Link Between Character and Opportunity

Martin E.P. Seligman

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The standard view of today's social reformers is that building character plus building opportunity will break the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. I think this view, while laudable and a big improvement over the failed strategy of merely building opportunity, is still seriously incomplete. The missing link is that *good character can take advantage of opportunity only by free will, and free will only works through future-mindedness*. This view sounds quaint to twenty-first century ears and so is in need of a history and a justification.

Why did science give up the notion of free will? Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827), a French mathematician of the Enlightenment, postulated that if we knew the position and momentum of every particle in the universe at one instant only, we could then predict the entire future of the universe as well as postdict the entire past. When the deterministic claims of Darwin for biology, Marx for sociology and politics, and Freud for psychology are hammered on to Laplace's superstructure, this makes for a pretty imposing edifice – an edifice that is a secular version of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and just as pointedly renders any belief in human choice nonsensical. Is it any wonder that so many educated people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries began to believe that they were prisoners of their past, doomed to be frog-marched into their predestined futures by the accidents of their environment and their personal histories?

Actually it is. First, because the argument is much looser than it appears, and second because Laplace faced venerable intellectual forces arrayed on the opposing side. The nineteenth century American mind did not think much of historical determinism. Quite the contrary.

The educated nineteenth century American mind believed deeply, and for reasons not at all frivolous, in two intimately related psychological doctrines: free will and character. It was the first doctrine, free will, and all its buttresses that were arrayed against Laplace and his allies. The modern history of free will begins with the liberal Dutch Protestant Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). In opposition to Luther and Calvin, Arminius claims that humans have free will and can *participate in their own election to grace*. This was dubbed the "Arminian Heresy" since grace was supposed to come freely only from God. The heresy then became widespread through the charismatic, evangelical preaching of John Wesley (1703-1791).

The English founder of Methodism, Wesley preached that humans have free will and using free will, each of us can actively participate in attaining their own salvation by doing good works. Wesley's stunning sermons, heard through the cities, towns, and villages of England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and in the American Colonies, made Methodism a strong and popular religion by the early part of the nineteenth century. Free will entered popular American consciousness, and almost all forms of American Christianity – even Lutheran and Calvinist – came to embrace

it. Ordinary people no longer saw themselves as passive vessels waiting to be filled with grace. Ordinary human life could be improved. Ordinary people could better themselves. The first half of the nineteenth century became the great age of social reform – the second great awakening. The Evangelical religion of the American frontier was intensely individualistic. Prayer meetings climaxed with the drama of the *choice* of Christ.

There was no better soil than nineteenth century America for this doctrine to root and grow and flower. Rugged individualism, the idea that all men were created equal, the endless frontier along which the waves of immigrants could find freedom and riches, the institution of universal schooling, the idea that criminals could be rehabilitated, the freeing of the slaves, the drive to women’s suffrage, and the idealization of the entrepreneur, are all manifestations of how seriously the nineteenth century mind took free will – before Darwin, Marx, and Freud threw cold water on it – and how little it cared for the idea that we are prisoners of the past.

This led to an uncomfortable standoff. On the one hand, the religious and political traditions of America embraced free will and everyday experience seemed to display it in hundreds of small ways. On the other hand the bulky edifice of science seems to demand that you give up the notion. So by the end of the 20th century, educated Americans were talking out of both sides of their mouths about freedom and choice. On the one hand, free will is integral to political discourse (e.g., “the will of the people,” “responsibility” “I will return character to the White House”) and to ordinary discourse (e.g., “Would you mind putting your cigarette out?” “Would you rather go to the movies or watch television?”). On the other hand, tough-minded scientific argument excludes it. This exclusion has crept into legal decisions (“mitigating circumstances,” “not guilty by reason of insanity”), and most importantly into the way most educated people think about their own past.

Can hard determinism be overthrown? After all, Laplacian determinism failed utterly for Freudians, was too general to be at all predictive for Darwinians, and as for Marx, the only remaining home for historical inevitability after the fall of Eastern Europe is in the English departments of a few elite American universities. The philosophical arguments for Laplace’s dictum are, however, less easily disposed of than the empirical claims of Freud and Marx. This is not the place to review the long, picky arguments about hard determinism, soft determinism, compatibilism and free will. For now, I will simply direct attention to recent work by Chandra Sripada (2014), work that is a breath of fresh air as it discusses an aspect of free will that has been so far almost entirely neglected.

Paraphrasing liberally from Sripada’s discussion, consider the question of what makes a Ferrari fast, what is special or distinctive that makes a Ferrari speedier than other cars. A proper answer must surely say something about the Ferrari’s engine, and in particular its size or power or its unique engineering. The philosophical question of free will is similar: What is the distinctive mark that makes humans, presumably alone in the animal world, free?

Sripada contends that the distinctive mark of free will is not, as is usually claimed, any properties of our decisions or our actions; it is remarkable how much decisional machinery we share with simpler creatures. Rather, it is to be found in our *imagination* – it consists in our potent abilities to imaginatively construct and evaluate options. These abilities are in turn

intimately linked to time horizons; a sufficiently long horizon enables the building of complex plans of action that unfold over months, years, decades, even generations. If a person can only think about the actions that can be done in the present moment, his set of options is highly constrained. Once the future is fully brought in, the space of options expands spectacularly; there are countless plans he might construct, projects he might pursue, lives he might lead, persons he might elect to be. It is human imagination, our ability to mentally create sets of options of massive size and diversity, that is the engine of freedom.

If Sripada is correct, this makes sense of Banfield's dictum (1976) that poverty is not a state of the pocket book, but a state of mind – present mindedness. This in turn has important implications for interventions that will break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Good character alone will not amount to much. More opportunity alone will not amount to much. They must be accompanied by optimism and hope, the bulwarks of a robust future-mindedness – and there are well-validated interventions that build optimism and hope. We need to develop interventions that expand the latitude of the futures young people imagine, that lengthen the time horizon that young people imagine, and that teach our young people how to dream.

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# Conscientiousness: A Primer

Brent Roberts

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The personality trait of conscientiousness reflects the propensity to be self-controlled, responsible to others, hardworking, orderly, and rule abiding (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, and Meints, 2009). It is not a singular entity, but rather a family of dispositions inclusive of specific facets, such as industriousness, self-control, orderliness, responsibility, and conventionality. And as a domain, it subsumes current popular constructs such as grit and delay of gratification (Roberts et al., 2014).

Conscientiousness predicts health and longevity, occupational success, marital stability, academic achievement, and even wealth (for a review, see Jackson and Roberts, in press). As a result, conscientiousness has become an important “non-cognitive” trait used in diverse fields such as economics, political science, and education.

Although conscientiousness is clearly important, the role of conscientiousness and most other predictors of human capital and well-being should be kept in perspective. There is a tendency to valorize our measures and predictors, especially when they are first introduced to the public. Character or personality appears to be the new big thing, albeit already controversial. Both proponents and critics should condition their rhetoric against the empirical findings. If one examines the contribution of any one predictor favored by different groups, such as poverty, cognitive ability, or character, to outcomes that people care about – love, work, and health, for example – the picture becomes quite clear. No one factor explains everything. No one factor is going to revolutionize the policy landscape. In fact, looking empirically at the merits of social background, intelligence, and personality, it is clear that each makes a small contribution adding up, collectively, to something large. This empirical edifice is what I would call the “diversified portfolio model of human functioning.” Like a retirement portfolio, human functioning and achievement are maximized by investments in many different qualities.

It is a gross exaggeration to suggest that dimensions like self-control, or grit, or mindset, are the sole most important domain for solving problems like poverty and crime. So while incorporating efforts to improve character are important, so are maintaining efforts to improve cognitive functioning, and alleviating poverty.

## *Changing Conscientiousness?*

Personality traits are relatively enduring constellations of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are elicited in diverse situations and that develop with the proper time and circumstances (Roberts, 2009). That personality traits like conscientiousness are not only consistent, but also demonstrate systematic changes across the lifespan are now widely accepted findings

(Roberts et al., 2006). For example, studies have found that individuals tend to become more conscientious with age. Conscientiousness is particularly interesting because it does not show systematic changes until young adulthood, at which time it appears to accelerate upwards for most populations. Most surprisingly, meaningful change in conscientiousness still occurs through midlife (Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer, 2006).

