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PERSEVERANCE DESPITE THE PERCEPTION OF THREAT AND MARGINALIZATION: STUDENTS' HIGH GRIT IN GRAD SCHOOL AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This paper illustrates the relationship between graduate students' social identities and their ability to persevere in an academically rigorous graduate setting. Through our analysis we show that while many students experience marginalization and threats to their identity, they display no less grit than those who do not experience marginalization and threats to their identity.
Background	There are contentious debates in higher education about the role that universities should play in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion principles. Existing arguments rarely consider students' social identity in conjunction with their academic mindsets and ability to succeed in the graduate school environment, but instead make assumptions of who students are and of what they are capable.
Methodology	Survey methods and quantitative analyses, including regression and ANOVA testing.

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Contribution	While demonstrating that students who experience marginalization and social identity threat display no less grit than their counterparts, we claim that all students would still desire to live and work in a society in which their social identities are respected and honored.
Findings	Many students, even those successfully navigating graduate school, still identify as oppressed or marginalized, which is strongly related to certain social identities and to social identity threat. No demographic or oppression-based variable alone correlates negatively or positively with perseverance as tested by the grit scale we used.
Recommendations for Practitioners	We recommend that universities uphold a commitment to diversity and inclusion in order to create welcoming environments for all students to thrive.
Recommendations for Researchers	We recommend that researchers focus on the intersections of identity, perseverance, and policy to fully address the issues of marginalization and social identity threat at graduate school campuses.
Impact on Society	Our paper works to counter the often-negative perception of students who identify as marginalized and who demand more inclusive university environments.
Future Research	In future studies, it would be beneficial for the field to address other social identities and examine their perceptions of marginalization and inclusion and assess impacts on academic mindset.
Keywords	grit, social identity threat, marginalization

INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TOPIC

There is compelling evidence that student diversity in higher education is beneficial for learning outcomes and the overall climate for all students (Gruin et al., 2002; Jayakumar 2008). However, the extent to which universities are obligated to create campus environments and policies that support equity, diversity, and inclusion is emerging as a contentious issue. Often, the arguments for or against policies that seek to address Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) on college campuses are substantiated by using indicators of resilience and academic success to explain impacts on students. Our research over four years was straight forward and positioned to better understand the relationship between identity and perseverance. To do this, we surveyed graduate students who attend a competitive professional school, and we asked them to indicate whether they experience marginalization or threat due to their social identities. We also included items related to grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). We sought to understand whether grit, as defined in the literature, is different for those who experience social identity threat and marginalization and for those who do not.

On one side of this debate over diversity, there is concern that, in general, universities do not effectively create supportive and nurturing environments for students whose social identities – such as their race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation – are not in the majority. Educators are responding to research indicating that in schools where there is limited focus on ensuring equity and supportive inclusion for these students, such students are less likely to successfully integrate and thrive (Kundu, 2019; Harper & Quaye, 2015; D. A. Williams, 2013; D. A. Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). For example, in 2016, 370 administrators attended a conference of university Diversity Officers, who testified to the need for serious investment and positive returns in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work (Cholewa et al., 2014; Frum, 2016; Kuh et al., 2005). Over 90 of these universities already had Chief Diversity Officers on staff. Moreover, there seems to be some consensus that encouraging diversity in its many forms is not only the moral responsibility of universities, but also

necessary in the robust, competitive, and global world where graduates must function (Williams, 2013). In fact, schools are so committed to enhancing diversity that the Association of American Colleges and Universities endorses programs that promote “diversity and equity as fundamental goals of higher education and as resources for learning that are valuable for all students, vital to democracy and a democratic workforce and to the global position and wellbeing of the United States” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d., para 1).

Yet despite this push for EDI development, there are those who believe that excessively progressive policies might lead to *coddling* college students. This camp sometimes contends that providing things like safe spaces, personal pronoun days, and trigger warnings to protect against distress, undermine the very purpose of the higher education experience. They argue that overemphasizing EDI can lead to a sort of infantilizing of students, which also weakens necessary character traits that are conducive to obtaining goals and success, such as grit and resilience (Campbell & Manning, 2018; Jarvie, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Paresky, 2018; Robbins, 2016). Even without strong data-based footing for these arguments, there is a presumption among some academic researchers that students who demand more attention to EDI are similar to “snowflakes,” unable to take the rough-and-tumble of university and post-graduation life (Egginton, 2018; Kronman, 2019; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). In other words, if these students cannot handle the impassioned debate and discourse that characterizes the higher education experience, they remain “rigid, weak, and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to respond vigorously” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

The deeper questions around the values of diversity and inclusion, then, should be reflected somewhat in how people best navigate the society of which they are a part. This further heightens these disagreements and touches a sensitive nerve deep within the American body politic. Some claim that highlighting and being sensitive to each person’s unique identity may well undermine the social bonds that connect students to each other and to America (Egginton, 2018). As Kipnis (2015, para 34) notes, “what becomes of students so committed to their own vulnerability, conditioned to imagine they have no agency, and protected from unequal power arrangements...?” Others argue that, at the core of the American story as a democratic society, is the need to recognize and validate the range of identities that give meaning to the lives of its citizens (Lepore, 2018).

While the rhetoric of both of these perspectives continues to be heated, there has been little empirical evidence behind the general question of whether, in educational settings, there is a relationship between students who feel excluded because of their identities and their ability to persist. We wondered whether feeling like one literally exists on the “margins” may be detrimental to their motivation in higher education. Specifically, we wanted to see if a student’s perception of belonging to a marginalized group has any interaction with the important academic indicator of grit.

