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Brent D. Oja

Louisiana State University, boja@lsu.edu

Samantha L. Jordan

University of North Texas

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What Happens When Grit Goes Bad?

Conceptualizing “Dark” Grit Among Sport Employees

Brent D. Oja,

Louisiana State University

Samantha L. Jordan

University of North Texas

Please send correspondence to Brent Oja, boja@lsu.edu.

Abstract

This paper details the complexities of the construct known as “grit” and specifically examines the potential for the positive effects of grit to turn maladaptive or “dark.” Although grit is commonly viewed as a generative construct that helps individuals achieve success and experience well-being, past scholars have suggested there could be a “too much of a good thing” effect whereby the helpful outcomes of grit reach a turning point and become detrimental. We propose that the sport industry is an ideal environment for this phenomenon to occur because the industry has high labor demands, and its employees have a strong passion for sport. When sport employees over engage with their work, they are disposed to the negative outcomes of dark grit, which we propose as burnout and turnover. The paper concludes with an overview of the possible future directions for the study of dark grit among sport employees.

Keywords: passion, human resource management, organizational behavior, workplace dynamics

What Is Grit?

The study of passion among sport employees has seen a significant increase in attention, but there remains much to unpack about the psychological complexities of passion. One element of passion that is only beginning to receive scholarly interest among sport scholars is that of grit (Kim et al., 2023). Despite being colloquially referred to as an indicator of toughness or determination, grit is a psychological construct that is steeped in motivation literature and pertinently relies upon passion to explain its potency in impacting individuals' drive to realize their full potential. Duckworth (2016) popularized grit by introducing it as representing consistency of effort in taking on challenges with the intention of achieving goals, all while displaying continuous effort and interest despite obstacles. Other interpretations of grit have defined the construct as a combination of one's passion, goal achievement, and perseverance, but more recent work has challenged this conceptualization of grit by arguing that perseverance should be an outcome of grit rather than part of the variable itself (Jordan et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2023). Instead, grit can be viewed as a combination of one's goal pursuits and their purpose (i.e., purpose reflects passion; Jordan et al., 2019). This is a powerful combination as having goals that are deeply intertwined with one's passion or purpose (i.e., grit) provides individuals with the determination to march on toward their goals even when difficult challenges and setbacks arise.

Passion is a critical component of grit as it demonstrates how grit is different from, for example, resilience. Whereas one can demonstrate resilience with continued effort, grit's passion element informs that gritty individuals may be more successful because they put in more effort as they are participating in meaningful activities (Jordan et al., 2019). Further, scholars have described grit's passion feature as symbolic of one's purpose and their desire to reach their full potential. As such, grit and passion are well positioned to help individuals achieve self-actualization and experience well-being (Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). As we engage in activities that we are passionate about, we are better situated to connect with our authentic selves and find meaning in our lives. This positions grit as a generative construct that helps individuals experience well-being and the enrichment that comes from human development (Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that grit has been linked with outcomes such as perseverance, performance, and psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2023). Yet, scholars have yet to fully understand how grit is experienced by individuals, such as the possibility of negative consequences.

"Too Much of a Good Thing"

The idea that grit could lead to detrimental outcomes despite its positive qualities is grounded in the belief that positive constructs have an inflection point where their effects turn negative. For example, it has been posed that the positive influence of grit has a peak and then descends to a point where outcomes of grit turn negative (Jordan et al., 2019). Importantly, the phenomenon of a generative construct transforming into a condition that induces negative outcomes is thought to predominantly occur at extreme levels (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). We propose that grit could be "too much of a good thing" by representing a construct that is susceptible to extremes and a possible driver of negative consequences.

From a practical standpoint, grittiness helps an individual pursue their purpose-driven goals despite experiencing setbacks and failure. When adverse outcomes arise, gritty individuals will find a way to persist in their quest to achieve their goals that are deeply engrained with their purpose. However, it is this

tenacity that marks the potential for danger. Those with high levels of grit may find it difficult to disengage with an activity that they are passionate about. Indeed, this is similar to Vallerand et al.'s (2003) conceptualization of obsessive passion whereby an individual gathers so much enjoyment from participating in a given activity that they are unable to disengage. Beyond enjoying the activity, gritty individuals may not know when to quit. When an individual persistently pursues their goals that have become nearly (or completely) unattainable and refuses to accept failure, this could be viewed as virtuous. However, it is critical to recognize that there remains the possibility of a maladaptive component to this experience. Persistence in achieving the unachievable could lead to a controlled condition whereby individuals are unable to reposition their efforts to areas that are both meaningful and attainable. In this way, gritty individuals are at risk for overengagement with their purpose-driven goals.

The consequences of an inability to recognize what is unattainable and stubbornly pursue goals despite no plausible path forward are serious. For one, a prioritization of purpose-driven goals comes at a cost to individuals' other responsibilities and interests. Although it is commendable to pursue meaningful goals, overprioritizing unattainable goals could negatively impact an individual's ability to function at other aspects of their work or family responsibilities. This is particularly relevant in the sport industry where sport employees are driven to work in the industry because of the connection they feel with sport and competition (Oja et al., 2023), and the demands of the industry encourage sport employees to utilize their passion for sport to work long and challenging hours. This positions sport employees as susceptible to the potential negative ramifications of grit.