Since conscientiousness is both important to many outcomes and demonstrably changes across the life course leads to the inevitable question: should we intervene to increase conscientiousness? If conscientiousness does have such a pervasive positive effect, it almost becomes ethically problematic not to intervene. By what rationale would we tell persons with impulse control issues that they do not deserve our help? That their personality is so valuable in its current form that it should be preserved even if they desire to change? At the core of this example is one potential answer to the question of “should we intervene?” – if someone wants to change, then yes, by all means we should provide whatever tools we can to help individuals move up (or down) even a modicum of levels on conscientiousness.

Two issues that arise when considering interventions are first, would it be unfair to certain populations and second, would it have unintended negative consequences? Things get a bit sticky when we start thinking about paternalistic efforts to change conscientiousness in populations that may or may not want to change. One faulty idea that we should dispense with immediately is that poor people are not conscientious and therefore in need of good character training. To date, there is no reliable, systematic evidence that childhood socioeconomic standing predicts levels of conscientiousness in adulthood. Personality is indecorously democratic. Rich people can be as problematically impulsive as poor people are hard working. In some cases the well off may also be the ones most likely to cause problems in society because of their lack of conscientiousness: politicians, police, and businessmen come immediately to mind.

The second issue about interventions concerns the unintended, and potentially negative, consequences of accelerating growth in conscientiousness. This can be seen in the general revulsion that many feel in response to the Tiger Mom phenomenon or toward people that obsess single-mindedly over achievement. The pressure to work to exhaustion, which is clearly valuing conscientiousness above all other qualities, is often thought to engender stress, anxiety, and a distinct lack of creativity in children and cultures.

It may be then, that the association of conscientiousness to outcomes is curvilinear –the effect bends toward negativity at the high end of conscientiousness. If so, pushing children to maximize their conscientiousness may actually hurt them. Unfortunately, the science on the curvilinear effects of conscientiousness is mixed at best and cannot provide a clear guide.

Still, it is clear that efforts to increase conscientiousness in adolescence might have unintended negative consequences because of the particular social ecology of the teenage years. Several studies, for example, have shown that adolescents who are accelerated in terms of their personality, that is, higher on conscientiousness, are not held in high esteem by their peers (Klimstra et al., 2012). In the absence of a uniform expectation that all teenagers should be higher on conscientiousness, the unintended consequence of making some adolescents higher

on conscientiousness would be to marginalize them at a critical juncture of development.

Finally, a push to elevate conscientiousness could undermine the long held value of creative achievement, especially in the US. According to some reviews, there is a negative relation between conscientiousness and creativity (Feist, 1998). To understand this negative relation we need to look closer at both creative achievement and conscientiousness. Creative achievement requires two things, coming up with original ideas and successfully implementing them (Amabile, 1996). One would assume that much of conscientiousness would contribute positively to the implementation of creative products. What drives the negative association is most likely the conventional aspect of conscientiousness undermining originality in particular.

So: conscientiousness is a key component of what some are describing as character. It is related to a wide range of achievements in life that most people and societies care about. But conscientiousness and other character traits are only one of many factors that contribute to people's success and well-being. Like other character traits, conscientiousness is changeable. It might be something we want to actively change and in some cases there is a clear moral argument for doing so, especially for people who suffer as a consequence of being low in conscientiousness. In other cases, we should move cautiously in determining who should be targeted and especially the risk of negative unintended consequences from being the target of change.

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# Chronic Adversity Shapes Character

Ross Thompson

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A newborn enters a world of unknowns. Is the world safe or dangerous? Are people nurturing or threatening? How will my needs be addressed? It will be many years before children can articulate answers to questions like these. But because their well-being depends on it, even newborns begin adapting to the conditions into which they were born based on questions like these.

This begins even before birth. The mother's nutritional state influences fetal growth and metabolic rate in ways that can have life-long consequences. Mothers who are chronically stressed during pregnancy give birth to newborns who are more reactive to stress.

After birth, young children's experiences shape further developmental adaptations. One example is language learning. Newborns cannot know whether they have been born in New York, Moscow, or Seoul, so the developing brain becomes sensitized to language-specific phonemes during the first year based on the characteristics of language they hear. This enables the child to become a more efficient language learner and contributes to the vocabulary explosion of the second year.

Language is not the only environmental condition to which young brains must adapt. Newborns also cannot know whether they have been born on the East Side or the West Bank, but adjusting to conditions signaling threat or safety is important to their survival. Young children living in stressful conditions, such as in families beset by poverty or chronic marital conflict, show intensified biological responses to stress. They also exhibit heightened vigilance to threat, poorer emotion regulation, and problems in cognitive and attentional self-regulation that derive, in part, from the downstream effects of stress hormones on other developing brain systems, such as the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus. This constellation of biological and behavioral adaptations develop in response to chronic stress. But they also prepare the child for continuing adversity by allocating mental resources to threat vigilance, fostering quick and strong reactions to perceptions of danger, and enabling rapid mobilization of resources to confront immediate challenges.

Such adaptations carry inherent trade-offs. Mental and attentional resources devoted to threat vigilance are important for anticipating an adult's anger, but these resources cannot as readily be devoted to exploration and learning. Threat monitoring undermines the development of constructive social relationships with others. Adapting to the requirements of one environment, such as the home or neighborhood, may render children less competent in managing the requirements of a different environment, such as a classroom.

These early biological and behavioral adaptations are not immutable. Just as children can later

learn another language, they can also learn how to function in different settings that present different supports and challenges. But the characteristics of early environments, especially if they endure, may leave an enduring “accent” in the child’s natural response tendencies even in different settings and with different people.

Scholars characterize these early influences as “biological programming” or “experiential canalization” of behavior. Together they emphasize the importance of the signals conveyed by early experiences that shape developing biological and behavioral systems to prepare the child for life in the conditions into which they have been born.

How is this relevant to character development, especially as it relates to intergenerational mobility? In three ways.

First, early experiences influence the development of character attributes most relevant to later success such as self-regulation, resilience, and prioritizing future rewards over present ones. Self-regulation, for example, is essential to persisting in the face of obstacles, focusing on long-term goals, and monitoring progress along the way. But one of the consequences of chronic early stress is self-regulatory problems, with children in poverty or family adversity exhibiting greater impulsivity, diminished cognitive or attentional focus, and poorer emotional self-control. Resilience is undermined when early adversity contributes to heightened reactivity to challenging or difficult events. Future time perspective may be lost when immediate challenges command attention. The conclusion is not that mature character attributes are determined by early experiences. Rather, it is that long before character education begins, there are inherent capacities shaped by early experience that make the development of these attributes easier or more difficult.

Second, character is biologically as well as behaviorally embedded in the developing person. Character is based on developing behavior and biological systems that provide the basis for self-regulation, focused thought, emotional self-control, planfulness, and other characteristics. And the development of these systems is profoundly influenced by early experiences that provide security or create adversity to which these systems must adapt.

One reason I have focused on early stress is that its biological and behavioral effects on very young children have been well studied. Another reason is to emphasize that by contrast with prevalent portrayals of “toxic stress” and its consequences, the stressors that affect young children are not only threat and danger, but also the absence or withdrawal of nurturing social support. Both constitute “toxic stress” for young children. And just as adults can be sources of stress, they can also buffer the stresses that children encounter from other sources by providing reliable emotional support. The quality of parent-child relationships is the central ingredient to the environmental conditions to which young children adapt, both behaviorally and biologically.

Third, if chronic early stress biologically orients children’s development in ways relevant to emergent character, one can see how intergenerational continuities in opportunity may occur when children and their families are subject to the same stressful life conditions that endure over time. When parents have grown up in dangerous neighborhoods or risky families, and face continuing financial or relational problems, their own stress reactivity, self-regulation,



and resilience are comparably undermined. Indeed, we might consider what it means when entire communities or nationalities are subject to chronic adversity – through occupation, war, economic devastation – whose behavioral and biological consequences for those who endure them compromise capacities to rebuild and heal.

Young children adapt biologically and behaviorally to the conditions in which they are born because those conditions are likely to endure. Ensuring that those conditions improve for children facing chronic adversity is one way a compassionate society builds character strengths in its youngest citizens.

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# Responsible Parenting: A Test of Character?