More recently, grit, or the “passion and perseverance for long term goals” (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007), has emerged as a quintessential behavioral characteristic indicative of a person’s proclivities for achievement and status attainment. Grit has been increasingly spotlighted as an observable trait that is predictive of positive life outcomes, including high academic and professional achievement for adults, as well as facilitative of one’s subjective well-being (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Duckworth et al., 2007, 2009; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Kwon, 2017). Our paper extends the idea of grit beyond goal achievement by examining how graduate students may experience the interaction of their own social identity with their ability to persevere in challenging contexts.

This study, then, seeks to better understand the interactions of social identity with a self-assessed experience of marginalization and social identity threat among graduate students. The concept of “social identity threat” has emerged from research in a variety of contexts to capture an overarching sense of diminished safety and even of menace that comes from being part of a marginalized or oppressed group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In this paper, we look at a wide range of demographic social identity categories as well as ask students about their sense of threat and marginalization. We compared the ways the experience of marginalization and social identity threat interact with grit among

those who do and do not experience those obstacles, where a successful academic outcome is completing a graduate school program with a master's degree from a competitive graduate school. Our sample population presents a unique set of strivers who have chosen to attend an elite graduate program of study in the field of public policy and administration. We will present findings on whether graduate students' experience of their own social identity, as marginalized or not, has any impact on their ability to persevere, in spite of various perceived institutional and interpersonal threats.

To address these specific voids in research, we designed a survey that examines the relationship between students' varied social identities, their experience of marginalization, and their grit scores (Duckworth, 2016; Kundu, 2017) as a clear and vetted indicator to gauge their persistence to strive toward academic goals. This research, then, is a direct contribution to establish whether these interactions exist among older students in their graduate experience, expanding discourse on grit as well as on higher education EDI policies.

To foreshadow our findings, results suggest that a significant percentage of the graduate student population in this study do perceive themselves as marginalized as a result of their social identities and also experience threats as a result of their social identities. At the same time, we found no difference between the grit scores of those who experience social identity threat and marginalization and those who do not. Through the ways in which we interpret this data, we hope to make a case that supports policies to promote and protect, as well as capitalize on, university goals of valuing diversity in a more supportive environment that does not demand overcoming social identity threats to produce successful performance outcomes from its students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Researchers and educators in the field have largely focused on the impact of self-perceived marginalization in a range of settings, from primary and secondary education to undergraduate college institutions, trying to understand the experience of marginalization and its impact. More recently, there has been an increased focus on grit and resilience as personal tools employed by young people to address a range of challenging situations they may routinely encounter over long-term periods of time. Our work adds to this discussion by surveying graduate students, an understudied population on these topics, in a professional school of public policy.

MARGINALIZATION AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THREAT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this paper, we focus on individual student perceptions of whether “marginalization” or “oppression” applies to them and their identity groups. Marginalized students are defined as identifying with at least one social identity group different from the dominant group in society. These identity groups could be based on class, race and/or ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, etc. (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Being marginalized typically means having less social capital than people in more dominant identity groups.

Marginalization and the perceived social identity threats that often accompany it continue to have potentially large and negative impacts in higher education. The vast majority of research on the effects of marginalization has focused on undergraduate outcomes. For example, close to 47 percent of first-generation college students from low-socioeconomic status households do not complete their degree requirements within six years of enrolling. Most drop out, while only 11 percent of them actually obtain a bachelor's degree, a figure nearly 40 percent lower than peers from wealthier backgrounds (The Pell Institute, 2011). Additionally, Latinx and African-American students continue to be the most representative members of low-income, first-generation students, often with access to less-rewarded forms of cultural capital and insufficient preparation for success in higher educational environments (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Saunders & Serna, 2004).

Graduate student populations and their experience of marginalization have historically been overlooked by researchers, (with some exceptions, e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2015). Yet their experiences are critical to understanding experiences of diminishment and oppression in higher education. Masters students identifying as marginalized may likely be a population that has persevered and succeeded despite ongoing micro- and macroaggressions throughout their educational trajectories. This perseverance could imply having the characteristic conceptualized as “grit” by researchers (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007). Exploring their experiences at university is a valuable step toward understanding larger dynamics of marginalization in higher education and the individual characteristics that help students survive and thrive.

Additionally, there is evidence that being marginalized by another person or group in power might have psychological impacts and cause emotional turmoil (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Experiencing marginalization might exclude an individual from meaningful participation in a society or group, while inclusion could well be an essential component to succeeding in the master’s program from which we sampled. The basic idea here is that one’s social identity can either denigrate or uplift their standing in a community. In other words, marginalized people “are not recognized, nor do they have voice. These effects translate into losing four fundamental needs: Belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence” (K. Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009). Research shows that for some, the impact of such a loss correlates with serious negative behaviors.

The experience of being marginalized can include being on the receiving end of negative and major overt acts of aggression, ranging from violence to explicit threats to outright denigration and slurs. But it can also include what are deemed by many researchers as microaggressions, which are more complex (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Microaggressions are experienced in more subtle ways and are prevalent in workplaces and university settings (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are not based on personality characteristics, but rather on identity and group membership (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Examples include asking a person of Chinese descent who was born in Seattle, “But where do you really come from?” or commenting to an African-American person how great it is that affirmative action brings in more African Americans to campus. As Chester Pierce notes, at least in academic settings, “one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism” (as cited in Solorzano, 2014). The experience of marginalization is often “characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of color, women, [and the LGBT community]” (Sue, 2010 cited by Granger, 2017, para. 4) even as the experience of marginalization invalidates the racial, gender, or sexual-orientation reality of these groups (Sue, 2010). Asking students to reflect on microaggressions as a way to understand marginalization and social identity threat is “[a]useful ‘tool’ for research on race, racism and the everyday experience of People of Color” (Huber & Solorzano, 2015).

