

# Effort Traps: Socially Structured Striving and the Reproduction of Disadvantage<sup>1</sup>

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It seems intuitive that the more effort one exerts to escape poverty, the likelier one should be to succeed. Findings from a two-year ethnographic study of low-income Black men transitioning to adulthood challenge this intuition. Participants in the study encountered two-tiered *effort traps*. First, schools and life circumstances regularly primed participants to overexert themselves in pursuit of escaping poverty and meeting long-term goals. Second, participants' resulting efforts proved not merely futile but counterproductive, keeping them committed to untenable workloads past a point of no return and causing exhaustion and failure. Effort traps are a previously unrecognized mechanism of social reproduction: a structured way that ambitious young people from low-income families can be set up to fail, not despite their best efforts but precisely because of them.

From odes to industriousness in *Poor Richard's Almanac* to the notion of the "American dream," the idea that anyone can improve their circumstances with hard work and determination is deeply ingrained in the collective ethos of the United States (Adams 1931; Franklin [1733] 1934). The idea also

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pervades US schooling. In the last century, as personal advancement increasingly required formal education, teachers and administrators embraced the idea that success in life stems from hard work. Scholars call this concept “achievement ideology” (MacLeod [1987] 2009).

Many strands of research in the social sciences repudiate the idea that young people living in poverty can easily get ahead. Rates of intergenerational mobility are low in the United States (Chetty et al. 2014), and a broad array of studies about the lives of America’s poor help show why. Problems like racial segregation and concentrated neighborhood poverty (Wilson 1987), tenuous educational pathways (Goldrick-Rab 2016), unequal family socialization (Lareau [2003] 2011), desperate household finances (Edin and Lein 1997), and the bodily toll of stress and scarcity (Juster, McEwen, and Lupien 2010; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013) make poverty hard to escape.

Recent scholarship has also begun to refute another core assumption of achievement ideology: the notion that effort is uniformly helpful for personal advancement. Scholars have long argued that effort is *not enough* to overcome the challenges of poverty (e.g., Williams and Kornblum 1985; Newman 1999; DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). But increasingly, researchers have identified ways that effort *itself* can cause problems, acting as more of a hindrance than a help. Effort poured into getting ahead can have unintended downsides like missed opportunity, risk exposure, and debt (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012; Stuart 2020; Payne 2022). And effort can be self-undermining when it is exerted unsustainably. A growing body of evidence unrelated to social mobility suggests that there can be “too much of a good thing” when it comes to seemingly beneficial practices like trying very hard (Pierce and Aguinis 2013; Khan, Neveu, and Murtaza 2020). These findings suggest a potentially important and overlooked process that could reproduce poverty. People living in poverty are forced to work tremendously hard to survive and try to get ahead (e.g., Edin and Shaefer 2015; Reich and Bearman 2020). If people in this predicament are induced to work so hard that their efforts become counterproductive, then the very act of trying to escape poverty may instead directly perpetuate it.

Drawing on a two-year ethnographic case study about the transition to college for a group of young Black men in New Orleans, this article investigates socially structured overwork as a mechanism that reproduces poverty. It describes *effort traps*: structural circumstances that reproduce disadvantage by prompting oppressed people to exert effort unsustainably, such that trying harder actually harms their goal attainment or hastens their failure. As humans, we have physical and mental limits, and when we are induced to push past these limits, we become exhausted and fail.

The effort traps described in this study emerged from race and class domination. (As I explore in the discussion, other forms of oppression can likely lay effort traps as well.) I identify three processes that helped set the effort

traps participants encountered. First, experiences of childhood poverty fostered pent-up desire to attain life goals. Second, school-based indoctrination about hard work—a curriculum designed specifically for low-income children of color—imparted misleading lessons about when and how to “double down” on effort. And third, the demands of daily survival added further strain. Together, these processes primed participants to overcommit, to subsequently misdiagnose their resulting struggles as signs of inadequate effort, and to ultimately fail through overextension and exhaustion. This study also identifies structured processes that helped other study participants avoid effort traps, describing checks on personal ambition that paradoxically aided their success.

The study’s findings reveal an opportunity structure that is counterintuitive to navigate because it encourages personal striving but subsequently punishes it. The dogma of hard work in American society has long been known to have racist and classist origins, and it has long been known to mask the true causes of disadvantage (e.g., Du Bois 1903). The concept of effort traps highlights an even more pernicious consequence of our ideology of hard work and advancement. Effort traps are a way that up-by-the-bootstraps thinking directly undermines attempts to get ahead, reproducing inequality instead of simply justifying it.

By identifying effort traps as mechanisms of social reproduction, this article makes contributions to several fields of study. First, it offers new insights to research on poverty and mobility about the downsides of excessive effort, revealing a vexing challenge people face as they work to escape oppressive circumstances. Second, it shows how failure through excessive effort can be a socially structured outcome rather than the result of an individual propensity, as previous psychology and management research has assumed (Miller and Wrosch 2007; Caesens, Stinglhamber, and Marmier 2016; Khan et al. 2020). Third, by describing in detail how people can fall into effort traps, it reveals mechanisms that previous correlational studies about counterproductive effort were unable to observe. And finally, it identifies a flaw in policies to help children overcome disadvantage through “grit” (Tough 2013; Duckworth 2016), showing how oversimplistic messaging about hard work can equip young people with maladaptive strategies that undermine goal attainment. Together, these implications help point the way toward a sociology of effort that does not lapse into individualism or victim blaming.

#### EFFORT, POVERTY, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Within the social sciences, there is substantial disagreement about the role effort plays in helping young people escape poverty. A long tradition in sociology critiques “up by the bootstraps” ideology, tallying structural challenges that can derail even the most ambitious and hardest-working young people

(e.g., Du Bois 1903; Tickamyer and Duncan 1990; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1999). Other scholars reply that structural challenges are all the more reason for poor people to work hard, contending that structural reforms and individual-level effort are compatible ways to fight poverty (e.g., Heckman and Rubinstein 2001; Duckworth 2023). The following sections trace competing ideas about effort and upward mobility, arguing that findings about the downsides of individual striving hold untapped promise for explaining how poverty passes from one generation to the next.

### Structural Challenges and Individual Striving

Among scholars who view the reproduction of poverty as largely structurally preordained, perhaps the most common account of the role of personal effort in failed upward mobility is that this effort is simply overwhelmed by the challenges of poverty. In leveling this critique, scholars invoke effort-versus-structure imagery, describing personal advancement as a struggle between individual effort pushing forward in one direction and structural challenges pushing back in the other (Newman 1999; Alexander, Entwisle, and Oson 2014). For example, DeLuca and colleagues write that the challenges of poverty are an “undertow,” acting as “a drag on [young people’s] momentum as they attempted to launch” (DeLuca et al. 2016, p. 120). In this view, getting ahead requires near-superhuman levels of drive and determination (Williams and Kornblum 1985).

Other accounts describe how, in light of such daunting structural challenges, some young people opt out of the game (Clark 1960; Willis 1977; MacLeod 2009). The authors of these studies argue that young people’s leveled aspirations are not the primary cause of their failure to get ahead. Rather, these young people simply see the writing on the wall. Deciding not to try helps them save face, soothing the pain of accepting subordinate roles in the class hierarchy. But they are made complicit in sealing their fate. Those who give up “salvage some self-esteem,” MacLeod writes, but they “aid in the process of social reproduction because [they] relegate themselves to the bottom of the pile” (MacLeod 2009, p. 151).

It seems intuitive that the challenges of poverty might prompt disadvantaged young people to give up, but a growing body of empirical evidence suggests this process is the exception rather than the rule. In the United States, poor and working-class young people generally report high aspirations, and they pursue advancement even after repeated setbacks (Goldrick-Rab 2006; Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008). Young people hold fast to their dreams not only for instrumental reasons but also for symbolic ones; they see educational aspiration as a form of moral virtue (Frye 2012; Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015). As they remain committed to their long-term dreams, young people sometimes shift their short-term focus to attainable goals, such

as prioritizing healing from trauma or claiming upwardly mobile status by pursuing accessible forms of highbrow consumption (Silva 2013; Ray 2017). But they do not easily give up on the idea that they can work their way into better lives.

