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## Grittier Chinese adolescents are happier: The mediating role of mindfulness

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### ABSTRACT

A few recent studies indicate that grit, the perseverance and passion for long-term goals, has a positive association with subjective well-being. However, less is known about the psychological mechanisms underlying this association. Here, we tested the role of mindfulness in mediating this association in Chinese adolescents who attended high schools. In Study 1 (N = 1262), we first verified the association between the grit and subjective well-being, given that this association has not been reported in the Chinese population. Consistent with the previous literature, higher levels of grit were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, more positive affect, and less negative affect. In Study 2 (N = 627), we replicated the association between grit and subjective well-being. More importantly, mediation analyses demonstrated that the association was partly mediated by mindfulness. Together, our findings suggest that the grit may help boost adolescents' subjective well-being through their mindful mind in pursuing their long-term goals.

### 1. Introduction

The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.  
One must imagine Sisyphus happy.  
The Myth of Sisyphus, by Albert Camus (1942).

Happiness, often referred to as subjective well-being in academic psychology (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003), is essential for good individual lives and a good society. Therefore, exploring the predictors of subjective well-being is one of the most important missions of psychological science. During recent decades, investigations have established numerous predictors of subjective well-being, such as economic (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2013), cultural (Steel, Taras, Uggerslev, & Bosco, *in press*) and personality factors (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). A few empirical studies have recently suggested that a newly explored personality trait, grit, is associated with individuals' subjective well-being (Datu, Valdez, & King, 2016; Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016; Singh & Jha, 2008; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). Grit refers to trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), and it reliably predicts success in various domains (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009; Reed, Pritschet, & Cutton, 2013; Strayhorn, 2014).

Moreover, Duckworth and her colleagues proposed that grit is distinct from several related personality traits, including conscientiousness, need for achievement and self-control (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Gross, 2014). In particular, grit involves the ability to maintain both effort and passion in achieving long-term goals lasting months or even years, whereas the other traits mentioned above do not necessarily involve such goals.

Thus far, a few cross-sectional data have suggested that grit is beneficial to different aspects of subjective well-being among adolescents and adults. First, grittier individuals from India, Sweden, and the Philippines have had better evaluations of life satisfaction (Datu et al., 2016; Singh & Jha, 2008; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). Second, grittier individuals from India, North America, and the Philippines have more positive affect and less negative affect (Datu et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2016; Singh & Jha, 2008). However, less is known about the psychological mechanisms of the beneficial effects of grit on subjective well-being. Although not formally tested by empirical research, one apparent factor in this association is the *outcome* of pursuing long-term goals – success. In other words, grittier individuals have a better chance of fulfilling their goals (Duckworth et al., 2007), and that successful feeling may lead to enhanced subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

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Another explanation for the association between grit and subjective well-being lies in the *process* of pursuing long-term goals. This hypothesis could be illustrated by the famous story of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, a figure from Greek mythology, was condemned to repeat the same endless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll down again and again. A common opinion is that the story of Sisyphus was as a tragedy, but the French philosopher Albert Camus concluded that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” because “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart” (*The story of Sisyphus*). Therefore, grittier individuals may be happier because they have better mental states (e.g., filling their hearts) in the process of pursuing long-term goals. Here, we propose a candidate mediator underlying the association between grit and subjective well-being – mindfulness. Mindfulness is most commonly defined as “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” (Brown & Ryan, 2003). A mindful mind always focuses on the ongoing task. This mental state is similar to Sisyphus's situation – pushing the boulder itself could fill one's heart. Therefore, we argue that gritty people are happier partly because they are more likely to have a mindful mind.

No empirical research has directly tested this proposed mediating model that describes the relationship between grit, mindfulness, and subjective well-being. However, the previous literature provides evidence concerning the correlational (and possible causal) relationships among all three variables in this model. First, as we noted previously, grit and subjective well-being are positively correlated. Second, mindfulness and subjective well-being are positively correlated, and training and experience sampling data suggest that mindfulness could causally influence one's subjective well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Third, although the research on grit and mindfulness is rather scarce, a recent study demonstrated that grit is positively correlated with both questionnaire and everyday life measures of mindfulness in three cross-sectional samples of North American adults (Ralph, Wammes, Barr, & Smilek, 2017). One possible explanation for this association is that grittier individuals are more goal-orientated and hard-working (Duckworth et al., 2007), and pursuing goals in the present moment makes them ignore noise from thinking about the past and future. Together, the above empirical data about the relationship between grit, mindfulness, and subjective well-being provides the necessary premises for testing the proposed mediation model.