These interpersonal experiences, whether macro- or microaggressions, can bring heavy mental tolls to those who experience them. In some contexts, “social identity threat” is used to describe an overarching sense of threat or even menace that accompanies the experience of being part of a marginalized or oppressed group. Steele and Aronson (1995) first developed the construct of “stereotype threat” 25 years ago in order to explain why African-American high school students with equal grade point averages and standardized test scores to white students underperformed compared with whites once they arrived at college. Since that seminal paper, hundreds of studies have shown that if people believe that their behavior could reinforce a negative stereotype of their group, they tend to perform less well — from women concerned about gender stereotypes related to chess to white men’s concerns that their basketball skills are inferior to those of African-American men (Maass et al., 2008; Stone et al., 1997). However, additional research has identified that a broader sense of threat is experienced by those with non-dominant identities, which came to be called social identity threat (Steele et al., 2002). As Grant and Brown (1995) explain, social identity threats can be “some action or communication that directly or indirectly seems to undermine the value of being a group member” and

“takes the form of an attack on central, shared in-group attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and group practices, rejecting and derogating their nature and importance.”

GRIT IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXTS

Earning educational credentials over the course of one’s life requires ample persistence. The study of persistence, stamina, and determination are prominent in the field of positive psychology, which is based around the study of human strengths. These studies have become increasingly popular in educational contexts (Ong et al., 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The rationale for this type of research, which pays attention to self-efficacy, confidence, hope, and resilience, is to discover where people have room for growth, as opposed to locating where they are deficient (Seligman, 2002). Grit, as applied here, is predictive of individuals’ ability to maintain focus on long-term goals and achieve them undeterred by whatever immediate setbacks may arise in the process. Through many studies, Duckworth (Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, Duckworth et al., 2009) has shown that grit can predict the success of students as well as the professional success of adults. Studies indicate that grit allows individuals from all backgrounds to put in tremendous amounts of deliberate effort and develop fixation toward their goals, despite whatever challenging obstacles may or may not be present (Lucas et al., 2015). Research in higher education settings demonstrates that, in college, grit is positively associated with a higher GPA, one’s sense of belonging, and overall satisfaction and subjective happiness in life (Bowman et al., 2015; K. Singh & Jha, 2008). Studies show that for African-American males in a predominantly white college grit is indicative of greater scholarly ambition (Strayhorn, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, we have a particular allegiance to those who claim that higher grit levels may develop in individuals more “planful competence,” or the ability to create a future plan and adhere to it (Clausen & Jones, 1998; Kwon, 2017). This seems to also define the qualities needed to successfully navigate graduate school, which requires juggling rigorous academics, group dynamics and projects, and finding time for critical self-reflection. However, most existing research that applies grit in postsecondary contexts appears to focus on understanding the psychological dispositions of undergraduate student populations. To the extent that grit does exist in these studies, higher grit levels have been useful to help medical students and other graduate students avoid experiencing burn-out and exhaustion from overwork (Salles et al., 2014). This leaves a paucity of research on how some graduate students experience social identity threats and marginalization during the course of their challenging educational endeavors.

There is also growing evidence that higher degrees of grit are positively correlated with an enduring general psychological well-being (Kwon, 2017; Salles et al., 2014; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2016). Some scholars postulate that perhaps this is because “grittier” individuals develop better coping mechanisms towards the adversities they face, or that they are more naturally able to consider that challenges are a necessary part of life (Meriac et al., 2015). Research on retention rates in higher education substantiates the need for students to be both persistent and capable of integrating into academic and social settings (Hartley, 2011; Kundu, 2019; Tinto, 1987). Perhaps these students are better able to constructively triumph in the face of adversity rather than see themselves as at the mercy of external circumstances.

METHODS

Our design was structured to address the pressing need for more new research that examines more thoroughly how motivation to succeed results from an interplay of factors related to individual-level characteristics, such as grit, but also factors related to one’s perceived identity and background. The point of research such as this is to foster more interdisciplinary dialogue that ultimately will benefit the experience of students and subsequently promote greater success and well-being.

ACADEMIC SETTING

Our four-year study took place at a private Northeastern university, in a public policy school that offers a comprehensive curriculum in public and nonprofit policy and management. Its student body ranges from 800-900 in any given year, with students from over forty-nine countries, although the significant majority are American citizens. Roughly two-thirds identify as women and one-third men (a small number identify as “other,” queer, or non-binary); see Table 1. Additionally, a little less than half of those surveyed (Table 1) identify as of European descent, roughly a quarter identify as Asian, and the rest identify with a range of racial and ethnic identities. Those who are American citizens overwhelmingly identify as liberal in their political preference, with a small number who choose conservative as their political ideology.