### Fostering Effort to Overcome Structural Challenges

A large and influential coalition of scholars and policymakers argues that young people from poor families should be encouraged to try as hard as they possibly can precisely because of the daunting challenges they face. The call to study noncognitive skills, and to foster these skills in disadvantaged children, is largely focused on measuring and teaching individual propensities that lead to hard work (Farkas 2003). Some traits, like “grit”—defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al. 2007, p. 1087)—are direct metrics of a person’s propensity to expend personal effort. Others, like “growth mindset” (Dweck 2006) and “hope” (Lopez 2013), relate to confidence that one’s efforts will pay off in the future (Anderson et al. 2016).

Advocates contend that effort-based noncognitive skills hold the key to helping young people escape poverty. One author calls programs that teach noncognitive skills “the most effective and promising anti-poverty strategy we have” (Tough 2013). An influential early article in the noncognitive skills literature identifies “motivation,” “tenacity,” “perseverance,” and “self-discipline” as keys to “achieve success in life” (Heckman and Rubinstein 2001). Like some effort pessimists, effort optimists use push-and-pull, effort-versus-structure imagery. But unlike the pessimists, they use this framework to argue that effort matters. For example, Heckman and Rubinstein (2001) cite the children’s story *The Little Engine That Could* about a tiny but brave locomotive that hauls a heavy load over a mountain by relying on tenacity and hard work.

Perhaps the most prominent policy to foster effort in disadvantaged young people is grit education. Teaching grit has become a widespread practice in schools that serve low-income students of color (Tough 2013). Many of these schools follow the “no-excuses” pedagogical model, which aims to boost students’ academic achievement and life outcomes through high and strict disciplinary expectations (Golann 2021). One such network, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter school operator, provides teachers with a playbook to help foster grit in students (KIPP 2020). Some KIPP schools also give out grit grades on report cards (Sparks 2014). Teachers understand grit to mean an inclination toward extremely hard goal-directed work (Willey 2014).

Grit education has garnered a chorus of skeptics, who argue that it perpetuates systems of oppression instead of fostering upward mobility (e.g., Cohen 2015; Lardier et al. 2019). Some early supporters of grit education

falsely argued that low-income Black students need to be taught hard work at school because they do not learn it from their parents (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2004).<sup>2</sup> A growing number of education scholars criticize grit training for being based on such racist and classist assumptions (Herold 2015). One influential critique argues that grit training is aimed primarily at poor Black and Brown children with the idea that they need to fix themselves to escape poverty, recycling victim-blaming ideology about pulling oneself up by the bootstraps (Love 2019). Another finds that grit pedagogy pushes students to endure unnecessarily harsh and stressful school environments and teaches them to only focus on individualist explanations of success or failure (Golann 2021). These critiques join a long intellectual tradition that shows how schools can oppress poor and racialized students (e.g., Woodson [1933] 1999; Fanon [1952] 2008; Sojoyner 2016; Ray 2022*b*). They also contribute to scholarship that shows the racist, classist, and exploitive ideas woven into the ideology of hard work in the United States (e.g., Du Bois 1903; Erikson 1977; Johnson 1999).

In reply to criticisms of grit education, proponents argue that their initiatives neither ignore structural challenges like racism and classism nor embody these problems. They argue that it is possible to encourage tenacious effort in young people while also working to dismantle the obstacles they face (Duckworth 2023; see also Anderson et al. 2016). And they argue that structural challenges are all the more reason to encourage disadvantaged young people to work hard (Duckworth 2023).

### Considering Pitfalls of Effort

Debates that frame attempted mobility as a push-and-pull struggle between personal effort and structural resistance miss an important fact: sometimes effort does more harm than good. Scholarship about attempted upward mobility is becoming increasingly attuned to the ways that personal striving can backfire. These include the possibilities that a less-demanding pathway may actually offer greater payoffs (MacLeod 2009), that apparent rewards of an alluring pathway are unequally distributed, accruing only to the privileged and well-connected (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012), that trying to get ahead will take an unacceptable toll on personal safety (Stuart 2020), and that the cost of trying to get ahead will result in crippling debt (Payne 2022). Such insights show the limits of effort-versus-structure thinking.

<sup>2</sup> Black parents have on average higher academic expectations than white parents after controlling for SES (Yamamoto and Holloway 2010), and Black people living in poverty often work tremendously hard and espouse an ideology of hard work (e.g., Newman 1999).

Large bodies of research in psychology and public health offer additional information about the downsides of effort, tallying the physical and mental toll of overwork. One literature in public health documents the bodily consequences for Black Americans of long-term, high-effort coping in response to discrimination, a phenomenon called “John Henryism” that has been linked to hypertension, depression, and increased cortisol levels (James 1994; Felix et al. 2019). Other research, focused on effort and employment, shows how workers suffer consequences like heart disease, depression, and anxiety when they are pushed too hard (Iwasaki, Takahashi, and Nakata 2006; Kuroda and Yamamoto 2019). Overwork is also a key driver of burn-out, the state of feeling exhausted, cynical, and unproductive (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001). And research in psychology examines the harm caused by “nonproductive persistence”: effort expended in pursuit of an unobtainable goal. Research shows that nonproductive persistence makes the consequences of inevitable failure worse, leading to wasted time and diminished health (Miller and Wrosch 2007).

Not only does overwork harm health and well-being; it can also directly undermine goal attainment. Recent scholarship in workplace psychology investigates whether exerting effort past a certain threshold can make success less likely for otherwise attainable goals. This too-much-of-a-good-thing theoretical framework posits a curvilinear relationship between psychological resources like grit and goal attainment (Pierce and Aguinis 2013; Astakhova 2015). In other words, it suggests there may be an optimal, “Goldilocks” amount of effort that one should put forth for attaining a goal, past which additional effort becomes counterproductive. Recent empirical evidence appears to confirm that such a relationship can exist (Khan et al. 2020).

### Thinking Sociologically about Counterproductive Effort

These new too-much-of-a-good-thing findings about counterproductively excessive effort present an opportunity for sociology. Most studies in this literature have treated the tendency to overwork as an individual propensity (Miller and Wrosch 2007; Caesens et al. 2016; Khan et al. 2020; but see Nerstad, Wong, and Richardsen 2019). But decisions about how hard to work are frequently shaped by social influences (e.g., Burawoy 1979; Hochschild 1983; MacLeod 2009). A fuller account of the origins of such counterproductive effort would identify collective processes that push people to become overextended.

Moreover, these too-much-of-a-good-thing studies have not been set up to observe mechanisms that render excessive effort counterproductive (Astakhova 2015; Khan et al. 2020). These studies are correlational, linking self-reported effort to eventual goal-attainment outcomes. Intuitive explanations

for these findings include the possibility that excessive effort leads to exhaustion or the possibility that it prompts unwavering pursuit of pathways that turn out to be dead ends. Closer qualitative inquiry could help reveal whether and how such mechanisms play out.

Finally, the too-much-of-a-good-thing framework could offer new insights into the social reproduction of poverty. People living in poverty work tremendously hard. They face taxing demands for daily survival (Edin and Shaefer 2015). And if they try to work their way out of poverty, the pathways they encounter are arduous (Newman 1999; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Reich and Bearman 2020). The insight that effort can become more harmful than helpful past a certain threshold casts such work in an even bleaker light. It suggests a structural reason that people's best efforts can be turned against them, keeping them trapped in the very predicaments they are straining to escape.

## METHODS

### Cases and Setting

To study attempted upward mobility up close, I undertook two years of ethnographic observation focused on the transition to college for a cohort of Black men from low-income families in New Orleans. Because the first year of college is now the stage of the life course when potential upward mobility most often breaks down (Engle and Tinto 2008; Snyder and Dillow 2015), observing the transition to college for low-income students is an ideal way to study contemporary processes of social reproduction in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Most first-time college students from low-income families enroll in community colleges or nonflagship public colleges (Engle and Tinto 2008), so I decided to study the experiences of students on these educational pathways.