Isabel Sawhill

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A well-functioning liberal democracy is based on the everyday practice of civic virtues or what in another context we might call character. Without those virtues, the amount of intervention required to promote social and individual welfare, including upward mobility, would be inefficient, and overly intrusive. Government may require that children be vaccinated or attend school, but unless parents see the need for this and voluntarily cooperate with such requirements, they would not work in practice. Government can establish laws governing taxes or safe driving speeds but it cannot have an auditor for every citizen or a policeman on every corner and it must have the consent of the governed to impose such rules in the first place. Social norms are the private analogue to government rules and regulations. They establish standards of behavior to which most people conform. The punishment for nonconformity is not a fine or a prison sentence but social stigma and loss of respect or affection from significant others.

Although more efficient and less intrusive than government for guiding our behavior, social norms can also be individually stifling, even repressive. In addition, norms that may have once been useful for supporting the collective good may later become outdated and unproductive. But social norms are, in my view, exceedingly powerful shapers of individual behavior. The economist James Duesenberry once said that economics is all about how people make choices and sociology is all about why they don't have any choices to make. Theories of human behavior need, in my view, to consider both.

As Richard Reeves has noted, some of these civic virtues or traits – what he calls persistence (hard work) and prudence (self-control or deferred gratification) – are more important than others for an individual's chance of being upwardly mobile. I want to apply these ideas to a topic of great interest to me: unplanned childbearing, and its implications for upward mobility and opportunity.

Many young adults are drifting into early and unplanned childbearing outside of marriage, often before they have completed their education or formed a stable relationship with another adult. Roughly 40 percent of all births now occur outside of marriage and most of these are unplanned. All of the evidence, detailed in my book, *Generation Unbound*, points to this being detrimental to both the parents and their children's life prospects. I have argued that what is needed, in this context, is a new ethic of responsible parenting, by which I mean: Not having a child before you and your partner really want a child and are prepared to care for it. With such an ethic in place, the amount of government assistance needed in cases where, through no fault of their own, parents still needed help, would be more affordable, and more acceptable to the taxpaying public. Such cases could include death of a parent, the low wages earned by both parents, the lack of child care to enable them to work, a child with special needs, and so forth.

But it would not include the large number of children who are born to adults who did not want a child (or another child) at a particular stage of their lives.

What's behind this drifting into relationships and into parenthood without marriage? Some of it is the result of changing social norms. Fifty years ago children born outside of marriage were considered "illegitimate." Not anymore. Even the term sounds old-fashioned and pejorative. In addition, some young adults may see little or no reason to delay childbearing given their limited economic prospects. But unintended childbearing rates are three or four times as high among the poor as among the middle class: this is hard to reconcile with a purely economic argument. The disadvantaged are not actively choosing to have as many children, or to have them as early in life. Less discussed is another important reason for drifting into parenthood: the simple fact that all of us lack will power and make mistakes; we don't always end up doing what we intend to do. We don't reach for a condom in the heat of the moment. We don't think about the college tuition we are going to have to pay when we have a baby now. More generally, we lack a sense of self-efficacy or control over our lives. In a sample of 103 college women in their twenties, a relatively advantaged group, Paula England and her colleagues found that efficacy has strong effects on contraceptive use, even after controlling for many other variables including the strength of the desire to have children. And in a large survey of American women, 44 percent agreed or strongly agreed that "it doesn't matter whether you use birth control or not; when it's your time to get pregnant it will happen." These findings suggest that a large portion of the population is fatalistic in their attitudes. If character means being more self-directed, more future-oriented, and more willing to control one's impulses, and if these attributes, in turn, produce more social mobility, these findings are discouraging.

Social norms, I believe, can help to build or reinforce character strengths. The old social norm was "don't have a child outside of marriage." That norm was useful but it has now eroded to the point where it has little salience to the youngest generation. The new norm needs to be "don't have a child until you and your partner are ready to be parents." A new ethic of responsible parenting (backed up by more affordable and effective forms of birth control) may or may not be feasible. But without it, social mobility will continue to be limited for those at the bottom.

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# Gendered Character

Jen Lexmond

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“The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities”  
-Aristotle (quote in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*)

Emma Watson, actress and UN Goodwill Ambassador, launched a new campaign, #HeForShe. In a landmark speech to the UN on gender equality she argued that the pressure for men to be ‘masculine’ and for women to be ‘feminine’ is limiting self-expression and opportunity for everyone.

Much attention is paid by policy makers to structures of class, race, and income that inhibit social mobility: our freedom to change, adapt, or improve our position in society. There has been less focus on how individual’s own qualities, capacities, and dispositions shape their life chances. But intuitively, we know that a resilient, motivated, and determined individual - no matter what socio-economic situation they find themselves in - will fare differently to someone who lacks confidence, struggles to control their emotions, and gives up easily. Individual character evidently shapes social mobility.

Far from being fixed or an accident of birth, many of these character traits are developed, at the start of life through a combination of home environment and parenting, and throughout life by wider social and cultural structures. Character development is thus a key part of any strategy to deliver a more socially mobile society.

The social construction of gender limits our social mobility, perhaps more than any other structure. because it feeds the root, the very source, of our character. It is typically seen as the basis of social identity, with most societies having a fairly clear assignment of gender attributes for each of the sexes. Developmental accounts of gender suggest it is formed in the early years when young children first grasp the concept of the gender binary (in other words that there are two - feminine and masculine - and that they are opposites), learn about roles and stereotypes (pink and blue), identify with parents (like mother like daughter), and form preferences (dolls v soccer). By the age of five or six, when children are starting at school and spending more time with peers, gender roles are consolidated and at their most rigid.

Language and linguistics, the mass media, and the roles adopted by parents and siblings at home are all key sources of information about gender that young children soak up, and in turn internalise, model, and integrate into their own identities. But the images of ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ presented to young children are limiting right from the outset, at a time when brains are most ‘plastic’ or open to influence. These are the ‘headline’ messages being broadcast to children about their gender:

## Girls

- are a minority
- are primarily concerned with finding romantic love
- are often passive, and look to others to fulfill their wishes
- are 'saved' by male heroism
- are rewarded and do well when they're pretty
- are 'fixed'

## Boys

- are the majority
- have a range of ambitions and aspirations
- are primarily active in taking on challenges and achieving goals
- are the protectors of the 'weaker sex'
- are rewarded and do well when they face up to challenges
- are 'fixers'

Between 2006 and 2011, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media conducted a study of Examining 11,927 speaking characters in 129 top-grossing family films, 275 prime-time programs (including ABC, NBC, Fox, Cartoon Network, Disney Nickelodeon), and 26 children's TV shows across key networks. In family films, the study found an almost 3 to 1 ratio of male to female characters. Only a quarter of narrators were female. A mere tenth of films had a gender balanced cast. There was also a striking disparity in presentation - not only in the proportion of male v female characters, nor in how primary their roles were (how frequently they speak, how integral they were to the story or plot) - but also, crucially, in their personal attributes, in other words, their 'character'.

Female characters were portrayed with more exposed skin, thinner bodies, and their physical attractiveness was referred to more often. 'Adornment, enticement, or with an inclination to romance' remained the key motivation of female characters. Even within this drive towards finding love, female characters tended not to try to fulfil their aspiration through action - initiating plans or setting events in motion in order to achieve a goal. The majority were passive, or 'daydreamers' with an idea of romantic love in mind but little intention or resolve to realise their desires.

These gender profiles function as powerful cues, especially to younger viewers, providing positive and negative reinforcements of behavior, including incentivising action for boys and passivity for girls. As these messages are repeated - not just through media, but through peers and parents, toys, and books - they lead not just to changes in behaviour, but the formation of habits, tastes, and interests. In short, they shape our character.

We know very well the traditionally measured 'gaps' that the construct of gender has led to: earnings and pay, wealth and assets, land ownership, positions of authority, representation in different occupational sectors, a public/private division of labour. We know that girls and women are the biggest losers here, but we also know that boys and men are negatively affected too: the pressure of masculinity is eroding men's health and wellbeing. In the UK today, suicide is the leading cause of death amongst men age 20-49.

One of the most inspiring early results of Watson's call to action came in the form of an open letter from a 15 year old British school boy:

By using words such as 'girly' or 'manly' we inadvertently buy into gender stereotyping.