Table 1. Key Demographic Features from the Pre-Test Dataset

Category	N	% of Category	% Oppmarg*
Race and Ethnicity			
<i>African Descent</i>	85	85/885 (10%)	66/85 (78%)
<i>Hispanic or Latinx Descent</i>	89	89/885 (10%)	44/89 (49%)
<i>European Descent</i>	395	395/885 (45%)	118/395(30%)
<i>Asian Descent</i>	204	204/885 (23%)	47/204 (23%)
<i>Native American Descent</i>	1	1/885 (<1%)	0/1 (0%)
<i>Middle Eastern or North African Descent</i>	23	23/885 (3%)	15/23 (65%)
<i>Mixed Descent</i>	61	61/885 (7%)	34/61 (56%)
<i>Other</i>	27	27/885 (3%)	15/27 (56%)
Religion			
<i>Buddhist</i>	24	24/895 (3%)	6/24 (25%)
<i>Catholic</i>	140	140/895 (16%)	48/140 (34%)
<i>Evangelical Christian</i>	33	33/895 (4%)	20/33 (61%)
<i>Hindu</i>	34	34/895 (4%)	3/34 (9%)
<i>Jewish</i>	131	131/895 (15%)	58/131 (44%)
<i>Mainline Christian</i>	106	106/895 (12%)	49/106 (46%)
<i>Muslim</i>	38	38/895 (4%)	25/38 (66%)
<i>No religion</i>	327	327/895 (37%)	101/327 (31%)
<i>Other</i>	62	62/895 (7%)	29/62 (47%)

Category	N	% of Category	% Oppmarg*
Gender Identity			
<i>Male</i>	245	245/914 (27%)	92/245 (38%)
<i>Female</i>	661	661/914 (72%)	248/661 (38%)
<i>Trans Male/Trans Man</i>	2	2/914 (<1%)	½ (50%)
<i>Trans Female/Trans Woman</i>	0	n/a	n/a
<i>Genderqueer/Gender Non-Conforming</i>	2	2/914 (<1%)	2/2 (100%)
<i>Different Identity</i>	2	2/914 (<1%)	2/2 (100%)
<i>Not Sure</i>	2	2/914 (<1%)	2/2 (100%)
Sexual Orientation			
<i>Lesbian</i>	12	12/894 (1%)	11/12 (92%)
<i>Gay</i>	34	34/894 (4%)	25/34 (74%)
<i>Bisexual</i>	31	31/894 (4%)	16/31 (52%)
<i>Queer</i>	21	21/894 (2%)	19/21 (91%)
<i>Straight or Heterosexual</i>	780	780/894 (87%)	263/780 (34%)
<i>Pan Sexual</i>	2	2/894 (<1%)	0/2 (0%)
<i>Not Sure</i>	14	14/894 (2%)	1/14 (7%)
Family Educational Background			
<i>First-Generation College Degree</i>		133/733 (18%)	63/133 (47%)
<i>First-Generation Master's Degree</i>		483/734 (66%)	158/483 (33%)
National Identity			
<i>US Birth</i>	618	614/914 (67%)	274/618 (44%)

*Oppmarg indicates self-reported identification with an oppressed group

STUDENTS' FINAL PROJECT

As a part of their graduation requirements, all of those who participated in this study were required to participate in a final team project. This project is a yearlong team effort to provide consulting support to nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and other entities. Based on their program and specialization, teams are matched with relevant clients and faculty who oversee three to four teams at a time.

Due to the student body makeup, the teams are quite diverse, in terms of a variety of identity groups: race, sexual orientation, religion, gender, etc. The experience of social identities and the willingness and ability to address issues of diversity are part of the dynamic of the final project experience. Therefore, this population of students provides an excellent opportunity to study the interplay of social identity, marginalization, and grit.

THE SAMPLE

The sample included all students enrolled in their final project for the years 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19. The number of students enrolled per year, respectively, is 355, 317, 296, and 258, for a total of 1,226 potential participants. Surveys were administered in the fall, at the beginning of the academic year, and again in the spring, upon its conclusion. We asked extensive questions in the surveys about demographics, including social identity groups such as students' race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and generational status in attending college and graduate school.

The larger study was designed to investigate the workings of diversity, demography, and marginalization in a population of professional graduate students. It included a survey that all students completed at the beginning and the end of their Final Project experience.

CONSTRUCTS

Social identity threat

Social identity threat is a well-established construct in the psychology literature (Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is based on a person's sense that they "could be devalued because of their group memberships, such as ethnicity or gender" (Belmi et al., 2015, p. 467). It is well-established in research in organizations and work groups that some group members may feel a sense of threat based on their social identity groups (Foldy et al., 2009); further research indicates this can affect both their own performance and the outcomes of the unit group (Johnson & Avolio, 2019; Roberson & Kulik, 2007; B. Singh et al., 2013). The scale employed in the survey included two validated items that tested how a student feels their social identity is viewed in group settings: "I worry that people will draw conclusions about me based on stereotypes about my social identity groups" and "I often feel that people's evaluations of my performance are affected by my social identity groups." These data are drawn from the pre-surveys of all four years.