I began my fieldwork interested in studying college transitions for students from no-excuses schools, which have been critiqued for not preparing their students for the comparative freedom of college (e.g., Golann 2021). I was interested in this topic because I had taught at a no-excuses school in New Orleans and listened to alumni of my school describe exactly such struggles. I based my study in New Orleans because I knew the school system well and because it was a microcosm of trends I wanted to explore. After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was transformed into a school district made up

<sup>3</sup> Colleges do not pay off equally for students (Chetty et al. 2020). Black college graduates' projected lifetime earnings are about 20% less on average than the lifetime earnings of white college graduates (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2011), and they graduate with an average of \$25,000 more debt than white students (Hanson 2023). But there is still a payoff: Black college graduates make on average \$700,000 more over the course of a lifetime than Black high school graduates (Carnevale et al. 2011).



mostly of charter schools, and a sizable minority of its schools adopted no-excuses pedagogy (Carr 2013). New Orleans has some of the lowest rates of intergenerational income mobility in the country (Chetty et al. 2014), and nearly two-thirds of its high school graduates attend college (Dreilinger 2015), which is in line with national trends (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019).

To protect participants' confidentiality, I assign pseudonyms to individuals, schools, and workplaces. I also use approximate rather than exact figures when reporting school statistics. And although I share that my fieldwork took place in the mid-2010s, I do not reveal the exact years.

I conducted observations at one no-excuses high school, Strive Prep, and one traditional public high school, Oretha Castle Haley High. Strive enrolled around 400 students, whereas Haley High enrolled around 800. Large majorities of students at both schools were Black and qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of their families' economic need. Both schools had mean composite ACT scores of around 18. Forty percent of graduates from both schools enrolled in four-year colleges, and another 30% enrolled at community colleges. Despite both being charters, the schools had different disciplinary cultures, with students at Haley High enjoying substantially more autonomy. Around 90% of entering freshmen graduated from Haley High, whereas only around 70% of entering freshmen graduated from Strive. (Many of the rest, after clashing with Strive's school culture, transferred to other high schools.) As I would learn, both schools engaged in substantial effort-based messaging to students, although this messaging was more pervasive at Strive.

### Fieldwork, Positionality, and Analysis

I embedded with the senior classes at Strive Prep and Haley High at the beginning of a school year. I intended to recruit small cohorts of participants at each school who planned to enroll at community colleges or lower-tier four-year public universities, which together serve approximately two-thirds of low-income, first-generation students (Engle and Tinto 2008, p. 10). I opted to only enroll men. I am male, and I anticipated that it would be easier for me to spend time with male participants outside of school.<sup>4</sup> I also knew that low-income men have lower college graduation rates than low-income women after enrollment (Snyder and Dillow 2015, pp. 608–14).

I am white and from an upper-middle-class background. I was 29 at the time my fieldwork began. At Strive Prep and Haley High, I looked like many of the young, white, out-of-town teachers recruited by programs like Teach for America. Outside observers were common in post-Katrina New Orleans

<sup>4</sup> However, researchers can also conduct excellent ethnographic research across lines of gender (e.g., Carter 2005; Small 2009).

classrooms, so students were not immediately taken aback or put off by my presence. But I was quick to tell students exactly who I was and what I was doing there, letting them know I was not an authority figure. For example, I first met two study participants, Vincent and A.J., when I visited their small homeroom class at Strive. As soon as class began, at the teacher's invitation, I explained that I was a PhD student studying what it is like for students to go to college whose parents did not go to college. I said that I would be spending time at Strive all year and that I hoped to follow some students into their freshman year of college to see what goes well for them, what goes wrong, and how they can be better supported. I gave this introduction over and over again during my first days of fieldwork.

For the fall semester, I spent most of each school day at one school or the other, attending classes, sitting with students in the cafeteria, going to extracurriculars, and attending field trips and sports games. In the spring semester, I decided to stop doing observations at Haley High and focus only on Strive. I had realized that my fieldwork paid much higher dividends when I returned day after day to a single school, and my theoretical interests were broadening away from my initial focus on comparing levels of student autonomy. However, I remained in close touch with one student from Haley High named Casey. It became an easy decision to keep Casey enrolled in the study when he moved into the same college dorm as another participant. My remaining participants came from Strive Prep.

I ultimately enrolled eight students bound for less selective or nonselective public colleges. More than anything else, this recruitment hinged on mutual affinity; I enrolled participants whom I enjoyed spending time with and who enjoyed spending time with me. Each student I asked to take part in the study said yes.

The advantage of spending lots of time with only a few young men is that I was able to watch carefully as processes unfolded over time in their lives. The disadvantage is that I was not able to observe dozens of different college transitions. By focusing on a few participants, my research joins an ethnographic tradition that studies education and social reproduction by paying immersive, long-term attention to small cohorts of young people (Willis 1977; MacLeod 2009; Ray 2017; Sandelson 2023). Intensive, "small-*n*" ethnographies of this type have also been used to study a range of other topics (e.g., Anderson 1978; Duneier 1999; Fader 2013; Jones 2018; Stuart 2020).

In qualitative research, cumulative exposure to the field is a helpful gauge of the rigor of data collection (Small and Calarco 2022). For this study, I spent 2,400 hours with participants. This exposure to their lives allowed me to achieve an important depth of saturation. By the end of my time in the field, I thoroughly understood how some of my participants fell into effort traps and others avoided them. Additional fieldwork data were no longer changing the theoretical picture I had developed.

Choosing depth over breadth yielded otherwise unattainable insights. Identifying the effort traps my participants encountered required pairing yearslong observations of their trajectories with in-depth knowledge of their hopes, dreams, and material circumstances. If I had allocated my hours in the field differently, enrolling more participants and spending less time with each one, I am not sure I would have been able to identify the puzzle at the core of this article.

Who were the young men who took part in this study? All eight participants were Black, and all came from low-income families. Participants from Strive were loosely a group of friends. As table 1 shows, participants varied in their career aspirations, chosen major, and the institutions they planned to attend. Participants also varied in the nature and extent of outside obligations on their time and finances.

To get an intimate view of the experience of attempted upward mobility for study participants, I aimed to learn as much as possible not only about their academic experiences but also about their experiences outside of class. College students from low-income families are likely to be employed while enrolled in college (Perna 2010), and most continue to live at home and commute to classes (Ipsos Public Affairs 2015), so I anticipated that fieldwork outside of school would yield crucial insights. I spent approximately two-thirds of my total fieldwork time with participants in contexts outside of class. Along the way, I got to know their friends, classmates, family members, teachers, and professors. I also got to know their high schools, colleges, and workplaces. And I lived for 11 months in the same neighborhood as many participants. I concluded my fieldwork in September of what would have been participants' sophomore year of college, allowing me to see the processes that led them to either reenroll in college or leave.

In building and maintaining relationships with participants, I balanced different roles: friend, confidante, adult mentor, observer. I treated consent as a continuous process (e.g., Khan 2011; Armstrong and Hamilton 2012), talking frequently with participants about the research and paying attention to whether they wanted me around. I was heartened that they were usually the ones to call me to spend time together.

Often, my identity and affiliations opened doors for me. I was young enough that participants and their friends were willing to hang out with me, but I was old enough that their parents and guardians trusted me. My status as a former teacher and current PhD student helped me quickly gain the trust of participants' teachers and professors. And being white gave me undue privileges, even in mostly Black spaces. For example, at the historically Black college that four of this study's participants attended, security guards who checked everyone else's IDs would wave me through, and administrators who were often unhelpful to students and their families seemed eager to answer my questions.