We play with toys designed for our gender, we play different sports based on gender, we often go to segregated schools. And yet it takes some effort for people to acknowledge the existence of gender inequality and the injustice it entails for both sexes. If we want equality, it will take more effort than paying women the same as men, or giving women equal opportunities. We must all make an active decision to change our language. We must stop pressuring each other to fit stereotypes which more often than not leaves us feeling repressed and unable to express ourselves. We must not let gender define us.

The self-limiting norms of gender cramp the development of individual character, and thereby reduce freedom, opportunity and fairness. For women, most obviously, but in the end for us all.

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# Women, Character and Competition

Carmit Segal

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Individuals who are inclined to consistently work hard and can defer gratification have better grades in school, are more likely to have higher educational attainment, and higher wages – controlling for their cognitive abilities. This is just one example of how skills other than cognitive ones help to explain success in school and in the workplace, as documented in a growing research literature.

A direct policy implication of these findings is that fostering such non-cognitive skills may help increase social mobility. Given the recent findings from Pew’s Economic Mobility Project that men are more socially mobile than women (i.e., they earn more than both their parents, while women only earn more than their mothers), a natural question to ask is whether such non-cognitive skills can help explain the gaps in economic success between men and women.

Gender differences in self-discipline and misbehavior seem to be doing an excellent job in explaining differences in human capital accumulation – but in the other direction. Adolescent girls are better behaved and more self-disciplined than adolescent boys. They also place a higher value on the future.<sup>1</sup> These gaps can account for the fact that girls have higher GPA than boys<sup>2</sup> and higher college enrollment,<sup>3</sup> again controlling for cognitive skills. If girls and women have the edge in terms of non-cognitive skills, does that mean, then, that non-cognitive skills are irrelevant in explaining their worse outcomes in terms of later earnings and income? Not necessarily.

A different kind of non-cognitive skill may play a decisive role in explaining both the gender gap in earnings and the scarcity of women in leadership positions. To gain leadership positions, whether in the economic or the political spheres, individuals need to engage in a competition with others. So gender differences in levels of competitiveness may help explain the scarcity of women in leadership position, and, as far as these jobs are very lucrative, this may also contribute to increasing the gender gap in earnings.

Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund have used lab experiments to investigate whether there are gender differences in competitiveness.<sup>4</sup> They find that when given the choice, women were less likely than men to choose a tournament compensation scheme over a “piece rate” compensation scheme. Beliefs about relative performance and risk help explain the different choices, but about 40% of the initial gender gap in tournament entry can be attributed to women’s aversion to perform in a competition. Even among high-ability individuals, there remains a substantial gender gap.

Can levels of competitiveness be changed? The evidence gathered so far suggests that the

tendency to be competitive is affected not only by nature but also by nurture. Gneezy, Leonard and List showed, for example, that in matrilineal societies there is no gender gap in tournament entry.<sup>5</sup> Niederle, Segal, and Vesterlund showed that policies that favor women as winners in a competition will cause women to enter tournaments at higher rates.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the increase in entry by high-ability women is high enough such that it mostly offsets the decrease in entry by men. Thus, this policy has very little to no cost and does not create a situation in which high ability male candidates are passed over for lower quality female ones. More recently, Petrie and Segal have shown that if the prizes that the tournament winners get are high enough, women behave as competitively as men.<sup>7</sup> This body of research suggests that policies can change the conditions such that women would be willing to enter competitions, and possibly change their competitive tendencies.

Should we promote policies encouraging women to enter competitions (like affirmative action), or even policies designed to make women more competitive? The answer is not clear. While having skills like drive and prudence help individuals increase their educational attainment and earnings, the same is not necessarily true for competitiveness. Competitive individuals are not necessarily doing better than their less competitive counterparts. On the contrary, they may enter competitions in which their (objective) chances of winning are not very high and they would have done better had they chosen an alternative compensation scheme. Tournament entry increases expected earnings only for individuals who possess the skills necessary to win the tournament. Creating tournaments in which women are favored causes both high- and low-ability women to change their entry patterns and compete at higher rates. While high-ability women stand to increase their earnings when entering these tournaments, the earnings of low-ability women will almost certainly decrease.

On the other hand, an increase in the share of women in leadership positions may be beneficial to all women. Studies have shown that women in leadership position tend to help other women. Women in political office divert public resources to issues that women voters care about.<sup>8</sup> Women in corporate leadership help promote other women to corporate positions.<sup>9</sup> Having more female police officers increases reports of crimes against women, decreases escalation of domestic violence and prevents intimate partner homicides.<sup>10</sup> Whether these benefits offset the losses for individual women who were attracted to the competition but did not win is an issue for public debate and further research.

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# Cultures Build Character

Stuart Butler

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Why does one young woman play the lottery each week while a similarly-situated one squirrels away the same amount in her bank account? Why does one young man drop out of college after his first failing grade while his roommate persists after the same setback? Most people believe “character” influences such decisions – decisions that are strong predictors of whether someone will rise up the economic ladder or be stuck near the bottom.

The brain’s hard-wiring may have a significant influence on character development. But it is also true that the “culture” of a neighborhood play a critical role. By culture we mean the prevailing social norms, influential networks, and the behaviors expected by one’s family and friends. It’s easy to get into trouble talking about such things. When conservatives like Paul Ryan or Charles Murray use the term “virtues” to describe the personal and neighborhood attributes needed for economic mobility, critics hear that as a moral judgment about poor people. That’s why culture is the better term, because it connotes a web of influences in a neighborhood that can relentlessly shape people’s personalities and carry them along towards failure or success, whatever their underlying traits.

The culture of a neighborhood plays a large role in launching patterns of behavior that evolve into more lasting, habits – such as saving money and getting homework done, or partying and shunning work. If reinforced, habits become entrenched and the core of what we call character.

Neighborhood culture can shape an individual’s character in at least three ways. The social norms of the community can be helpful or harmful to the development of habits that evolve into character. Second, the influence of one’s immediate friends and peers seems often to be even especially potent. We see this in many critical areas, such as education. Being brought up in a tough neighborhood often means that a student who hands in homework regularly and wants to excel will face a daunting social price. Even students in more upwardly mobile neighborhoods can be held back by their friends, whose social impact seems to be even greater than the prevailing norm. Similarly, health-related behaviors that have long-term social and economic consequences, such as smoking, drug use or obesity, appear to be heavily influenced by the norms of a person’s friends and social networks. Still, we have to be cautious about blaming friends for an individual’s character formation – after all, to a significant degree one chooses one’s own friends.

Beyond just friends, associations and social institutions are a third cultural influence. Gangs are an example, often enforcing behavior patterns as the price of protection. On the other hand, the peer pressure of tightly knit school sports teams or religious institutions can be a strong and positive cultural factor in building character.

The relationship between neighborhood culture and an individual's character is powerful, though of course not deterministic. But for younger people, whose patterns of behavior are still malleable, daily life in a poor neighborhood is characterized by a constant struggle for dominance between different these cultural pressures. Yale University's Elijah Anderson describes this as the "Code of the Streets", with locals referring to "street" or "decent" behavior standards that profoundly affect such work habits, school and family. And Harvard's Robert Putnam explains that if the dominant social culture undervalues work, family stability and education it can serve to condemn young people with innate potential to a low-achieving social class.

So, is it possible to create a neighborhood culture with norms and social networks that will help build positive behavior patterns and good life choices? One approach is simply to take people out of neighborhoods that pull them down and permit or encourage them to move to communities with a more positive culture. That implies strategies such as providing housing vouchers or school choice to enable families to live or be educated in communities with positive social norms and networks. Such an approach may work well for families who already have a commitment to work and study and want their children to live in a community that reinforces those behaviors, and that's good. But for other families the evidence of several studies suggests it is hard to overcome the effects of being brought up in a discouraging community culture simply by enabling families to move to better neighborhoods.

A more lasting and broader approach is to tackle the culture within low-income communities. That is no easy task, of course, and one where the ability of government to alter social norms may be quite limited. Still, there are some ways government at different levels may be able to assist from the sidelines.

One is to reduce regulatory obstacles to innovative neighborhood-based efforts to tackle social problems. For instance, some groups using ex-offenders as mentors appear to have achieved remarkable success at reducing widespread violence in neighborhoods. But often they face license barriers or inadequate assistance from local government.

Another is to try to actively seed stronger institutions within communities. But that has proved hard for government to do. Federal initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods and Promise Zones may yet emulate the success of the Harlem Children's Zone. But it always seems to be a challenge for government efforts to fund and lead efforts that partner creative local efforts rather than impose a less successful cookie-cutter approach.