In the present study, we conducted two studies specifically to explore the mediating role of mindfulness in the association between grit and subjective well-being in two cohorts of Chinese adolescents attending high schools. In Study 1 ( $N = 1262$ ), we first verified the association between grit and subjective well-being, including life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect, in the Chinese population. In Study 2 ( $N = 627$ ), we replicated the results in Study 1 and tested the proposed mediation model on an independent sample.

## 2. Study 1

The main goal of Study 1 was to perform an initial test of the hypothesis that grit is associated with subjective well-being. Moreover, we examined the unique contribution of grit by controlling for two possible confounding third variables, i.e., self-control and Big Five conscientiousness, which have been shown to be simultaneously correlated with grit and subjective well-being (Duckworth et al., 2007; Li et al., in press; Li, Wang, Zhao, Kong, & Li, 2017; Li, Zhao, Lin, Chen, & Wang, 2018).

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

The participants consisted of 1262 10th-grade students who were recruited from several local public high schools in Chengdu, China. The mean age of the participants was 15.73 years ( $SD = 0.50$ ); 58.5% of the

participants were female. All students were native Mandarin Chinese speakers and completed a multi-section questionnaire survey online via a Chinese survey website (<http://www.sojump.com>). Previous studies have shown that the online data collection is efficient, reliable and valid (Meyerson & Tryon, 2003).

#### 2.1.2. Measures

**2.1.2.1. Short Grit Scale (Grit-S).** We administered the 8-item Grit-S to assess students' grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). The Grit-S includes two factors (i.e., consistency of interest and perseverance of effort), which further load on a second-order latent factor (i.e., grit). It includes items such as, “New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones” and “Setbacks don't discourage me”. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). The Chinese version of the Grit-S shows adequate internal reliability, test-retest reliability and criterion-related validity with respect to conscientiousness, self-control, and academic performance among Chinese adolescents (Li et al., in press; Wang et al., 2017). In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s for Grit-S total scale, the consistency of the interest factor, and the perseverance of the effort factor were 0.76, 0.75, and 0.70, exhibiting acceptable internal reliability. Subsequently, we used only the total score of the Grit-S to index grit for two major reasons. First, the total score of the Grit-S scale reflects a more comprehensive measure of grit (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Second, similar to some previous studies (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), neither factor of grit was consistently more predictive of outcomes than the other in subsequent analyses of our datasets.

**2.1.2.2. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS).** Cognitive subjective well-being was measured using the SWLS, which contains only one dimension (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The scale includes 5 items, such as “I am satisfied with my life” and “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal”. Participants are instructed to indicate their degree of agreement on each item, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The SWLS has been commonly used among Chinese adolescent students (e.g., Kong & You, 2013; Sun & Shek, 2010). In this study, the SWLS exhibited adequate internal reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

**2.1.2.3. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS).** Affective subjective well-being was measured using the PANAS, which is a popular and sound tool for general affects (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). This scale contains 20 emotion words with 10 items for positive affect (e.g., “inspired”) and 10 items for negative affect (e.g., “scared”). Participants are required to rate how often they have felt specific affections during the past month with each item rating from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The scores for positive affect and negative affect were calculated separately, with higher scores suggesting higher levels of the corresponding affection. The Chinese version of the PANAS reveals adequate psychometric properties among different Chinese populations (e.g., Kong, Hu, Wang, Song, & Liu, 2015; Li et al., 2017). In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s for positive affect and negative affect were 0.91 and 0.89, respectively, suggesting satisfactory internal reliability.

**2.1.2.4. Brief Self-Control Scale (SCS).** To assess self-control, we employed the 13-item SCS, which contains only one dimension (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Participants respond to each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). Example items include “I am good at resisting temptation” and “I have trouble concentrating”. Previous evidence has revealed that the SCS shows satisfactory reliability and validity among adolescents (Frijns, Finkenauer, Vermulst, & Engels, 2005). The Chinese version of the SCS has been established by using a translation and back-translation process and was used in a prior study (Li et al., in press). In

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