TABLE 1  
A SNAPSHOT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS AS THEY STARTED COLLEGE

Participant	Career Aspirations	College, Major	Time and Money Obligations	Work Status
Juan	Detective	4-year commuter, undecided	Attend class, custody of son, long commute to campus	Must work
Paul	Open small construction business	2-year commuter, business	Attend class, help pay rent, hide from a gun conflict	Must work
Jaydin	Undecided	4-year commuter, business	Attend class, support mom and siblings	Must work
Dorian	Photographer, filmmaker	4-year commuter, art and film	Attend class	Few work obligations
Vincent	Entrepreneur: funeral home, barbershop, and lawn business	2-year commuter, mortuary studies	Attend class, help with a few bills	Few work obligations
Casey	High school guidance counselor	4-year residential, psychology	Attend class	Few work obligations
Kenya	Undecided	2-year residential, criminal justice	Attend class	Few work obligations
A.J.	Computer programmer	4-year residential, computer science	Attend class	Few work obligations

NOTE.—For “must work,” students had to work to make ends meet; for “few work obligations,” students were free to pursue education without having to support themselves or others.

While conducting fieldwork, I took real-time notes in small notebooks and on my phone. With participants' permission, I would also sometimes digitally record conversations with them in the field. After each day of observation, I wrote detailed notes on my laptop, using my field jottings to jog my memory (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

The ideas developed in this article emerged from a recursive process of reflecting on surprising findings, developing intuitions about possible explanations for these findings, and then seeking further observations in the field to test and develop my emerging hypotheses (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). This cycle guided my fieldwork for much of participants' spring semester of college, sparked by my realization that several participants were struggling in college because of their fierce commitment to goal-directed efforts in and out of the classroom. After leaving the field, I continued to iteratively refine my analysis by rereading existing literature and carefully combing through my fieldnotes with an eye for effort-related data. As I analyzed my fieldnotes, I took stock of each participant's life ambitions, of the effort-based lessons and messaging each encountered, and of contributing factors and timelines for each participant's freshman year success or failure. Another part of my iterative analytical process was discussing the ideas in this article with each of the study's participants (Auyero 2015), with whom I have stayed in close touch and from whom I have received invaluable feedback. For example, after reading part of an earlier draft of this article, Dorian pushed me to refine my thinking about when and how he and his peers used lessons about effort taught by their high schools. A quote from that conversation appears in this article.

#### STRUCTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF EFFORT TRAPS

Effort can be counterproductive to its aims in cases of overextension, when a person tries to do too much for too long. For the young men I profile, processes structured by poverty and racism influenced the pull to overextend. This article identifies three such processes, although others likely exist. These processes laid the foundations for effort traps. Effort traps are structural circumstances that reproduce disadvantage by pushing oppressed people to work too hard, such that their efforts become counterproductive to their goal attainment.<sup>5</sup>

This empirical section of the article shows that the structural roots of such traps can be years in the making. The subsequent empirical section shows

<sup>5</sup> Following Sewell (1992), I understand social structure to include both the social world an individual inhabits *and* the learned schemas that individual employs as they interpret and navigate the world. The structural circumstances that constitute an effort trap are not purely external to the individual who falls into it. They also include the individual's learned schemas about hard work.

how some study participants fell into effort traps. A final empirical section describes structural processes that helped other participants avoid effort traps.

### Foundational Process 1: Disadvantage Amplifies and Multiplies Desires

Like most young people, this study's participants aspired to build purposeful, fulfilling lives. The hardships of poverty sharpened their yearning and lent it urgency. The resulting intensity of their desires left them eager to unreservedly chase their life goals if given the chance. Poverty also proliferated the goals the young men might pursue, multiplying the outlets into which the young men could choose to pour effort.

Some participants, like Dorian, had already found pursuits that felt like a calling. Dorian, a tall young man with a throwback flattop haircut and a winning, confidently goofy gap-toothed grin, had fallen in love with the arts—especially photography. Dorian had not thrived academically in high school, clashing with teachers and administrators over disciplinary practices he considered stifling. But he had discovered interests outside of school, in the city's overlapping worlds of skateboarding culture, fashion design, photography, and filmmaking. For Dorian, these undertakings had become what DeLuca and colleagues call an "identity project," a "source of meaning that provides a strong sense of self and is linked to concrete activities to which youth commit themselves" (DeLuca et al. 2016, p. 66). Dorian had embraced his identity project, aided in no small part by his knack for cultivating relationships with adult mentors whose work he admired. By the spring semester of his senior year of high school, Dorian was working with one mentor on a series of photographic portraits of New Orleans street life, with another who was shooting and editing a full-length documentary set in rural Louisiana, and with several others who ran local skate-inspired fashion brands that he featured in his photography.

Other participants, like Kenya, were not yet sure what pursuits they would embrace in life, but they were no less committed to building bright futures for themselves. Kenya, a taciturn young man with an unhurried gait, believed that many people in his life expected him to fail. After serving a yearlong expulsion for taking marijuana to school, Kenya returned to Strive Prep for his junior year and came to feel that his teachers saw him as irredeemably delinquent. He recalled telling the principal: "It feel like y'all treat me different since I came back." He appreciated that his senior-year teachers seemed to see more potential in him, especially his science teacher. "I feel that she expects a lot out of me," he said, "and I like that." He intended to prove his doubters wrong. "I want to go to college, hopefully," he told me, soon after we met.

For all participants, poverty amplified their desire to get ahead. Experiences of material deprivation, and of watching caregivers struggle to provide

for them, left them determined to escape such strain. Kenya's perspective is illustrative. His mother Tamika, a tenth-grade dropout, struggled during Kenya's childhood to keep him and his siblings housed and fed. As she battled homelessness and worked a series of jobs she despised—checking in Johns as a front desk attendant at a seedy motel, earning below minimum wage changing the diapers of elderly clients—she told her five children that education was their ticket to a better life. Kenya took her message to heart. “You ever eaten a just-mayonnaise sandwich?” he asked, recalling a time he and his siblings went hungry when his mother was out of work. “If you don't go to college, you're screwed.”

Childhoods of poverty also left participants feeling acutely aware that they had been denied opportunities afforded to better-off peers, which lent urgency to their yearning for the lives they wanted. Dorian, for example, fixated on the fact that Strive Prep, like many Title I schools serving students from low-income families, did not offer formal visual arts classes. Dorian believed that he and his peers possessed vast reservoirs of potential that remained untapped because of such lack of exposure. “I guarantee you we have so much talent we don't know about,” he told me. “We are educated out of our creativity.” This sense of injustice led Dorian to approach his work with missionary zeal. Between photo shoots, he began to plaster the walls of his bedroom with hand-drawn plans for a website, which would feature his photography and work from other young artists in the city. Stashed away in the drawer of a battered dresser, on a carefully handwritten page of a spiral notebook, Dorian kept the text he would feature under the site's “About” tab:

We believe the world is nothing without self-expression through creativity. . . . A world without creativity is black and white. Stripped of soul. . . . Art is our religion. You as a creator, your job is to voice this religion through your creative crafts to the world. Where you showcase this religion is whether [*sic*] it's a museum, the streets, an alley, or where you performing. Those places are our churches, cathedrals, temples, to spread this creative plague. . . . The art frees us and shows the world who we are. (Dorian's writing)

This statement—part personal credo, part call to arms for his generation—perfectly captured the urgency and sincerity Dorian brought to his work. He felt a void that needed filling.

A sense of obligation to needy family members also intensified participants' desires. Vincent, an energetic, jovial young man with a wispy beard, dearly wanted to become a reliable breadwinner for some of his closest loved ones. An aspiring entrepreneur, Vincent had begun mowing lawns after school and on weekends. He planned to create a string of family businesses that could one day employ any relative who needed a job. His family's finances were stable, but they had not always been. He had seen how difficult it was for his stepfather to find reliable work after his release from prison. He

also anticipated that his incarcerated cousin, with whom he spoke regularly on an expensive prison-operated video conferencing service, would face similar employment challenges upon his release. “My cousin tells me, ‘I’m gonna need you,’” Vincent said. “That’s why I be so hard on myself. Discipline myself to do the things I got to do.” Vincent had come to see his life as a high-stakes entrepreneurial mission to forge a bright future for his family.