The most effective strategies for building positive social institutions come from organizations with roots in the community. For instance the Harlem Children's Zone has attracted wide attention for bringing together schools, social services and housing with remarkable results, although the nature and degree of its impact is not fully understood and sometimes questioned. Meanwhile school-based initiatives that see the school as the anchor for a range of health and social services also seem promising, as do other local efforts to build social capital. Some promising initiatives even create new networks to build a reinforcing culture among households in different neighborhoods. And religious institutions have a long track record of helping to improve the culture of neighborhoods, by praising some behaviors and stigmatizing others.



We may not know exactly how to build a culture of improvement in tough neighborhoods. But one thing is certain. Unless we can, expensive public and private programs will be doomed to fail.

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# Grit and Community

Marc Dunkelman

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As more research emerges on the roots and substance of “character,” the public policy implications are coming into clearer view. The interplay between what Richard Reeves has termed “character gap” and the “opportunity gap” is undeniable. Those who are unable to withstand emotional impulses are less likely to climb the economic ladder. More hopefully, we may be uncovering ways to imbue future generations with additional “grit.”

But we are ignoring part of the story. To date, our focus has been on studying the influence of character on the individual. Indeed, to the degree there’s been mention of any social impact, it’s been focused on the possibility that grittier individuals might respond differently to an impulse to participate in what the British call “anti-social behavior.” The sociological implications of character have been left broadly unexamined. But self-control affects who a person knows and befriends. It is high time to explore how a new profusion of grit might ripple through America’s social architecture.

Why have we overlooked the connection between character and community? At the most basic level, because we do not yet possess a clear way to understand or compare different types of interpersonal relationships. The focus of many social scientists have spent on what is broadly termed “network theory” – the effort, for example, to understand how many “degrees of separation” stand between any two strangers – rarely parses the quality of any single connection. And so the ongoing battle between those who see social networking as a corrosive force on community and those who foresee salvation in digital technology often sails past a third alternative – that America’s social architecture hasn’t decayed so much as it’s evolved.

Imagine your social universe as the rings that surround the planet Saturn. Your intimate connections comprise the inner-most rings, and acquaintances with whom you are successively less and less familiar take corresponding places in the rings as they move further out. For a variety of reasons, Americans of late have decided to invest much more of their time and attention in the inner-most rings (relationships with your closest family and friends) and the outermost rings (individuals with whom you have a single common affinity, like a hobby or political niche). These investments have come at the expense of the middle rings – the connections previous generations had with individuals who were familiar, but not intimate.

This shift has led some to argue that American community is in decline. Even if we’re more intensely connected to our spouses and children, we’re less likely now to have the sort of contacts their grandparents had with neighbors, members of the PTA, fellow Rotarians or, as in Robert Putnam’s iconic image, bowling leagues. In some societies, that shift might not have had such an acute impact. But in the United States, the middle rings have played an especially

important role. Familiar but non-intimate connections have long been the places where people with different points of view learned to understand and appreciate one another. In a society that, as Tocqueville noted, is built from the bottom up, mutual comprehension is at a premium. And in its absence, we've found it harder to maintain a spirit of compromise in Washington. The political frustration so apparent across the political spectrum derives less from what's happening within the machinery of government, and more from the shifting social architecture of America's neighborhoods.

Which brings us back to the issue of character. Grit is important to nearly any relationship: few life challenges require more self-control than raising a three-year-old. But whereas love can help overcome a dearth of character in maintaining an inner-ring tie – and it's no trial to unsubscribe from the Twitter feed of an outer-ring connection grown stale – there is no substitute for grit within the middle rings. When Americans with different points of view are forced together, self-control underpins their ability to resist lashing out or turning a cold shoulder. It is an irreplaceable ingredient in the sorts of relationships that span a substantive disagreement.

Would a grittier American population necessarily re-invest in the kinds of ties that defined the old neighborhood? We cannot know for sure. Certainly, the solution to Washington's current problems won't be found in curricula that imbue future generations with an additional modicum of self-control. But two often overlooked points are worth considering. First, our failure to appreciate the shift in American community – the diffusion of our time and attention away from the middle rings – has clouded our efforts to understand why we're losing faith in America's future. Second, any attempt to understand the choices Americans make in building their personalized social networks needs to account for self-control.

Few now doubt that the ability to bear down in the face of immediate and long-term obstacles is the basis of a productive career. Soon we will develop a clearer view of how grit ripples out from the individual to the interpersonal and from social architecture to societal fortune. We're fortunate to have uncovered the nub of an incredibly powerful concept. And so we can only hope that a fuller understanding will provide keys not only to empowering individuals to thrive, but a salve for many of the broader challenges contributing to what George Packer has famously termed “the unwinding.”

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# Schools of Character

Dominic A. A. Randolph

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Here are two predictions: there will be ever-increasing change and a growing demand for greater equality and opportunity. We must therefore educate for change and opportunity. This learning cannot just be about knowledge, but must also be about capacities that are adaptable and provide one with a “toolkit for change.”

As society has become more rational and more enlightened, we have also come to believe in a division of labor and specialization; however, this focus has also brought about a loss of our ability to see human nature as a whole. This lack of wholeness is one reason we encounter such difficulty in suffusing the development of character skills such as optimism, self-control, gratitude and curiosity into the curriculum. As David Levin, the co-founder of the KIPP charter school network, has said to teachers over the years, dual-purpose teaching allows the teacher to teach fractions while also emphasizing resilience as a skill to be developed. It is not a matter of “either/or,” but rather “both/and.”

For all the talk about character in schools, two things are clear: The definition of character has been vague at best (what are the clear character outcomes for schools?) and there have been few formal measures of character that have any effect on one’s future. Character doesn’t show up on transcripts. And yet, we know that “character skills” can be defined, measured and developed and that they are tremendously relevant to effective performance in our schools, in our work and in our lives.

From my perspective, the failure to focus seriously on the development of character skills leads to a number of urgent problems:

- Fragmentation of school life without significant and clear binding influences
- Lack of resilience in different school populations of students (high-achievers / non-traditional independent school students / minority students)
- Extreme focus on IQ as a sign of success rather than on a broader conception of human capacities. The result of this is a misunderstanding of human success and potential that closes the accessibility to education
- A “fixed mindset” in students and adults about capacities like intelligence that affects different student populations negatively for potentially their whole lives.
- And, most importantly, a feeling of disenfranchisement and powerlessness rather than agency in students and teachers. They do not believe that they can change the world.

Given these problems, why is it that these essential character skills are neglected, overlooked and not seriously embedded in our work and in our lives? Why don’t we have a SAT for

character if non-cognitive capacities are so correlated with common measures of success (salary level, reported happiness, divorce rates...)? I think there are three principal reasons:

- Character skills are difficult to define with precision.
- There is not enough evidence to support specific interventions developing character strengths in young people through schooling.
- While measuring math skills seems a viable objective public pursuit, measuring character seems a personal, subjective and private endeavor.

We need to stop talking about STEM and STEAM and reviving a retrograde “Sputnik” approach to improving education. Perhaps our math scores on the PISA tests are lower than that of Singapore, but to reduce human endeavor to a math score is just as faulty as reducing our achievements to an SAT score or to the place we go to university. We need to broaden our approaches to conceptualizing and measuring human endeavor in all its richness. Moreover, if you ask the question, Why does Singapore so dramatically outperform the US in math, you might come around to the idea that character strengths like self-control and perseverance may be cultivated more intentionally, and more successfully, in cultures other than ours.

There needs to be a comprehensive international effort in institutions and in governments to develop intellectual, character and community standards of growth that can be embedded in the “curricula” of schools, universities, workplaces.

There are amazing scientists as well as organizations like the Character Lab, the International Positive Education Network (IPEN), and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) that are all working on the problem of taking some of the findings from social science and “translating” them to our lives. This “translational research” is essential to finding interventions that help to grow optimism, zest, curiosity and other strengths. However, there needs to be more of a consensus and clearer set of goals that these organizations can rally behind, as well as more governmental support of these ideas and how to bring them to action and scale. Character outcomes must become part of our entire educational system. Formative and summative assessments of character skills need to be created by researchers and testing organizations. Report cards need to assess intellectual, character and social skills. The capacity to understand and make change happen needs to be primary amongst our school outcomes.