Self-reported identification with an oppressed group

(This is shown as our variable "oppmarg")

We also asked a second set of questions about the student's sense of marginalization: "Do you identify as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group?" Students were given two choices, yes or no. Those who responded yes, were grouped in the *oppmarg* variable, and were also provided with a text box in which to answer the question, "If so, which one(s)?" Table 2 provides an overview of the percentages of students in different social identity groups who answered yes to the first question. Note that students' responses in the textbox could differ from their self-categorizations in different groups. They could self-categorize as being of African descent but feel marginalized because of their status as a woman or LGBTQ. Based on the social identity groups chosen by those who self-identified as marginalized and in an oppressed group, those most indicated were African-American/African American and Latinx, LGBTQ, and women. While there was a large array of options, we chose to focus specifically on these four identity categories as most commonly referenced in other research on the experiences of marginalization and social identity threat. We hope to address other social identities in future studies. The self-reported identification with an oppressed group data was drawn from the pre-surveys of all years as well. It is also important to address in this section our decision to combine certain demographic categories in our analysis. Specifically, we combined Latinx and African Descent populations because these samples were too small individually (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Harper, 2012)

Table 2. Relation Among Key Demographics, Identification as a Member of an Oppressed Group, and Social Identity Threat Scale

Category	% <i>Oppmarg</i>	Result of ANOVA	Explanation of Results
Women (<i>n</i> = 661)	248/661 (38%)	$f = 26.84,$ $p < .0005^{**}$	Women have higher social identity threat on average ($M = 3.94, SD = .92$) than non-women, but the difference is not significant. The interaction with <i>Oppmarg</i> is significant, and the group with the highest social identity threat is marginalized-identifying non-women ($M = 3.32, SD = .99$).
African and Latinx (<i>n</i> = 174)	110 / 174 (63%)	$f = 27.99,$ $p < .0005^{**}$	People of African or Latinx descent have higher social identity threat on average ($M = 3.11, SD = 1.06$) than those of other descents. The interaction with <i>Oppmarg</i> is significant, and the group with the highest social identity threat is marginalized identifying people of African and Latinx descent ($M = 3.46, SD = .93$).
LGBTQ (<i>n</i> = 101)	74/101 (71%)	$f = 25.54,$ $p < .0005^{**}$	LGBTQ people have higher social identity threat on average ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.00$), than non-LGBTQ people, but the relationship is not significant. The interaction is not significant.

** Difference significant at the 0.01 level

Grit

A person's grit was measured through a grit scale survey (Duckworth et al., 2007), which is based on a self-report of scaled responses to statements. Respondents record how similar or different they see themselves to the statement at hand, such as, "Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily." After two years (and two rounds of data collection), we recognized the importance of "grit," which emerged as an important factor in responding to situations where students felt at risk or up against large challenges. Therefore, we included measures of grit in the last two rounds of data analysis. Specifically, we chose to administer the 2009 Grit-S Scale (the shortened and prevalently used short survey version) to our Year 3 and Year 4 cohorts, in order to have a scientifically vetted reference point for gauging graduate students' levels of persistence against self-reported marginalization. These questions were added to the surveys sent to students in the spring of the year they completed their student project experience.

RESULTS

The overall response rate for the surveys was 73%. This can be broken down into a 77.5% completion rate for the pre-surveys taken in the fall, and a 63% completion rate for the post surveys taken in the spring. Table 1 gives an overview of self-reported student demographics, including race and ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, first-generation college and first-generation master's degree status. As the table makes clear, the student population is quite diverse on a number of different identity measures.

Our data yielded two significant findings: (1) that many students, even those successfully navigating graduate school, still identify as oppressed or marginalized, which is strongly related to certain social identities and to social identity threat and (2) that no demographic or oppression-based variable alone correlates negatively or positively with perseverance as tested by the grit scale we used.

Our data give a great deal of clarity as to whether and how students identify as members of oppressed or marginalized groups. Across all demographic categories, 38% (349/917) of the students who were surveyed identify as members of an oppressed or marginalized group in the pre-surveys. Those numbers are consistent in the post-survey's dataset. Table 1 compares percent *Oppmarg* across several critical demographic social identities that are of interest to us and to the larger field of higher education regarding conversations about grit and social identity threat. When we look further at the relationship between certain demographic social identity groups with a minimum sample population, we learn about which students identify as marginalized.

These social identity groups come into particular focus in the relationship between identification as a member of an oppressed/marginalized group and their scores on the social identity threat scale. Social identity threat ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .95$) is measured on the fall surveys of our dataset ($N = 845$), where the number one signifies "Strongly Disagree" and five signifies "Strongly Agree" (See the appendix for scale items). An independent samples *t*-test was run to determine if there is a significant relation between *Oppmarg* and social identity threat ($t = -8.59$, $p < .0005$). On average, those who identify as members of an oppressed or marginalized group ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .94$) have significantly higher scores on social identity threat than those who do not identify as such ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .90$).

An additional two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was run to determine if this difference remained significant across specific groups of students who identify as marginalized. When looking further at additional social identity groups (see Table 2), we can add further nuance to the relationship between self-identification as a member of an oppressed group and the experience of social identity threat. When, for example, we look at gender, we find a significant interaction effect showing that gender and *Oppmarg* best predict for variation in social identity threat ($F = 4.81$, $p = .03$). We show that women have a higher social identity threat ($M = 2.94$) than those who do not identify as women ($M = 2.87$) on average, but that difference in and of itself is not significant. However, when controlling for identification as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group, we yield a significant result ($F = 26.84$, $p < .0005$). This demonstrates an interaction between identifying as a woman and also identifying as a member of a marginalized group. As we see in Table 2, those women who also identify as marginalized, on average, experience higher social identity threat than other women in these surveys. Men who identified as marginalized actually have higher social identity threat scores, on average than women in this dataset. Table 2 also compares the results for two more key demographic or social identity groups in our dataset: LGBTQ folks and those of African or Latinx descent.