For five of the eight participants, the memory of tragically deceased immediate family members also intensified their desire to succeed. The symbolic stakes felt every bit as important as the material stakes. Casey, for example, lost his father in a shooting at the beginning of his senior year of high school. After his father’s death, Casey returned over and over again to memories of his father’s confidence in him. “He didn’t have to tell me to push myself,” Casey said. “He already saw it in me.” Like many of his peers coping with the premature loss of family members or close friends, Casey believed that he could honor his father’s legacy by thriving in life. “I know he’s still looking down and watching,” Casey told me. “I want to make him proud.” The thought was at once an inspiration and a gnawing source of additional pressure.

Poverty not only intensified the young men’s desire to build fulfilling lives; it also multiplied the outlets into which they could pour their effort. With little money at their disposal, they would have to work to attain many intermediate objectives on the way to building the lives they wanted—objectives that more affluent young people could attain with no additional effort. For example, Dorian knew that to fulfill his dream of becoming a professional photographer and filmmaker, he would eventually need to buy expensive photography equipment and a high-end computer for photo and film editing. He also intended to pursue a college education in photography and film. Working to acquire photography equipment would require Dorian to direct his effort in one direction; working to earn his degree would require him to direct his effort in another. He would have to choose whether to pursue these goals one at a time or simultaneously. And he would have to decide how vigorously to work for each one.

By sharpening their desires and requiring effort to fulfill all of them, poverty laid the groundwork for participants to overcommit. It fostered a pressing, deep-seated urge to do everything in their power to build the lives they wanted. It also created a plethora of alluring but demanding outlets for this urge.

## Foundational Process 2: Schools Teach Misleading Effort Lessons

Other factors set the stage for overwork by teaching the young men misleading lessons about effort. School-based effort training emphasized that the proper response to a daunting workload is to try as hard as humanly possible.



This training turned out to be poorly matched to the situations students would encounter in college. Schools did not balance their rhetoric of strenuous exertion with equally important reminders about pacing, moderation, and recovery. And the opportunities schools gave students to practice exerting effort did not resemble the unstructured, long-term, unforgiving challenges they would later face.

Messaging about intense effort was pervasive in both high schools I observed. At Strive Prep, the no-excuses school that seven of the eight participants attended, students received repeated reminders about the importance of trying their hardest. They walked to class under banners that read *Dig Deeper*, *Stretch Yourself*, and *Without Struggle, There Is No Progress . . .* and *No Greatness*. Teachers regularly used the concepts of “grit,” “urgency,” “hustle,” and to frame their feedback to classes. At Haley High, effort-based messaging was also quite common, with teachers and administrators regularly linking “hard work,” “hustle,” and “focus” to student success.

Effort rhetoric in the high schools was often melodramatic, valorizing intensity and physical abandon. For example, at an opening assembly for the Strive Prep senior class on the first day of school, Mr. Katz, the lead teacher, held up a large metal sword as students gasped and giggled. “Swords like this are created in something called a forge,” Mr. Katz said, projecting quiet intensity. “A forge is a very hot oven. It can get up to thousands of degrees. And in fact the hotter the oven, the better your sword will be. The stronger it will be.” He analogized the heat of the forge to the hard work of preparing for college and career. School, he told the students, “is the forge for you. The forge is hot. This is your future in the making. And this year, we are going to turn up the heat even higher.” He encouraged them to wholeheartedly chase their goals. “This will be the year of no regrets,” he said. “You put everything you have on the court. You put everything you have in the forge. And you are going to forge your future.” Such messaging emphasized that trying sufficiently hard—“turn[ing] up the heat even higher,” leaving “everything you have on the court”—requires total physical strain. It entirely omitted warnings about the dangers of exhaustion.

Students received few opportunities to independently pace and regulate their efforts at school, leaving them little practice with the long-term, open-ended challenges they would face in college. Especially at Strive, emphasis on personal effort often occurred in situations where students were given little autonomy (see Golann 2021), such that “trying hard” became a simple matter of complying with very explicit instructions. Using two techniques popularized by author and pedagogical consultant Doug Lemov—“What to Do” (Lemov 2010, p. 417) and “Narrating Positive Behavior” (Lemov 2018)—teachers structured and praised students’ efforts. A characteristic case occurred one morning in environmental science class.

## Effort Traps

Teacher: Wave to me if you need more time. OK, if you just gave me a wave continue finishing the ocean wave part of your packet. You have eight minutes. [*Sets timer.*] We are doing this at level zero [*silently*]. Begin.

Jaydin: [*Looks back down and continues writing in packet.*]

Dorian: [*Sharpens pencil.*]

Teacher: Team 3 needs more time on their packet. They are working silently from their textbooks. Excellent. Jaydin and Devonte have started silently working from their textbooks. Those of us using our four terms in our responses are showing me that they are really going to be prepared for the exit ticket [*end-of-class quiz*].

In such structured classes, students could choose *whether* to exert effort, but not *how* to do so. They gained little experience guiding and regulating their own work. College professors would not be micromanaging students' efforts in this way.

Moreover, rather than teaching students how to pace efforts to sustainably meet long-term goals, the schools ran systems that allowed students to fall behind and then induced them to catch up in structured, short-term sprints. This pattern would prove poorly matched to colleges, which were less forgiving of falling behind. Both high schools, like many high schools across the country, adhered to a philosophy of "teaching for mastery" (e.g., Block 1980). This meant that grades depended largely on students demonstrating that they understood the material they were being taught, even if they did not succeed on the first try. If a student scored poorly on a test or assignment, they could redo it for a replacement grade. Students monitored their grades through online portals like PowerSchool, identifying tests or assignments on which they had done poorly. Teachers would let students retry failed work in class, during lunch, or after school. In the frenzied days before final grades each quarter, students would dash to make up assignments. Teachers and administrators often created an aura of emergency around this work, telling students their academic fate hung in the balance. Midway through the fall at Haley High, for example, the principal called the entire senior class into an assembly to deliver just such a rallying cry.

Principal: If you ask me how many people are going to graduate on time? I would say, right now, less than fifty percent.

Students: [*Bustle of gasps and murmurs.*]

Principal: Hear these words. You might show up [to graduation] with your mama, your grandma, your nana, you uncle, and them. That is not going to move me. The only way you graduate is if you turn this around. It's on you. I'm telling you right now,

you'd better get to your teachers, look on PowerSchool, and bust your butt to get it done. . . . The only way forward is to put the effort in. To put the work in. It's the only way.

In telling students that they might not graduate and admonishing them to “bust your butt” and seek makeup work, the principal invoked a do-or-die sense of urgency. Scenarios like these taught a clear lesson: if you find yourself in a bind, the way out is to buckle down, try harder, and make up for past mistakes through effort and force of will. But such short-term bursts of effort, spurred by emotional rallying cries from teachers and administrators and made possible by forgiving academic policies, were very different from the slow-and-steady work students would need to do to stay academically afloat in college.

As students gained practice exerting effort in ways that were not well matched for college, they also largely bought into their schools' oversimplistic rhetoric about the effectiveness of hard work. For example, Casey was listening from the audience as the Haley High principal delivered his “bust your butt” warning. Casey had been grieving the loss of his father, and he had failing grades in drama and environmental science. Later, when prompted by a teacher to set academic goals for himself, Casey wrote: “Make sure I'm not lazy to do my work, and cut back on wasting time on things that are foolish.” He believed that he could salvage the semester by buckling down. Indeed, his subsequent experience improving his grades, with structured support that would not be available to him in college, confirmed to him that this approach worked. Likewise, I listened as students at Strive earnestly attested to the effectiveness of hard work. In one class, for example, students contemplated a scenario about a college student who found himself on academic probation. The teacher asked students what advice they would give this student. Hands shot up. Students gave answers like “I would tell him to stop slacking in class,” “He should set higher expectations for himself,” “He needs more motivation,” and “He needs to put in work.” Students had developed a sense—part rhetoric-driven ideology, part experientially grounded intuition—that vigorous effort was a silver bullet for getting out of academic jams.