At Riverdale Country School and KIPP NYC with the help of David Levin of KIPP, Angela Duckworth and Marty Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania over the last seven or so years we have tried to implement and research these ideas with two very different types of schools with some overlap in populations. Key lessons include:

- Character development needs to be a core and overt part of the missions of the school.
- The research is presented in articles that are intellectually compelling, but too opaque to influence students, teachers and parents. The research needs to be ‘translated’ into everyday practices in schools.
- We have to constantly challenge the idea that the outcomes of school are a zero-sum game – that focusing on character necessarily dilutes academic.
- Developing character strengths and moral education are complementary, not competing,

activities.

- The United States leads the research in this field, but lags behind other countries in terms of application. Why is the development of character skills not a primary policy goal for the United States?

I would suggest some of the following steps are necessary for this work to affect more broadly the work in our schools:

- Conduct further research into interventions that grow character strengths, and “clearing houses” of trusted information about character strengths linked to education. Create dynamic formative and summative assessments to measure and help develop character outcomes.
- Develop reports that capture student attainment in terms of academic and character outcomes.
- Integrate the “translational research” in schools (as championed by Angela Duckworth) into the ongoing, formalized movement for school reform.
- Introduce teacher evaluation systems linked explicitly to the development of character strengths.

If we focused on the development of character skills as much as we focus on the development of scientific, programming or literary skills, I believe we would live in a much better world. It is not an either/or proposition – we need both.

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# Morality Before Performance

Marvin Berkowitz

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The question addressed in this essay collection is “the connection between the development of individual character strengths and the broader societal project of promoting greater intergenerational mobility.” As a developmental and educational psychologist, I am more concerned with the holistic development of children; that is, of their broad psychological flourishing. Conceptually, we can deconstruct the child into psychological parts, such as “individual character strengths.” But in real life we are complex integrated organisms. Empirically, we can approximate the impact of particular influences on specific areas of development and functioning. But life also tends to have a robust impact on us, broadly impacting many aspects of our development. This complexity is often hard to discern and reassemble after the scholarly disassembling. Humpty Dumpty is hard to put back together again.

Let us start with two premises. First, we typically do things because of our values; because they fulfill a purpose. Second, for society to progress and flourish, we need morality to be a primary purpose for its citizens. I will take them one at a time.

Values researchers such as Solomon Schwartz have done an elegant job of detailing a wide array of values that people may hold, and may hold to differing degrees of priority. Some are pro-social, some are not. Some may be more other-focused and some may be more self-focused. Our values drive our choices and our behavior, so it is useful to examine and be aware of our values.

An eternal question for any group, if it is responsible and forward-thinking, is what the next generation needs to be like if the group (society) is to endure, or better yet flourish. This entails both a vision for what we want people to be like and an understanding of what is most likely to lead them to become that way. The founding fathers of our daring and radical experiment in self-governance believed our democratic way of life could only endure if citizens were virtuous participants in a collaborative search for ways to ensure the common good. They also understood the jeopardy that resides in the less virtuous places in the human spirit; i.e., how greed could lead to social disintegration. Hence the role of government and the various checks and balances in their blueprint for democracy.

This takes us to the presenting question for this collection of essays, namely the role of character in increasing intergenerational mobility.

Recently, Rick Weissbourd and Making Caring Common conducted a national survey of adolescents and parents to see what values parents prioritize for their children. The most

interesting finding was that, while parents claim they prioritize caring and respect over happiness and success, this does not seem to be the message their children receive. Adolescents in the survey said that their parents care more about their happiness and success. This underscores the need to know the values underpinning a desired end in order to identify the requisite character strengths needed to reach it. Happiness and success may require different strengths, compared to caring and respect.

This raises the question: what is the good in intergenerational mobility? It can be many things. Perhaps equity, or equality. Perhaps material prosperity. Or, a path to a more just and caring society. We need to know *why* it is worth promoting intergenerational mobility, before we can adequately address the appropriate character strengths that our youth need to maximize intergenerational mobility.

I am at heart a progressive. I always look to see if we can move to a better place from where we currently are. But better on which criterion? Not all “progress” is warranted. And perhaps not all intergenerational mobility is warranted. Is downward mobility good too, or just upward mobility? Ultimately, it is ethical criteria (e.g., justice, equity, benevolence, compassion) that should be used to answer these questions. For ethics to be commonly applied to addressing such choices, however, we need to reconsider the need for our citizens to be virtuous. The moral formation of youth needs to be front and center as a long-term but essential strategy for world building and world healing, including ethically justified intergenerational mobility.

While the sub-categories of character can be quite complex, a recently popular dichotomy may be informative here. There has been a recent upsurge in interest in a side of character that has to do with excellence rather than goodness. In 2005, Lickona and Davidson introduced a report on Smart and Good High Schools that helpfully described two broad and complementary domains: moral character and performance character. The former concerns characteristics that have to do with interpersonal matters and ethical issues. The latter is about the characteristics necessary for excellent performance in any domain, e.g., diligence, self-control, perseverance. Lickona and Davidson’s argument is that both are necessary, essentially channeling John Philips’ quote that “goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous, and that both united form the noblest character, and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind.” While true, the matter of priority remains. As Teddy Roosevelt said, “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” One argument then is that if one had to choose between “weak and feeble” and “a menace to society,” the choice should be clear. The more treacherous path then is to emphasize performance character. After all, performance character is about maximizing effectiveness, but is does not distinguish between ethical and unethical effectiveness. One can be a master of either.

Interest in performance character has increased even more recently in part through the popularity of Paul Tough’s book *Why Children Succeed*. In this excellent review of the aspects of character related to academic success, Tough focused on performance character, and largely ignored moral character, even taking a couple of pot shots at a straw man version of moral character. Tough’s work overlapped with the powerful work of Angela Duckworth on GRIT and the success of the KIPP charter schools which also emphasize performance character.

I give priority to the moral side of human flourishing. This is for many reasons – but the most significant is that human goodness will drive societal progress. To live in a better world we need better people. Better can mean many things, but the best better is a moral better. Performance character is about the pursuit of success, which, according to the Making Caring Common survey data, parents seem to be unwittingly prioritizing over the moral character.

The ultimate question, then, is the values question. Why should one pursue intergenerational mobility? If the answer has a moral basis, then performance character alone is the wrong path to that goal. Many believe that the market, especially if unfettered, will lead to a better world. But again, better in what way? Adam Smith was a moral philosopher before he delved into the notion of the free market, and always believed the market needed to be values-driven. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison worried that a moral check was needed to deal with human propensities for greed. Markets do not have consciences, people do. It is not guaranteed that people will have moral consciences as their primary compasses, so educating for character becomes a societal necessity. Educating for character must give priority to the moral side, lest we create “a menace to society.” I do not want a feral competition where those with the strongest performance character are most upwardly mobile. Rather, the goal should be a world in which the moral character of citizens drives societal progress to a more just and compassionate world.

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# Authority and Morality Build Character

Lawrence M. Mead

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In “The New Politics of Character” Richard Reeves shows that the poor must demonstrate “character” (prudence, hard work, persistence) to overcome their disadvantages and get ahead. However, he also argues that they will do so only if opportunity is available to them. Especially, they must be able to get well-paying jobs. If they cannot, we should not be surprised if they fail to get through school, work hard, or avoid crime and unwed pregnancy.

But does character depend on opportunity? I know of no evidence that supports this, and a good deal that does not. For one thing, to say that poor youth will stay out of trouble only if they can anticipate success is contrary to the psychology of youth. Most young people don’t calculate their futures like this. Would that they did! Rather, they do what their elders tell them, and if they do not they consider it a moral issue. If they succumb to imprudence, it’s because these moral constraints have failed and not because opportunity is lacking.

History suggests, if anything, that improved opportunities undercut virtue. For all our current economic problems, opportunity is still far better today for low-skilled youth than it was generations ago. Back then, most young people had to take the low-skilled, monotonous jobs that many think discourage youth from virtue today. Do not romanticize the factories. Marx didn’t. Most of those jobs were dirty and dangerous as well as low-paid. Only a few industries – autos, steel – ever paid unskilled workers well, and mostly due to unions. Yet back then, imprudent behavior was far rarer than today. Crime and unwed pregnancy were vastly lower. Since then, opportunity and prudence have changed in opposite directions.