Defining Dark Grit

Our conceptualization of a maladaptive or "dark" grit is based on the premise that grit has the potential to become a degenerative construct in extreme conditions. We propose that grit's positive effects can be reversed when there is extreme engagement with purpose-driven goals. This is likely to occur when (a) the organizational environment permits or promotes conditions that enable extreme engagement with one's purpose driven goals, and (b) when an individual reaches a controlled condition whereby the temptation to engage in purpose-driven goal pursuits are too enticing and thus goal attainment is prioritized over other life and work priorities. The condition of dark grit is thought to lead to negative individual and organizational outcomes. Hence, we define dark grit as a controlled condition where individuals continuously prioritize activities that are associated with their pursuit of their purpose-driven goals.

Outcomes of Dark Grit in the Sport Industry

The outcomes of dark grit are multifaceted as they could impact both sport employees and organizations. From an individual perspective, these outcomes are proposed to include both psychological and physiological impacts. From a psychological perspective, overengagement with work activities could set off a chain reaction whereby dark grit leads to burnout and then ultimately to sport employees leaving their organization or the industry altogether. Considering that sport employees have described an intense passion for their jobs (Kim et al., 2023) and the high labor demands of the sport industry, it seems that working in sport is a ripe environment for dark grit. Sport employees that are highly attuned to their careers and strongly identify with their job in sports derive great meaning from their work (Oja et al., 2023),

which is the source of their passion/purpose. As sport employees engage with their intense passion for working in sport, they may begin to overprioritize their work to achieve their purposeful work-related goals. As those work-related goals gain salience over other priorities, the logical immediate outcomes would include more hours spent at work as well as hours spent thinking about the job while away from the office. As these hours of engagement with one's purpose accumulate, one becomes predisposed to burnout, which is a form of psychological stress. Passion, mostly when it turns obsessive, has been linked with burnout (Curran et al., 2015). If sport employees overengage with their passion for working in sport to pursue their purpose-driven goals by working excessive hours, their enjoyment from task engagement could eventually lead to burnout as the engagement becomes compulsive and habitual to the point that burnout gains saliency over their passion. Once sport employees have reached a prolonged burnout stage, the combination of the demands of the sport industry and compulsive task engagement would likely lead to a decision to leave the specific organization or the industry.

Another consideration for sport employees who experience dark grit is that of physiological outcomes. As sport employees spend more time at work pursuing their purpose driven goals, they are likely to increase their exposure to adverse health outcomes. One clear example is the loss of sleep as the more hours one spends at work, as well as time spent thinking about work when away from the office, would mean less opportunity for sleep. A lack of sleep is a serious health risk for a multitude of reasons, but its association with cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a prominent risk factor. Further compounding the risk of CVD for sport employees experiencing dark grit and spending more time at work is the potential ramifications of occupational physical activity. Sport employees are not confined to desk work and instead are tasked with attending practices and competitions, as well as other events, all of which include extended time on one's feet. Prolonged standing time poses significant CVD risk (Quinn et al., 2022); therefore, sport employees experiencing dark grit could be predisposed to CVD risk because of a lack of sleep and extended time on their feet as they tend to the needs of sport teams.

From an organizational standpoint, those sport organizations that enable or even support dark grit among their employees are also likely to realize negative outcomes. Although there could be short-term gains for sport organizations due to additional employee work efforts and productivity, this is not likely to be sustainable because of the burnout and turnover issues detailed above. The more likely outcome is that sport organizations will be stuck in a detrimental cycle of hiring and replacing employees, which is costly and decreases organizational efficiency. Altogether, the outcomes of dark grit are predominantly negative and have limited, short-term positive impacts.

Implications for the Sport Industry

The sport industry's high labor demands are satisfied, in part, because employees are permitted to engage with their passion for sport and competition (Oja et al., 2023). These circumstances create an ideal environment for grit to prosper, but perhaps to a degree that becomes detrimental (i.e., dark grit). If one's dark grit goes unchecked there is a distinct possibility that both the sport employee and organization will be worse off. Asking or implying that sport employees need to prioritize their job over other personal priorities (Oja et al., 2024) is not a sound long-term strategy. Although a short-term prioritization of work is common in many industries, asking a sport employee for a continued prioritizing of their jobs is likely not

sustainable. Upholding institutional norms that set unrealistic standards and demands for sport employees essentially necessitates some degree of dark grit among employees. One would need a nearly unwavering passion for working in sport to be able to consistently work 80 hours a week (Oja et al., 2023). Conversely, those sport leaders who want to “play the long game” and strategize to retain their workforce and promote continuity might consider enforcing policies that limits their employees’ task engagement or time at work to preserve a healthy passion for their work.

A Call for Future Studies

We have proposed the existence of a maladaptive form of grit, known as dark grit, that could be pervasive in the sport industry because of the conditions that exist in many sport organizations. As such, it is critical for scholars to continue to unpack the intricacies of passion and grit among sport employees. One important first step is to develop a measure of grit specific to the sport workplace, as doing so would allow researchers to identify those with a darker form of grit. It would also be valuable to expand on the work of Kim et al. (2023), who proposed several outcomes of grit and examine when grit turns dark. From there, scholars can begin to determine the psychological impacts of dark grit and its impact on burnout and how the relationships between dark grit, burnout, and turnover interact. One area that has not seen significant attention in sport is the physiological impacts of working in sport (e.g., CVD risk), and studying dark grit offers a unique opportunity to explore these critical ramifications and offer recommendations to preserve and support the physical health of sport employees. Last, studying dark grit can illuminate flawed institutional structural elements of sport organizations that encourage sport employees to prioritize their work at obsessive and even unhealthy levels. A reconceptualization of job designs within sport organizations would be better informed with a greater understanding of what degree sport employees are engaging with their passion for working in sport. This would allow for adjustments to policies that would help sport employees restrain their strong passion for working in sport and instead maintain a healthy level of passion for their jobs and enhance their well-being.

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