Our second category of findings focuses on grit. Grit ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .58$) is measured on the dataset of two years of spring surveys ($N = 350$), and is measured on a scale with 8 items that has high internal reliability ($\alpha = .801$), where the number one signifies "not at all like me" and five signifies "very much like me" (See the appendix for a detailed list of items). An independent samples *t*-test was run to determine if there was any relation between identification as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group and grit. We found no significant difference in grit scores between those identified as marginalized and those who did not ($t = -1.51$, $p = .132$). In other words, we have a null finding: the grit scores for those who identified as marginalized ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .59$) and those who do not ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .53$) are not significantly different.

However, we can learn a bit about the relationship between *Oppmarg* and *grit* if we look at grit scores as dividing into three groups (high, medium, and low grit). Given that the mean score is 3.92 (1 = Not at All Like Me to 5 = Very Much Like Me) with a standard deviation of .58, those in group "low

grit” have scores 3.33 or lower, and those in group “high grit” have scores 4.50 or higher. The “medium” group contains all participants within one standard deviation of the mean.

Of those in the entire data set who identify as members of an oppressed or marginalized group, 20 (or 16%) are in the “low grit” group, 81 (67%) are in the “medium grit” group, and 22 (18%) are in the “high grit” group. Comparatively, in the group who does not identify as marginalized, 36 (19%) are in the “low grit” group, 129 (67%) are in the “medium grit” group, and 28 (15%) are in the “high grit” group. These group distributions are similar in size, though there are a few more marginalized-identifying students in the high grit group, proportionally, which based on our t-test, may be a negligible variation.

In addition to a lack of relationship between *Oppmarg* and *grit*, there is no demographic variable (including race, religion, gender, sexuality, country of birth, etc.) that can be remotely associated with significant differences in grit. Figure 1 displays identification as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group does not have any impact on the level of grit, irrespective of each particular demographic identity. (Although the statistics that follow reference the fall surveys dataset, the numbers are also consistent in the spring dataset.)

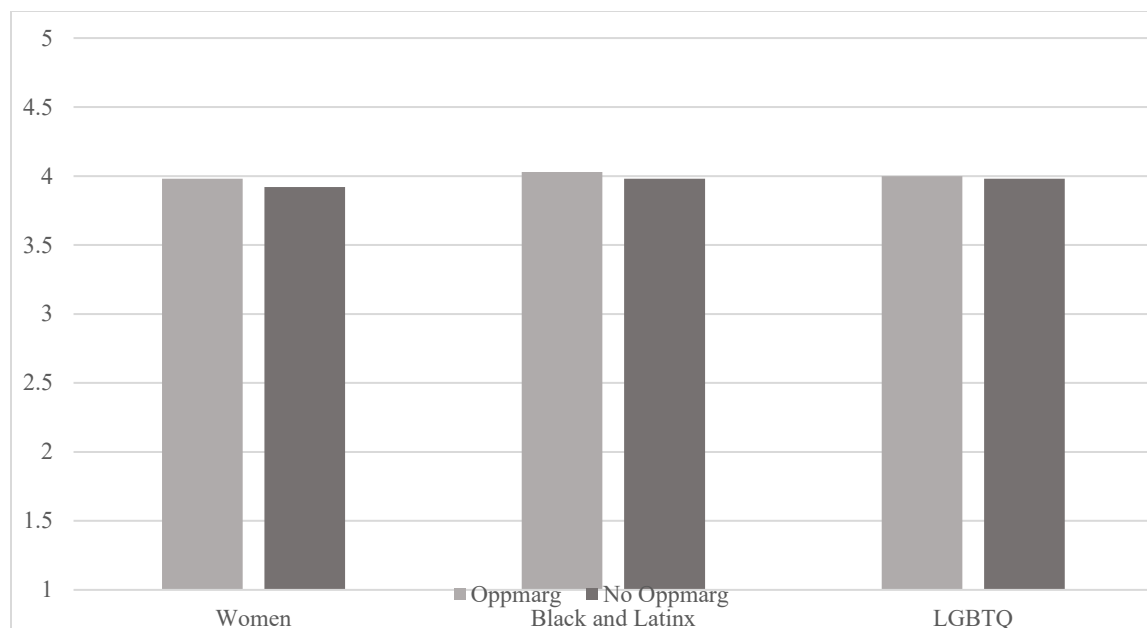
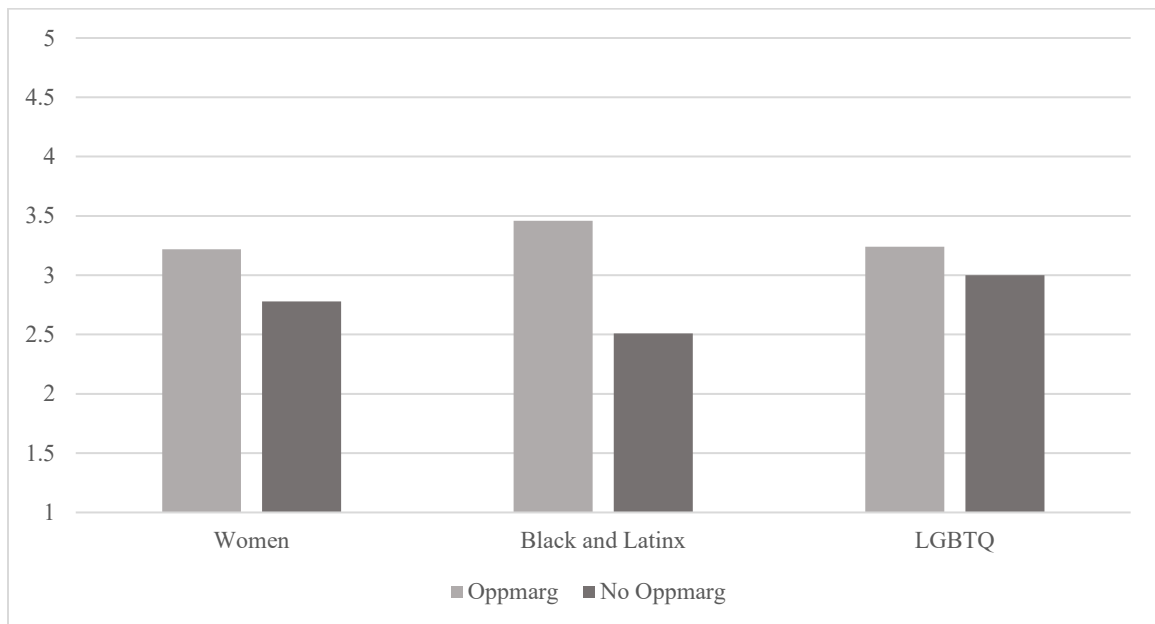