To be sure, the effects of school-based effort training were not monolithic. First, in buying into their schools' lessons about effort, students did not adopt a blanket mindset that they always needed to work hard at everything. Rather, they were developing a repertoire that they could selectively activate when they were facing demanding levels of work they believed was important. As Dorian reflected, years after high school:

If gym class was hard, I'm not gonna be like, “Well, I gotta persevere.” Fuck no. I just don't care enough about it. But if I'm with [a film mentor], and we're doing a long shoot and I'm on audio, I care about that. If shit gets hard, I'm really thinking to myself, “I'm gonna push through.”

Like other young men in this study, Dorian would reach for this repertoire of “pushing through” when he faced daunting arrays of tasks in college that he dearly wanted to finish.

Second, schools were far from the only places that students absorbed rhetoric about hard work. Many, for example, gravitated to elements of popular culture—including subgenres of hip-hop, R&B, and Black fashion—whose practitioners celebrated individualistic achievement through tremendous effort. All also heard reminders about hard work from parents or other loved ones, although these reminders tended to be about showing up and complying with expectations rather than about “giving it your all.”

Still, effort-based lessons taught in the young men’s high schools played a substantial role in shaping their intuitions and habits about when and how to work hard. The extent to which the young men had internalized these lessons became apparent when they began trying to apply them in college. Too often, these lessons proved to be mismatched to the newly autonomous and unforgiving circumstances of the young men’s college lives.

### Foundational Process 3: Poverty Demands Survival Work

For some of the young men, poverty also necessitated going to work to make ends meet. To pursue higher education, young men in this predicament would have to work outside jobs at the same time—a conundrum that many low-income college students face (Perna 2010; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Hart 2019).

After their high school graduation, three participants had no choice but to be employed. Juan had a young son whom he was working to support. Paul, an orphan, was renting an apartment with his older sister. He needed to earn money for rent and food. And Jaydin, whose mother had recently become unemployed, needed to help his family make ends meet. For these three, the only way to pursue college would be to work a job at the same time.

Like their peers, these young men were eager to get ahead. For example, the idea of foregoing college to focus on making ends meet was unfathomable to Jaydin. An inquisitive young man who was fascinated by world religions and loved playing chess, Jaydin saw college as a way to pursue his curiosity and achieve upward mobility. Jaydin lit up when he described college as an avenue to financial success. “I want to study business,” he said, eagerly. “I want to end up like Donald Trump.” In his bedroom, above his chessboard, Jaydin hung a poster of a mansion with a large garage full of supercars. It read, “Justification for higher education.” Jaydin was committed to pursuing college and supporting his family at the same time.

Needing to work to survive would leave Juan, Paul, and Jaydin with little leeway in how to allocate their efforts. Balancing college workloads with making ends meet would place them perilously close to overcommitment. Maintaining both endeavors would require working very hard. It would

also require pacing, on-the-fly adjustment, and luck. The young men would have to allocate their efforts judiciously, remaining within their physical thresholds to avoid exhaustion. If the demands on their time proved too much, they would need to cut back on their commitments—perhaps dropping some of their classes—before points of no return like add/drop deadlines. And with little margin for error, they would need luck. A single misfortune, like an illness, could set them back far enough that they would not be able to catch up.

#### FALLING INTO EFFORT TRAPS

Misleading school-based effort training, pent-up desire from childhoods of poverty, and the need to make ends meet laid the foundations of the effort traps that lurked for the young men. More immediate circumstances, in the form of newfound opportunities to work toward desired goals, also contributed to these effort traps. Here is how the process of falling into effort traps played out for study participants.

##### Step 1: Poverty, Optimism, and Drive Prompt Overcommitment

For participants who fell into effort traps, the process began with overcommitment. As college started, five of the eight young men set out to do more than they would have the physical capacity or time to accomplish. Pressures arising from poverty—the urgent desire to get ahead, and in some cases the imperative to make ends meet—pushed them to take on more than they could sustain. In addition to taking on full course loads, the young men signed up for demanding outside jobs. These dual commitments would eventually prove to be unsustainably taxing, but this was not immediately apparent. Excited to finally have the chance to chase their dreams, the young men approached this work not with a sense of burden or foreboding but with a sense of exhilaration and optimism.

As the fall semester got underway, Paul and Jaydin had no choice but to work outside jobs. Jaydin took a job at a seafood restaurant, vowing to use his paychecks to support his family. Likewise, Paul continued working his job at a Burger King, using the funds to pay rent and other living expenses.<sup>6</sup>

Other young men—Dorian, Vincent, and Casey—saw outside jobs as avenues to pursue cherished life goals that dovetailed closely with their academic commitments. Although these young men did not need to work to make ends meet in the short term, their decisions to simultaneously pursue

<sup>6</sup> As I describe in a subsequent section, Juan, the final young man who would have needed to work, opted at the last moment not to attend college.

college and employment were nevertheless shaped by poverty. Years of going without had given them a sense of pent-up eagerness to vigorously chase their dreams. Each was discovering a strong “identity project” to become the person he wanted to be (DeLuca et al. 2016). But unlike privileged peers with the resources to bankroll outside-of-class identity projects, these young men would have to work for every cent required to build the lives they imagined.

As they entered college, the young men who became overcommitted shared a sense of optimism that they could accomplish anything they set their minds to with enough hard work. “I regret not working harder in high school,” Dorian said on the eve of the fall semester. “I know I can get a lot more out of college.” Similarly, Vincent, an aspiring entrepreneur, described his vision of college as a time of frenetic work and growth. “I’m going to have a job that keeps me on the board [earning money] every week,” he said. “[In my classes] I just wanna learn as much as I can about business. . . . [And] throughout college I’m basically going to be building up my people skills. I’m going to be meeting so many people in class. That’s basically a time for me to build up my clientele.” Vincent pictured himself working toward the life he wanted with nonstop effort in and out of the classroom.

The young men’s optimism about sustaining high workloads was bolstered by positive experiences during the opening weeks of college. As the semester began, they seemed to thrive. For example, Dorian was enthusiastic about his intro to drawing and intro to graphic design classes, where he learned to sketch objects in perspective, color match when mixing paints, and embrace abstract ideas he had previously shied away from in his art. On the days I attended these classes with him, he appeared to be in his element, focusing intently as he filled pages and canvases with colorful compositions. He also found a happy home in his writing class, where the curriculum focused on performing in-person interviews and using them to write nonfiction essays. Dorian had experience conducting interviews through his photography work. At his professor’s invitation, he gave a 30-minute lecture on interview techniques, holding his classmates’ rapt attention as he presented his work.

Once they sensed that their classes were off to a good start, Dorian, Vincent, and Casey did not relax or slack off. They saw a chance that felt too good to pass up. They could keep up in their classes while also using time and energy outside of class to work toward cherished, complementary life goals.

Dorian’s extra work was aimed at jumpstarting his artistic career. He hoped to save up for the camera and computer he had long wanted. His current status quo—an amateur-level D-SLR camera and phone-based photo-editing software—was workable but far from ideal. To begin saving, Dorian took a part-time job for a construction company, where he photographed local renovation sites and updated the company website with his pictures. He found the job through an adult mentor, a documentary filmmaker named Steve who

had begun to take Dorian along on his shoots. The job felt like the perfect complement to his college studies, and it felt aligned with the advice Steve was giving him about how to pursue his career. "I was talking to Steve and his friends, and they said they wished they had got into more creative opportunities in high school and college," Dorian said. Dorian resolved to start the job while keeping up in his classes. He planned to meet the additional commitment by trying harder. "I'm going to get on my grind," he told me.

Dorian did "get on his grind." He went to classes in the mornings, where he worked hard. After class, he would hustle off campus for photo shoots, and then edit pictures and work on school assignments late into the night. His weekends were packed too. For example, one Saturday, he had four back-to-back shoots, the first beginning at 7:00 a.m. and the last wrapping up well after dark. That final shoot—a private party and book launch where Dorian met the mayor—gave him a taste of the life he was striving for. His pace was "intense" and "tiring," Dorian admitted, but the experiences it afforded him were heady and addictive.

For Dorian, college studies and work outside of college felt like part of the same overarching mission to build the life he wanted. Dorian saw his job as closely aligned with his film and photography studies in college—it was all part of the same identity project. "I'm learning a lot [at this job], and I'm getting my money up for this camera," Dorian told me. "It feels good."

