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Opinion

What Does It Take to Climb Up the Ladder?



By Thomas B. Edsall

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Credit: Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

What drives success? Cognitive skills are important, but so are harder-to-measure strengths that fall under the heading of what is sometimes called character.

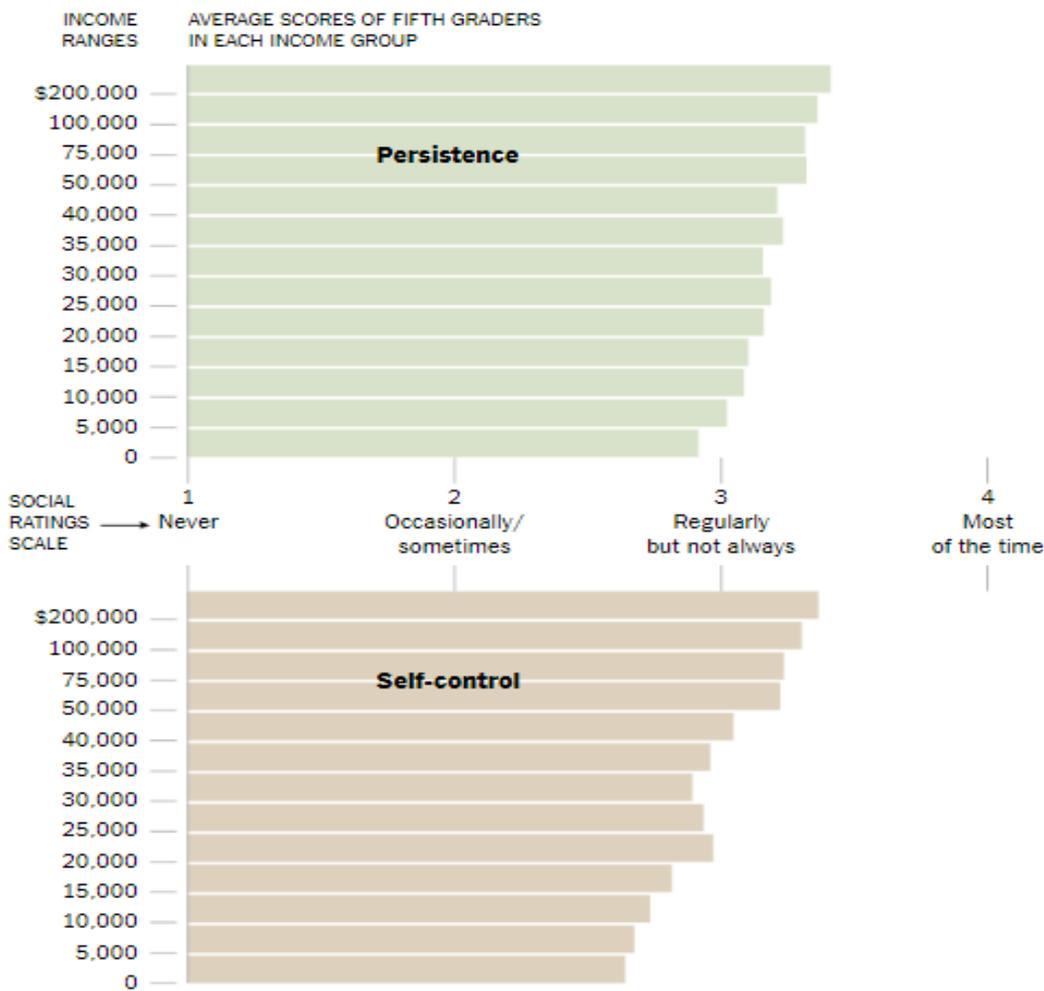
[Richard V. Reeves](#), of the Brookings Institution, has been doing research on the persistence of social and economic disadvantage for a long time. He often directs his attention to noncognitive skills.

In a 2014 paper, “[The Character Factor: Measures and Impact of Drive and Prudence](#),” Reeves and two co-authors, Kimberly Howard and Joanna Venator, focus on what they call “performance character strengths” and the crucial role played by noncognitive skills in educational attainment, employment and earned income. These character strengths — “perseverance, industriousness, grit, resilience, curiosity, application” and “self-control, future orientation, self-discipline, impulse control, delay of gratification” — make significant contributions to success in adulthood and upward mobility.

As the accompanying chart demonstrates, upper-income kids perform well on tests of noncognitive skills, but there are substantial numbers of low-income children who do well also.

The Influence of Family Money

Research has found a positive relationship between non-cognitive skills in fifth-grade students and their families' income.



Sources: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study — Kindergarten Cohort; Jason M. Fletcher, University of Wisconsin

By The New York Times

“There is a long research literature on the importance of self-control, or the ability to defer gratification — a close corollary of our conceptualization of the character strength of prudence,” Reeves and his two colleagues write.