Figure 1. Average Grit Scores by Social Identities and Identification as Member of an Oppressed or Marginalized Group

Table 1 allows us to quickly see a range of demographic information linked to social identities, how many students identified in each category, the number and then the percent of those who chose that demographic social identity. For example, 85 students out of 885 identified as of African descent. Of those, 66 students, or 78%, identified themselves as experiencing social identity threat based on their answers on the *Oppmarg* scale in the survey. While we show the results for all the demographic categories, we chose to focus on those most often seen as marginalized in the United States and where we also had large enough numbers to offer reliable analysis. That said, we sought to drill deeper to compare those identifying as of African descent or Latinx with those of other identities as well as African descent and Latinx who do not identify as experiencing social identity threat. We see that data in Table 2. Table 3 adds grit to the analysis, focusing expressly on students who identified as women, African descent and Latinx, and LGBT. It is in this table that we see no significant difference between the grit scores of those who experience marginalization due to their social identity and those who are not in that demographic category. These results are found graphically in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 3. Relation Between Key Identities and Grouped Grit Variable

Category	Results of <i>t</i> -Test	Low Grit	Medium Grit	High Grit
Women ($M = 3.94, SD = .55$)	$t = -1.36,$	38 (22%)	167 (62%)	39 (16%)
Non-women ($M = 3.85, SD = .64$)	$p = .18$	22 (16%)	62 (68%)	16 (16%)
African and Latinx ($M = 4.01, SD = .51$)	$t = -1.54,$	9 (12%)	51 (69%)	14 (19%)
Non-African/Latinx ($M = 3.89, SD = .59$)	$p = .13$	48 (19%)	173 (67%)	39 (15%)
LGBTQ ($M = 3.90, SD = .61$)	$t = 1.08,$	6 (20%)	20 (67%)	4 (13%)
Non-LGBTQ ($M = 3.92, SD = .58$)	$p = .91$	54 (17%)	206 (66%)	51 (16%)

**Figure 2. Average Social Identity Threat Scores by Social Identities and Identification as Member of an Oppressed or Marginalized Group**

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we seek to better understand the interactions of social identity, the experience of marginalization and social identity threat, and grit among graduate students seeking a master's degree. We offer two important contributions to current popular discussions in the education landscape: 1) By asking questions about a person's identity and noticing if that has any relationships to their ability to persist towards goals, we are broadening the existing discourse around grit; 2) By showing there were no significant differences in grit levels in our master's student population regardless of their social identity or self-perceptions of marginalization, we also have provided empirical evidence useful to the continuous debates around EDI issues in higher education, specifically related to student

perseverance despite social identity threat and marginalization. Our findings suggest that one's experiences of marginalization and identity threat do not necessarily dampen grit, but because immense dedication is required to succeed in postsecondary contexts, we should consider that perhaps these students would be even better off if they are better supported to not feel isolated from the community they belong in.

LIMITATIONS

Our study is not without certain limitations, many of which typically result from conducting an independently created survey on a large scale. We chose to include grit in the survey as a variable of interest only for our third (2017-18) and fourth (2018-19) years so that there may be a slightly disproportionate attrition of socially marginalized individuals in the initial sample. Another primary issue in this survey is reference bias. Reference bias can occur from self-reported surveys, comparing personality and character traits across diverse populations of people. For instance, most people do not have an objective way of understanding the same terms in the same exact manner as other people who may be in the same social setting as them. As Heckman and Kautz (2013, p. 18) point out, "If different groups have different standards or reference points, comparing traits across groups can be highly misleading. Laziness may mean different things to different groups of people." In our study, this matters in relation to the term "marginalization" and how some participants may or may not have perceived themselves to be marginalized. It may also skew responses on the grit and social identity threat scales.

SIGNIFICANCE

Our primary findings suggest that though some graduate students can feel psychologically threatened, undervalued, or isolated because of their social identities, these perceptions will not necessarily undermine their will to persevere toward their goals. That is an important finding that a high level of grit can allow individuals to overcome denigrating social obstacles placed before them. This study strongly asserts that marginalized are not less tenacious or goal-oriented than their peers in higher education. On the contrary, these students might be persevering at very high levels even though they also face more significant hurdles and implicit or quite explicit biases than their more privileged peers.