Simply in theory, it’s not obvious why a harsher environment should produce less prudent behavior rather than more. During the Great Depression, crime fell. Why now should adversity reduce social discipline rather than increase it? Edward Shils argued in the 1960s that affluence was undercutting discipline. In a rich society, why should one postpone immediate pleasures for the future?<sup>1</sup> Affluence is probably one reason why work and marriage are falling today. In a rich society, many assume that they can get through life even without marriage or regular work. And if this is all they seek out of life, they are probably right.

I know of no research in which low-skilled people *themselves* say that there’s no point in avoiding pregnancy or graduating from high school because opportunity is lacking. Rather, that is what better-off commentators believe their behavior implies.

In the ethnographic work of Elijah Anderson or Kathryn Edin, unwed mothers or nonworking men and youth almost never say that they live as they do because such a life is all they can expect. Both Anderson and Edin endorse the mismatch theory, the idea that lack of jobs in cities

explains why few poor work regularly, but their own findings don't support this. Rather, their respondents see marriage and work largely as moral issues. They assume jobs are available. They know that they can and should work. If they do not, they do not blame the society. Rather, they blame themselves or others for moral shortcomings.<sup>2</sup> One may argue that this moral language conceals an actual lack of jobs.<sup>3</sup> But why should we not take the respondents at their word?

The nonworking poor don't talk like trade unionists. They don't say that working isn't worthwhile for lack of good jobs. They simply fail to work, or they drop out of the labor force, largely for personal reasons that they cannot defend. Nor does providing them higher wages or better jobs make much difference. Nonworkers are simply not very responsive to such payoffs. The Earned Income Tax Credit is often thought to have raised work levels among poor parents by "making work pay." But what it really does is raise income *if* you work. It is seldom the reason people go to work.<sup>4</sup> Welfare reform succeeded in raising work levels largely because it enforced work as a condition of aid. Authority, not opportunity, was what promoted virtue.

Unwed pregnancy, most would say, is even less responsive to economic payoffs than nonwork. It's true that poor mothers refuse to marry the fathers of their children because they find them unreliable. But the fathers are not obviously unreliable due to a lack of opportunity. After all, many of the mothers work. They assume the fathers could too, and the latter seldom demur. And, in a sense, the parents aren't refusing to marry, because they have children anyway. They thus incur most of the burdens of marriage without the benefits. Fathers split with families yet have to pay child support. How then is nonmarriage sensible behavior – whatever the opportunity structure?

If the unmarried avoided having children entirely, the case that opportunity matters would be far stronger. That's what adults without resources did in Victorian times, when opportunity really was lacking. If they don't do it today, the cause has to be a decline in conventional morals, not the loss of factory jobs. When parents fail to marry today, what they appear to fear most is commitment to each other, not the economy. Character mostly means a capacity to commit to difficult tasks, including marriage. That capacity – not opportunity – is what has declined.

None of this means that opportunity is unimportant. We should assure it as an act of justice. Our leadership will also demand that. But to say character depends on opportunity is probably false. It is even counterproductive. For to say this suggests that society is responsible for whether people behave well or not, rather than the individuals themselves. The undercuts the core of character, which is above all to take responsibility for oneself. Character in the end has little to do with payoffs and everything to do simply with doing the right thing.

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## We Need Empathy, Too

Amitai Etzioni

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“Character” has been used in American political discourse as a code word for arguing that if people are suffering – are poor, unemployed, or hooked on drugs or alcohol – it is because they have not been brought up properly and thus have a poor character, especially one that is short on self-government and controlling impulses. These people are assumed by conservative thinkers to come from broken homes. But people of good character can lift themselves up by their own boot straps, make their own opportunities. Look at small businesses, or startups.

In contrast, liberal thinkers emphasize the role of opportunity. They tend to hold that anti-social behavior tends to result from deficiencies in the social structure, or The System. If there were enough jobs, especially well-paying and meaningful jobs – careers – people would be motivated to work. If people had opportunities to be heard, and to participate, if they were “empowered,” they would conduct themselves with prosocial manners. All people can be “good” given half a chance, given the right kinds of opportunities.

Social scientists are likely to agree that both upbringing and social structure play a role in shaping behavior but differ in the relative weight they accord to these two sets of forces. They also note that the two factors are not fully independent of each other. And they point to complexities in both concepts. They note that Americans in general tend to favor equality of opportunities but not of results, but to get equality of opportunities a considerable measure of equality of results is needed. If people are accorded the same opportunities but start the competition with different levels of preparation and assets, those with less will fail even if the opportunities are equal. And what makes a good character, and how it is formed, is affected by culture, over which each person has only limited control.

One school of thought focuses on cultivating specific virtues. Particularly popular was the work of Michael Josephson, who laid out a curriculum focused on cultivating what he called “Six Pillars of Character.” These include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Josephson noted that “[w]e might reasonably have eight or 10, or more. But most universal virtues fold easily into these six.” A considerable number of American schools dedicated a period of each school year to study one of these virtues – through recitation of poetry, reading of novels, and class discussions. Some schools increased the list. Others read a short statement about the virtue of the day during assembly or over the PA system.

I suggest that character education requires the development of two specific personality capabilities rather than acquiring specific values or virtues. These capabilities are self-discipline and empathy. Self-discipline (the ability to defer gratification is a major element of this psychological capability) is needed both in making ethical judgments and for performance

success. It is needed because families and schools and communities – places of worship included – cannot, even under the best conditions, expunge anti-social urges. We all have sexual and aggressive and selfish tendencies that push us to conduct ourselves in ways considered to be anti-social. Good students, citizens, and spouses – good people, people of character – differ from others in that they have acquired an ability to discern when such feelings swell in their chest and activate countervailing voices that enable them most times to restrain or deflect such anti-social urges.

Self-discipline (which builds much on deferring gratification) is also needed in order to persist, stick to tasks, concentrate, work hard, and achieve. This has been illustrated by the well-known studies about the differences in achievement between kids who could resist eating one marshmallow when they were promised two if they waited 15 minutes, and those who could not.

The second capability, empathy, significantly augments the first one. If students only acquired high levels of self-discipline, they might use their ability to dedicate themselves to projects that might harm others. Empathy, the ability to walk in another person's shoes, to feel others' pain and joy, guides students to activities that would enhance their lives without undermining those of others. Better yet, empathy allows students to enjoy helping and sharing with and caring for others. Without empathy, a person with strong self-discipline may merely become more accomplished in carrying out anti-social behavior.

The question of whether a school should engage in character education is an idle one: Schools cannot avoid influencing character. The only difference among schools is whether their character education efforts are unwitting or deliberately geared to an educational agenda, and what that agenda is.

Most importantly, experiences are more powerful educational agents when it comes to character formation than exhortations or even narratives. Among the key elements that affect pupil relevant experiences in school are the following:

1. Grades are the “wages” that are meted out to students for their work. The question for character building is whether students learn from their school experience that hard work pays off or if other messages are sent to them by the ways grades are meted out.
2. School sports are an important arena, too. Sports have been recognized since the first Olympics as a major tool for character building. The way school sports are conducted sends important messages, ranging from the notion that “It does not matter if you win or lose but how you play the game” to notions that “Winning is not the important thing, it is the only thing.” Learning to abide by rules, deal with authority, and with losing as well as winning are all skills more readily acquired in sports – if these are properly structured – than in math class.
3. Much attention has been paid to how schools deal with major discipline infractions, such as bringing guns to schools or assaulting teachers or fellow students. Similar attention also should be paid to the ways schools deal with small infractions.

In short, we may well need both opportunities and character to make for a good and high



performing society. However, opportunity will need to include some equality of results, not easy to attain. And character education must be based not on exhortation and recitation of virtues, but on developing two key psychological capabilities. Namely: self-discipline and empathy.

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# Character Education: A Cautionary Note

Mike Rose

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One of the surest claims one can make about leading a successful life is that qualities such as determination, perseverance, self-control, and flexibility matter a great deal. In American education, these qualities often get labeled as “character,” and there is a rapidly growing interest in developing character.

As I watch the 21st century character education take off, I worry. My worry is based on decades of working with low-income children and adults and watching new ideas – or, often, old wine in new bottles – capture our attention. I have two concerns in particular: the reductive way qualities of character get defined; and the near-exclusive focus on low-income children.