A study of participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1979, Reeves reports, found that those

who were identified as impatient or restless during their interview were found to be 55 percent more likely to drop out of high school than those who were not judged by the interviewer as impatient or restless. They also earned 13 percent less by middle age, on average.

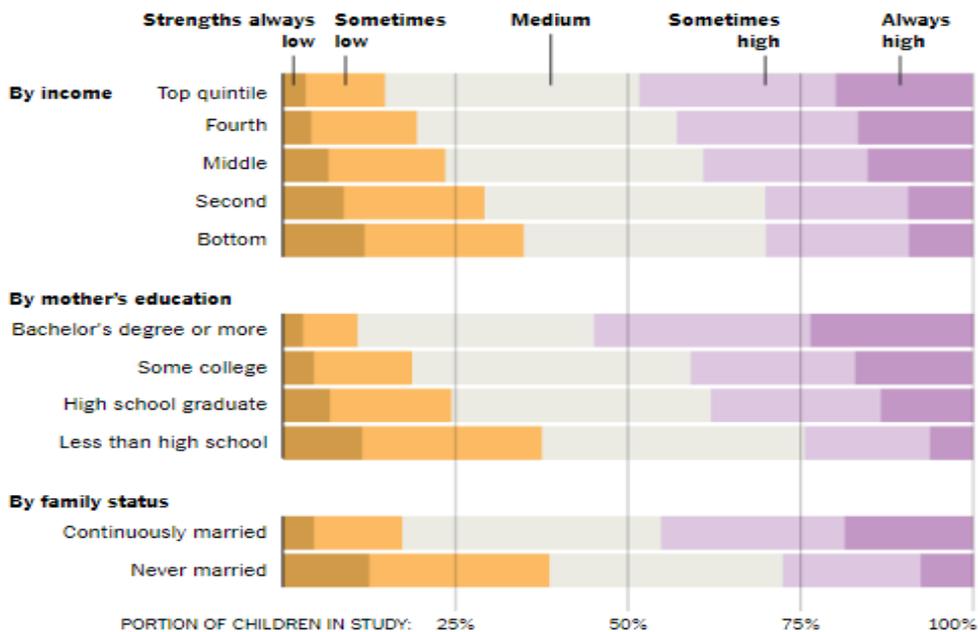
A lot of different measures have been used in other studies to assess self-control, according to [research by Angela Duckworth](#) of the University of Pennsylvania:

refraining from pushing a button when a non-target stimulus appears on a computer screen, matching two geometric patterns from a selection of highly similar patterns, choosing between \$1 today and \$2 one week later, and refraining from immediately eating a single marshmallow in order to obtain two marshmallows later.

Reeves found noncognitive skill levels rose significantly not only as family income grew but also as the mother’s education level rose. In addition, children in continuously married two-parent families did better than children with single parents.

Measuring ‘Character Strengths’

Demographic influences on children.



Source: Brookings

By The New York Times

Attempts to develop [educational strategies](#) to promote the development of noncognitive skills are still in the beginning stages. Many experiments are being conducted in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods where the challenges in developing noncognitive skills have been most acute.

James Heckman, a Nobel laureate and economist at the University of Chicago, is an expert in the assessment of the economic utility of noncognitive skills.

In a 2011 paper, "[The American Family in Black and White](#)," Heckman argues that a key factor in determining a child's future prospects is whether he or she grows up in a one- or two-parent family, a gap that has become apparent "between the environments of children of more educated women and the environments of children of less educated women."

Fewer than 10 percent of women with college degrees in 2011 bore children outside of marriage, Heckman writes. They

marry later and marry more educated men. They work more. They have more resources, have fewer children, and provide much richer child rearing environments that produce dramatic differences in a child's vocabulary, intellectual performance, nurturance, and discipline. These advantages are especially pronounced for children of two-parent stable marriages. Children of such marriages appear to be at a major advantage compared to children from other unions.

In contrast, disadvantaged mothers, especially single mothers, are compromised by lack of time, money, emotional support and experience in deploying best practice parenting skills. Heckman reports that these mothers

talk less to their children and are less likely to read to them daily. Exposure to this type of parenting leads to substantial differences in the verbal skills of disadvantaged children when they start school. Disadvantaged mothers encourage their children less and tend to adopt harsher parenting styles. Disadvantaged parents tend to be less engaged with their children's school work. The environments provided by teenage mothers are particularly adverse. Fetal alcohol ingestion alone, which is more frequent with teenage and less educated mothers, appears to have substantial deleterious consequences on adult outcomes.

In a 2014 collection, "[Essays on Character and Opportunity](#)," Heckman, argues that the early years are crucial:

Humans are most malleable, flexible and able to learn and be imprinted by parents and culture during their first years of life.