Vincent, the aspiring entrepreneur, similarly saw a close alignment between his studies and his outside-of-college work. Vincent was pursuing a mortuary studies degree at a community college to prepare to one day open his own funeral home, and he was continuing to build his lawn care business. The classes and the mowing were part of the same overarching entrepreneurial project to open a string of family enterprises, which he hoped would also one day include a barber shop. "Grass always grow. Hair always grow. And people always die," he said, his eyes twinkling above a wry smile. He planned to save the money he earned from lawn care to buy a pickup truck, which would help him take farther-flung mowing jobs. He knew that pursuing school and entrepreneurship would require energy and commitment, but he felt eager to take on the challenge. "It's about time to just take care of business now," he told me as college began. "So I'm ready to get it. I'm ready to get it on."

And it was the same for Casey, who saw both college and an off-campus job as twin tickets to independence. During his spring semester, Casey took a job at Nordstrom to save up for a security deposit and rent for an apartment. Getting the apartment would allow him to take summer classes at a nearby community college that shared credits with his university, helping him work toward graduation. It would also allow him to spend more time with his childhood best friend, who would be his roommate. To Casey, the college classes and the job both felt like avenues to adulthood; he saw them both as part of the same project:

Casey: I'm about to have a job. . . . I'll tell them my school schedule and then we gonna be poppin'. And I'm gonna get my car after my mom file her taxes. She's gonna pay the insurance and get a battery, 'cause it needs a battery. And then this summer, I'ma stay here in [city name]. I'm gonna work my job and take classes at [city community college]. And I'm gonna get an apartment so I can stay here. So yeah, job, apartment, car. I'ma be grown!

His excitement was palpable as he spoke; he was eager to put in the work to build the life he imagined.

As Jaydin, Paul, Dorian, Vincent, and Casey signed up for massive workloads between full-time college and outside employment, I did not see obvious signs that their high school effort training was driving their commitments. Circumstances born of poverty—the need to make ends meet, or pent-up desire paired with the need to self-fund identity projects—were more than enough to fuel their overcommitment. But as the young men began to struggle with the resulting heavy workloads, they tried to cope by reaching for effort-based repertoires they had learned in school.

## Step 2: Effort Training Prompts Doubling Down

Once the young men became overcommitted, the lessons they had internalized about solving problems with vigorous hard work proved fatefully counterproductive. These lessons were the other key part of the effort traps that caught the young men. The lessons prompted the young men to double down on their efforts, foreclosing opportunities to scale back on their commitments before it was too late.

As their semesters progressed, Dorian, Vincent, Casey, Jaydin, and Paul found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the demands of their undertakings inside and outside of class. Sometimes there were direct scheduling conflicts, such as when a work shift overlapped with class time. More often, the combined undertakings simply required more effort than any reasonable person could consistently put forth.

All the young men were overcommitted, but not all had the same options. Jaydin and Paul had no choice but to keep their jobs. However, they could opt to withdraw from classes in time to avoid failing grades and maintain financial aid eligibility. Dorian, Vincent, and Casey could also withdraw from classes, or they could quit their jobs.

Failure did not happen all at once. Warning signs of overcommitment came first: fatigue, missed classes or assignments, low exam scores. In moments of reckoning, the young men interpreted these signs not as evidence of incompatible undertakings and unreasonable workload but rather as indicators of inadequate personal will. After absorbing years' worth of effort-based messaging in school, this interpretation felt natural to the young



men. They responded by doubling down, resolving to overcome their problems by staying more focused and trying harder. This is one way that trying harder undermined goal attainment: it kept participants locked into unsustainable levels of commitment past a point of no return.

Casey, for example, acknowledged that working left him with little time for studying and homework, but he resolved to persevere through hard work. He was in danger of losing his financial aid if he finished the year with too low a GPA. He texted me about his plans for salvaging the semester:

Casey: [My GPA] has to be 1.5 or they take my financial aid away . . . but ima just grind for the rest of the semester. The only class I really have problem with is Math, so ima get it together in the class cause I failed one quiz already and we took 3.

Tom: Got it.

Casey: Bout [to] get on my grind.

Such a last-minute sprint to pull his grades up felt familiar to him—it followed the pattern he had learned in middle school and high school, where “teaching for mastery” (Block 1980) led to frequent end-of-semester pushes. “I’m not going to lie,” he told me. “This is how it usually go. My grades start out bad, and then I do what I gotta do to pull them up.” Doubling down on effort had become Casey’s go-to strategy in his “toolkit” of options for dealing with overwhelming challenges (Swidler 1986).

Indeed, years later, looking back on his decision to double down on employment and coursework, Casey chalked up his intuition about hard work to what he had learned in school. At the no-excuses middle school he attended, Casey recalled, “We used to have five key words . . . and one of the words was perseverance.” During the school’s long days, teachers would tell Casey and his peers how to cope with exhaustion:

Perseverance, they used to be big on us about perseverance. You know, you gotta push through man! . . . I used to be at the bus stop at six in the morning, and then not get back home till five. You have to persevere through that. That was how they shaped my mindset to be. Like, just perseverance, man.

Casey had learned to equate the feeling of backing off with giving up, and giving up was not something he was inclined to do.

Dorian’s first moment of reckoning came in October of his first semester of college. As he tried to keep up with his photography job and his classes, he began to show worrying signs of strain. He was realizing that his boss at the photography job was mercurial and demanding. “She just put unnecessary stress on me,” Dorian said. Whenever he would make edits to the

company's website or upload new photos, Dorian reported, his boss would second-guess his work and make him redo it. He was also slipping behind in Spanish, not keeping pace with the homework, and struggling to wake up in time for class. He looked exhausted whenever I spent time with him. "I can't wait until this semester over," Dorian told me. "I'm going to sleep for days."

Dorian had suffered some depressive episodes in high school, and I could sense that he might be sliding into another one, exhausted from his frenetic work and overwhelmed by the prospect of fulfilling all his commitments. After a tumultuous weekend in which he missed photo gigs and quarreled with his parents, he skipped his Monday classes and considered dropping out of college. But by Tuesday, he had changed his mind. He resolved to make appointments with his professors to take stock of work he had missed and redouble his efforts. "I'm gonna get it together," he told me.

Dorian's professors were understanding. For example, his English professor met one-on-one with Dorian in her office, granting him an extension on an assignment and creating a plan with him to help him get caught up. The pattern of having an inflexible boss but flexible professors held true for Casey, Paul, and Jaydin too. They would likely be fired for missing a work shift, but if they missed a class, they sensed they would have leeway to get caught up. But this leeway was only temporarily helpful. Unlike in high school, when teachers would bend over backward to help their students as they pushed them to get caught up, college professors were less proactive and less accommodating. And because the young men were trying to do more work than they could sustain, eventual failure was inevitable.

Dorian tried even harder, as he had vowed to do. However, although he gritted it out until the end of the semester, he seemed increasingly haggard and scattered. His class attendance grew spotty. He completed and presented a beautiful final project in his design class, which he passed. But in a poignant irony, he failed English, the class where he had given the guest lecture. He also failed Spanish.

Dorian's second moment of reckoning came before his second semester of college. Vowing to do better at all his undertakings, Dorian doubled down on his work-and-school approach. He quit the photography job, realizing that it was more demanding than it was worth. Not yet having saved enough for the camera and lenses, he took a job as an overnight valet at a downtown hotel. Between his classes and his new job, he would be working at least as many hours as he had the previous semester, but he seemed optimistic he could pull it off.

As he reflected years later about his decision to double down on simultaneously pursuing employment and college, Dorian recalled his faith in willpower and determination. "I thought I could do both, basically," he said. "I thought that by working hard enough, I could handle it." When the going got tough, Dorian recalled, "I was like, 'Alright, I'm going to persevere through this shit.'"