That said, the finding that, even among highly successful graduate students, a large percentage must still navigate the psychological assaults of prejudice should give us pause. With this awareness, this study allows us to encourage universities to place an enhanced focus on nurturing heightened grit and resilience in their student bodies, especially for those who experience marginalization and threat due to their social identities. We do not contend that grit is a solution. Rather, we argue that it is a potentially valuable coping mechanism for dealing with harmful environmental conditions. In this paper we also would want to make the case that these students should not have to solely rely on their internal reservoirs of mental fortitude to be successful. The existence of high grit alone cannot stand in for all forms of postsecondary success.

There is plenty of evidence that graduate students must socially integrate to fully thrive and benefit from their university experience (DeWitz et al., 2009; Hartley, 2011; Raley, 2007; Tinto, 1987). And as McGee and Stovall (2015) postulate, when students overuse their noncognitive characteristics — such as grit and resilience — to deal with marginalization, they can get overworked and exhausted in many different ways. As noted, in our sample of master's students, those who identified as marginalized also reported higher levels of social identity threat. While we did not test for other costs to such threats to one's well-being, we can postulate from research on marginalization and social identity threat that their grit may only be "skin-deep" (Brody et al., 2016), allowing them to walk across a graduation stage to accept their diploma, but carrying latent costs associated with diminished well-being (Kundu, 2019). Experiencing isolation in postsecondary settings, and more specifically isolation resulting from one's identity of group membership, can cause debilitating mental conditions,

dampening confidence, and longer-term anxiety and depression (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). It would be worth further study to survey successful graduates to see whether the costs of marginalization linger later in adulthood.

What does this imply in the context of the growing debate surrounding EDI policies and their place in higher education? A more thorough interpretation of our work would acknowledge that though certain students experience marginalization and still remain resilient, if they were offered more equitable environments, they could possibly achieve and thrive even more. The fact that, in spite of their academic success, many students experience social identity threats and marginalization is a reminder that, in spite of their best efforts, institutions cannot easily create environments devoid of the prejudices that are pervasive in the larger American environment.

If we wish our students to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, grit without complementary social support is not necessarily the main outcome we should desire. The students who we surveyed are “exceptional” of course, but they are not “exceptions” to these rules (Kundu, 2019). Thinking of them as “exceptions” can absolve stakeholders, such as ourselves, from the responsibility to do more to support their continued development and subsequent contribution to our community. And so, some of the most important implications of this research are realizing the significant need for institutional resources that can better support the endurance of all our students (Kundu, 2019). From a wellness perspective, it is important to realize that degree completion and professional success should not necessarily be the sole metrics for accomplishment and wellbeing.

What is plainly clear from our study is this: A significant percentage of this graduate student population does perceive themselves as marginalized as a result of their social identities and also experience threats as a result of their social identities. The fact that these students can be gritty does not lessen their experiences of marginalization and threat. The polarized debate over how best to prepare students at universities for the future and the role of EDI programs is unnecessary. We can and should assume that all students would still desire to live and work in a society in which their social identities are respected and honored.

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APPENDIX: SCALE ITEMS

Social Identity Threat

1. I worry that people will draw conclusions about me based on stereotypes about my social identity groups.
2. I often feel that people's evaluations of my performance are affected by my social identify groups.

Grit

1. (REVERSE) New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones
2. Setbacks don't discourage me.
3. (REVERSE) I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
4. I am a hard worker.
5. (REVERSE) I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
6. (REVERSE) I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
7. I finish whatever I begin.
8. I am diligent.

BIOGRAPHIES



Dr. Anindya Kundu is a sociologist who studies the social and cultural contexts of achievement. His debut book, *The Power of Student Agency* is being published in summer 2020 through Teachers College Press. He is currently a Senior Fellow of Research at the City University of New York in the Center for Urban Research, where he leads research in workforce development and higher education. Anindya serves as a member of the Citywide Career and Technical Education Advisory Council for the New York City Department of Education. He frequently contributes to public discourse and his work has been featured in NPR Education, MSNBC, Huffington Post, and he has two official TED Talks each with over 1 million views.



Dr. David Elcott is the Taub Professor of Practice in Public Service and Leadership at the Wagner School of Public Service at NYU and faculty director of the Advocacy and Political Action specialization at Wagner. He is the author of *Sacred Journey* and soon to be published *Faith, Nationalism and the Future of Liberal Democracy* by Notre Dame Press.



Professor Erica Foldy is an Associate Professor of Public and Non-profit Management at the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University and Affiliated Faculty with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management in Boston. Erica's research addresses the question: What enables and inhibits collaboration and learning across potential divisions, like race, gender and differences of opinion? She is co-author of the book *The Color Bind: Talking (and not Talking) about Race at Work* and co-editor of the *Reader in Gender and Organizations*. In addition, she has more than forty papers in a variety of outlets, including management, public administration, psychology and medical journals, and various handbooks, encyclopedias and edited volumes.



Amanda Winer is a fifth-year doctoral student in NYU's Education and Jewish Studies program, part of the Applied Statistics, Social Science, and the Humanities (ASH) Department. Amanda is a social psychology researcher with a strong analytic background, including fluency in factor analysis and scale creation, structural equation modeling, multilevel modeling, and data visualization. Amanda has vast interests in individual and community behavior, has participated in and led research projects at NYU, George Washington University, and other institutions. Her dissertation work uses mixed methods to investigate the intersecting perceptions of advantage and marginalization across (Jewish) students in higher education. Amanda is a member of the CASJE Advisory Board, an NRJE Emerging Scholar, and UJA-Federation of NY Graduate Fellow.