The rewards of successful interventions with young children go beyond immediate results, according to Heckman. "Skills beget skills," he writes, pointing out that

investments today increase the stock of future skills, which in turn increases the return to future investments — a phenomenon known as dynamic complementarity.

Paul Tough, a writer heavily influenced by Heckman's work, noted last year in an essay in the Atlantic, "[How Kids Learn Resilience](#)," that research reveals that "students will be more likely to

display these positive academic habits when they are in an environment where they feel a sense of belonging, independence, and growth” and where they “experience relatedness, autonomy, and competence.”

This kind of environment is difficult to replicate in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Instead, Tough writes, many of the kids brought up in these desolate areas have developed “a hyperactive fight-or-flight mechanism,” which conveys the warning

at car-alarm volume: I don’t belong here. This is enemy territory. Everyone in this school is out to get me. Add to this the fact that many children raised in adversity, by the time they get to middle or high school, are significantly behind their peers academically and disproportionately likely to have a history of confrontations with school administrators.

The result is a vicious circle: family disruption perpetuates disadvantage by creating barriers to the development of cognitive and noncognitive skills, which in turn sharply reduces access to college. The lack of higher education decreases life chances, including the likelihood of achieving adequate material resources and a stable family structure for the next generation.

There is substantial data describing this vicious circle.

A 2013 [Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis](#) of marital status for men and women at the age of 46 found that the divorce rate for those with only a high school diploma, 49 percent, is twice that of college graduates, 23.7 percent. The less well educated marry younger, 24.8 years, than college grads, 27.2 years.

An even sharper split has developed in recent years in terms of marriage rates and the proportion of nonmarital births — a topic I approached last week in the context of [problems specific to men](#). A 2016 study published by the National Institutes of Health, “[Diverging Patterns in Marriage, Cohabitation, and Childbearing](#),” shows that the problem crosses gender boundaries. The N.I.H. study found that in 1950, there was very little difference between the family arrangements of high school and college graduates, aged 30 to 44: 70 percent of the women with college degrees were married, as were 80 percent of those with high school degrees. By 2010, marriage rates had fallen down to 56 percent for those who had no more than high school degrees, but dropped by only one percentage point among college graduates.

The biggest differences by mother’s level of educational attainment were in nonmarital births, which were scarce in 1950, but [began to rise as marriage rates fell](#). By 1980 the nonmarital birthrate for college-educated women was 5 percent; it grew to 11 percent in 2013. For women with high school diplomas, it grew from 24 percent in 1980 to 58 percent in 2013.

Looked at from a different angle, in 1980 women with high school degrees were 19 points more likely to have a nonmarital birth than a college-educated women; by 2013, they were 47 points more likely.

The authors of the “Diverging Patterns” paper — [Shelly Lundberg](#) and [Jenna Stearns](#) of the University of California-Santa Barbara, and [Robert A. Pollak](#) of Washington University in St. Louis — make the case that

there are good reasons to think that children are key to the socioeconomic differences in marriage behavior.

For college graduates, they argue, “marriage has become the commitment device that supports intensive joint investments in children,” a cooperative “joint project of raising economically successful children.” In contrast, they write,

the expected returns to child investments by parents with limited resources and uncertain futures may be lower than for more educated parents with greater and more secure investment capabilities.

What is to be made of all these findings?

First, the spectrum of noncognitive skills and character strengths are a major factor in American class stratification. Whether these factors are more or less important than extrinsic forces like globalization, automation and declining unionization remains unclear, but changing family structures are evidently leaving millions of men and women ill-equipped to ascend the socioeconomic ladder.

Second, neither religious leaders nor practicing politicians nor government employees have found the levers that actually make disadvantaged families more durable or functional. As a corollary, the failure of government efforts to affect or slow down negative developments has left an opening for conservatives to argue that government interventions make things worse.

For liberals and the Democratic Party, the continued failure of government initiatives to achieve measurable gains in the acquisition of valuable noncognitive skills by disadvantaged youngsters constitutes a major liability.

This liability played a role in the outcome of the 2016 election. Throughout the campaign, President Trump [repeated](#) comments like this one:

The Democratic Party has run nearly every inner city for 50 years, 60 years, 70 years, and even more than 100 years they have produced only poverty, failing schools, and broken homes.

This and related charges will continue to dog Democratic candidates in 2018 and 2020 unless progressive policy advocates can find ways to more effectively highlight and capitalize on the ample supply of character strengths evident everywhere among America’s poor. This is extraordinarily important.

Advocates for the disadvantaged must also highlight and capitalize on the many demonstrably effective antipoverty solutions already well known to the academic, research and nonprofit communities. Without better funded and better crafted organization and advocacy on behalf of the poor, the propaganda and accusations now emanating from the right will ineluctably reshape the law of the land — and once institutionalized, such “remedies” could prove staggeringly difficult to reverse.

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