There is some confusion as to what to call qualities like “perseverance” or “self-control.” Some refer to them as personality traits – a term that in psychology refers to a relatively stable characteristic. Yet a quality like “perseverance” might change with setting, age, and task. I am dogged in writing a commentary like this, but I become impatient and unfocused with tax forms or technical manuals.

A further problem with terminology involves the widespread tendency to label these qualities “non-cognitive” traits or skills. Cognition traditionally refers to a rich range of mental processes, from memory and attention, to comprehending and using language, to solving a difficult problem in physics or choreography or human relations. But over the last few decades cognition has been reduced in education policy to the skills measured by standardized tests, typically of reading and mathematics. And as economists have gotten more involved in education, they’ve needed quantitative measures of cognitive ability and academic achievement for their analytical models, so they’ve used I.Q. or other standardized test scores as a proxy for intelligence or achievement.

This impoverishment of cognition and the construction of the cognitive/non-cognitive binary have troubling implications for education, especially the education of poor children.

To begin with, the labeling of character qualities as “non-cognitive” misrepresents them. Self-monitoring, for example, has to involve a consideration and analysis of one’s performance and mental state; flexibility demands a weighing of options and decision-making. These are deeply cognitive activities. Two of the classic pre-school programs that have provided a research base for the character advocates – the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Projects – were cognitively rich in imaginative play, language use, and activities that required thought and cooperation. I am not simply fussing over terminology. If you don’t have an accurate definition of something, how can you help people develop it?

Also, we have to consider the consequences of this cognitive/non-cognitive binary in light of American educational history. We tend toward either/or policies – think of old math/new math or phonics/whole language – so we can predict a pendulum swing away from the academic and toward character education. But over the past fifty years, attempts at character education as a distinct pursuit have not been particularly successful – in some cases, student behavior is not affected, or changes in beliefs and behaviors don't last.

There are equality issues here, too. The primary focus of the current character education movement is on low-income children. But many poor kids are already getting terrible educations in the cognitive domain. For character-building interventions to have an effect on academic achievement, students need a curriculum that is academically substantial.

My second concern about the current championing of character education is that it can diminish public discussion of broader policies to address poverty and educational inequality.

Generalizations abound in discussions of character. Support for character development is often coupled with the inaccurate claim that social and educational programs for poor children have failed, when, in fact, there is variability in the effectiveness of such programs depending on the site, the population, the specifics of implementation, and the way effectiveness is defined and measured. The same variation holds for newer psychological interventions to build character; context and implementation matter.

Worse, we have a longstanding tendency to attribute all sorts of pathologies to the poor. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, the authors of a report from the Boston School Committee bemoaned the “undisciplined, uninstructed...inveterate forwardness and obstinacy” of their working-class and immigrant students. There was much talk in the Boston Report and elsewhere about teaching the poor “self-control,” “discipline,” “earnestness,” and “planning for the future.” This language is way too familiar.

Some poor families are devastated by violence, uprooting, substance abuse – and children are terribly affected. But some families hold together with iron-willed determination and instill values and habits of mind that middle-class families strive for. There's as much diversity among the poor as in any group. What they share are the assaults of poverty.

Over the last few years, I have been working with a group of community college students who have overcome difficult, even traumatic, backgrounds to succeed, headed toward an Associate of Arts degree and transfer to a four-year college. They possess grit by the truckload. Yet every one of them has been significantly delayed by financial, housing, and transportation problems, by bureaucratic snafus they don't have the know-how or social capital to remedy, by violence in their communities (one fellow's younger brother was murdered), by disruptions in their families, by health care – one woman had to quit school for a year to pay down a \$10,000 emergency room bill. The poor routinely face barriers that they have few material resources to address. And sometimes no matter how hard they try, the barriers are too frequent and too high to overcome. A good education has always had as one of its goals the development of character. But as a matter of public policy, it would be counterproductive, and ultimately cruel, to focus on individual characteristics without also considering the economic and social terrain on which those

characteristics play out.

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# The Thorny Politics of Mobility

Lanae Erickson Hatalsky

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Within the span of a single week earlier this year, three of the most frequently mentioned Presidential aspirants in their respective parties gave major addresses on poverty. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Congressman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) each implored our nation – and their fellow policymakers in Washington, D.C. – to make changes that will help those at the bottom of the economic ladder become more upwardly mobile. Leaders in both political parties are calling for action to address the fact that 7 in 10 children born in the bottom economic quintile will never even break through to the middle one. So why can't we pass legislation that would help those children have a better chance of success in life? Because while talking about the problem may be good politics, championing the policies that would truly address our mobility crisis carries political risks on both sides of the aisle.

While there are certainly some widely popular economic policies that could do something to ease the burden on low income families – such as raising the minimum wage – many of the purely economic solutions under discussion by lawmakers would do little if anything to help children move up the income ladder over their lifetimes. And while some of these economic policy changes might be necessary, they aren't remotely sufficient. We can't truly address the mobility crisis unless we are willing to go beyond the safely poll-tested economic measures and consider non-economic ways that government levers could help to give every child born into the bottom quintile a chance to break poverty's gravitational hold. And that requires asking ourselves what kinds of non-economic characteristics can help someone succeed despite long odds.

New research in the education arena answers that question, illustrating that attributes like grit (the tenacity and perseverance to overcome obstacles to reach long term goals) and a growth mindset (the belief that the brain is like a muscle that, if properly exercised, can become stronger and make a person smarter and more skilled through effort) are significant predictors of success later in life. The way to nurture these characteristics (which we shorthand as “the mobility mentality”) is through grown-ups, who can teach, instill, and reinforce them at an early age. The most effective thing government can do to make the bottom quintile more permeable and help kids become upwardly mobile may be to encourage a mobility mentality and ensure that children have grown-ups in their lives that are equipped to channel and reinforce it.

Here, however, enter the political perils. The conversation about instilling grit and a growth mindset in kids, and using the grown-ups in their lives to buttress it, is a nuanced and sensitive one – the exact opposite of simply publicly aligning yourself with the nearly irrefutable statement that we have a mobility crisis in this country. For Democrats, it runs the risk of sounding like apostasy, blaming poor children for their own situation in life and chiding them to simply have



more grit and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It also quickly calls up touchy issues like family structure – which Democrats would prefer to avoid discussing at all costs.

President Obama became well acquainted with some of these risks when he gave a speech as a candidate on the importance of fatherhood. He was the perfect messenger to speak about the importance of non-economic factors to mobility, yet he was immediately skewered by African American leaders, feminists, and other core Democratic constituencies, to the point that political commentators wondered aloud whether those voters would even show up at the polls to support him (a worry that in retrospect seems unthinkable). A piece in *Ebony* captured the criticism, saying Obama had “castigate[d] black fathers” and “g[iven] public voice to what white people whisper about blacks in their living rooms,” while Rev. Jesse Jackson said Obama was “talking down to black people.” The President was not cowed – he has continued to raise the non-economic factors that harden the mobility barrier throughout his two terms, but every time he does, he gets blowback from those on the left.

Republicans, on the other hand, are much more comfortable discussing the non-economic factors that might contribute to or help overcome the mobility crisis. Yet this aspect of the poverty conversation often gives them foot-in-mouth disease – setting the stage for politicians to inadvertently say something that sounds patronizing to the poor, demeaning to single women, or offensive to African Americans (or all three). Congressman Ryan learned this lesson earlier this year when his Democratic colleagues in the House of Representatives called his comments on his much-publicized poverty tour “a thinly-veiled racial attack.” The negative Republican Party brand on issues of race and gender provides a backdrop that (not necessarily unfairly) casts a vague statement as an attack on women and minorities. And while Republicans are generally more comfortable with the idea that the mobility mentality is important, they can be wary of suggesting that government should have anything to do with instilling it and instead are too quick to defer to traditional family structures. Yet by relying on marriage as a panacea, they insult the huge proportion of families that might not look like theirs, and worse, they imply that kids can only succeed in a heterosexual, married, two-parent household – and that kids of single parents are doomed.

Given these political risks and pressures, it seems unlikely that either party alone will make it a major priority to figure out how the government can more effectively encourage and reward grit and a growth mindset. Policymakers from both parties should therefore join forces and step into the fray together – bringing their respective strengths together to form a coalition of leaders who are committed to using every lever at our disposal to ensure that kids who are born at the bottom of the income ladder aren’t destined to remain there.

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