After their own moments of reckoning, Vincent and Jaydin also doubled down, vowing to focus more and work harder to succeed where they had previously failed. Like Dorian and Casey, they attributed their early struggles not to overcommitment but to lack of adequate effort. Vincent's moment of reckoning came at the end of his first semester of college. He had missed too many days working on his lawn care service to pass his classes. Rather than reevaluating his commitments, he vowed to simply try harder the next semester. "The thing that happen with me is . . . I'm not all the way there," he told me. "I'm not ten times as focused as I could be."

Jaydin's moment of reckoning came after he fell behind in his classes during the fall semester. Jaydin had not been working quite as hard as Vincent, Dorian, and Casey. After initially struggling to balance his work and school commitments, Jaydin had stopped going to classes for a time, sheepishly trying to avoid the stern rebukes he anticipated his professors might give him. But as the deadline to withdraw approached, he resolved not to quit. Like Vincent, he attributed his struggles to inadequate effort, and he pledged to catch up through force of will. "I can do it if I want to," he said.

Paul, for his part, never quite arrived at a moment of reckoning about his overwork. Beginning midway through his fall semester, a simmering gun conflict pushed Paul slowly into hiding, forcing him to stop attending classes and quit his job. It is telling that it took the threat of death to dissuade Paul from strenuously chasing his dream of upward mobility. Like the other young men, he was deeply committed to this work.

### Step 3: Failure through Exhaustion and Elimination

Doubling down could spark a flurry of activity that helped the young men temporarily catch up, but their commitments were unsustainable. They were fundamentally trying to do too much. This was another way that effort proved counterproductive to success: when it was exerted past a sustainable threshold, it led to exhaustion and failure.

For Dorian, failure took the form of burning out. Physically and emotionally exhausted, he fell apart midway through his second semester of college. As the spring semester began, he would come home from work at 6:00 a.m., sleep for perhaps two hours, and then wake up in time for his 10:00 a.m. math class. Before long, the exhaustion started to show. He had bags under his eyes. His relationship with his girlfriend deteriorated. One morning, less than two months into the semester, Dorian's mom called me to ask if I had seen him. She had heard from his girlfriend that the two had broken up and that Dorian may have been arrested. "I don't know where my child is," she told me, her voice breaking. I called the jail to see if he was there, feeling a mix of relief and dread when I learned he was not. Eventually, his mom called back. She had learned that Dorian had suffered a breakdown,

dialing 911 in the middle of the night to say he was suicidal. The police had picked him up on the street, placed him in handcuffs, and taken him to the hospital.

When I went with Dorian's mom to visit him in the emergency room, Dorian was nearly catatonic. He lay curled up under a thin sheet on an examining table, his eyes open, his breaths coming in and out with a slight tremor. His mother bent over to hug him. She picked a piece of lint out of his hair and then settled into a chair to wait. Hours later, Dorian was admitted to the psychiatric ward, where he stayed for almost a week.

When he was released, Dorian had missed midterms in his classes and overrun minimum attendance requirements. He met with a college counselor, who briefly considered whether Dorian might be able to salvage his semester. Dorian would need to get each professor's approval to do makeup work and exams. The counselor told him to consider this option only if he had "a superhero sense of energy right now." Dorian, whose superhero sense of energy early in the semester had prompted his breakdown, looked thoroughly drained. Both agreed that it would be best for him to withdraw from his classes.

Dorian blamed his failure on insufficient personal effort and willpower. "It's on me," he said. "I'm not in the mindset. And I'm not really focused on it. And I don't know why I can't, like, I really can't make [college] my number one priority. I'm not trying to say like I'm not strong enough to make it. But . . .," he trailed off.

Casey and Vincent did not suffer breakdowns, but they failed just the same. Doubling down had kept each one committed to an untenable path. Exhausted, both men eventually stopped managing to maintain their frenetic pace in both work and school, falling behind in their classes as a result. Casey stuck with the department store job, even as he grappled with the stifling limits it placed on his ability to study and do homework. Vincent continued to work to expand his lawn business during his second semester, even as he scrambled to catch up academically. At the end of the school year, neither had cleared the minimum GPA threshold their colleges required for continued financial aid eligibility.

Jaydin, having passed up the opportunity to withdraw from classes after resolving to work harder, tried to stick to his new resolution. However, he was quickly daunted by the schoolwork he would need to make up, and he fell back into the self-reinforcing pattern of missing class. Although he would not have been able to quit his job because he needed to support his mother and siblings, and thus might not have had a viable path to academic success that semester, his decision to buckle down instead of withdrawing nevertheless proved counterproductive to his advancement. With failing grades in all his classes, he lost his financial aid eligibility, and he was saddled with a 0.0 college GPA that would be hard to overcome in the future.

AVOIDING EFFORT TRAPS

Three participants managed to resist the pull of effort traps. All three experienced circumstances that warned them of the dangers of overcommitment.

Juan, who needed to work to support his young son, avoided an effort trap by deciding at the last minute not to attend college. A month before he was set to begin classes, Juan's mother moved the family unexpectedly. From their new home on the outskirts of metro New Orleans, Juan now faced a commute to campus that would require multiple bus changes and take at least two hours each way. This new challenge was such an obvious impediment that he reconsidered his plans. Juan withdrew from college before classes began.

Two other participants, A.J. and Kenya, attended college but opted not to take jobs. They are the only two participants who passed their first-year classes. Relative to their peers who succumbed to effort traps, A.J. and Kenya exerted themselves comparatively narrowly and modestly. Attempts at upward mobility can vary in terms of acceptance of risk (Hamilton and Armstrong 2021), and A.J. and Kenya were both risk averse. By focusing on their academics and foregoing opportunities to work toward complementary goals, they avoided becoming spread thin. By moderating their efforts, they avoided exhaustion.

For A.J. and Kenya—unlike for their peers Dorian, Vincent, Casey, Jaydin, and Paul—typical days required only moderate quantities of work, allowing for substantial downtime. During a typical college day I spent with A.J., he attended 3 total hours of class, spent 20 minutes conducting an interview with a professor for the college newspaper, and spent an additional two hours working on an English essay and writing code for his computer science class. He spent the remaining waking hours of his day either eating meals or relaxing in his room, where he played the videogame *Dead or Alive* and streamed several episodes of *The Bernie Mac Show* on his laptop. Likewise, during a typical college day I spent with Kenya, he spent two hours attending that day's classes, approximately 15 minutes completing an English class homework assignment, and the remaining hours of the day hanging out with his roommate as they watched YouTube videos, played the videogame *NBA 2K*, and made trips to a tucked-away stoop to smoke marijuana. With typical days like these, both young men completed their academic requirements with energy to spare.

Perspective on Risk Helps Focus and Moderate Effort

A.J. and Kenya were subject to some of the same processes—childhood deprivation and misleading effort training—that spurred overcommitment in their peers. What helped them nevertheless resist these influences to overcommit? Two inclinations appeared to help A.J. and Kenya keep their

efforts focused and limited: a sense of caution and a sense of contentment. Both intuitions emerged, at least in part, from circumstances that gave them a perspective on risk. More than other participants, A.J. and Kenya could see that aspects of their lives would deteriorate if they left college. Like Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, they were materially secure enough during their first semester of college that they did not need to work to make ends meet. However, unlike Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, they had a strong sense that college was a refuge. Dorm life away from New Orleans offered A.J. and Kenya tangible benefits that they were keen to hold onto.

For A.J., moving away to college felt like an escape from his chaotic and demanding childhood home. An introvert, A.J. did not like the frequent parties that his mother and stepfather threw. He also felt burdened by caring for his severely autistic younger brother. At college, by contrast, A.J. could spend all his time focused on himself, and he got to live in a quiet dorm room.

For Kenya, remaining enrolled at his out-of-town college offered him a chance to save his best friend Paul's life. Kenya, soon after learning of Paul's gun conflict in New Orleans, resolved that he wanted Paul to transfer to his out-of-town college to stay safe. Although Kenya was less materially at ease in college than A.J.—Kenya's dorm lacked hot water, and the cafeteria food gave him diarrhea—he resolved that he wanted to remain enrolled despite these hardships so that Paul would agree to the transfer. Paul indeed transferred for the spring semester, and the two became roommates.

For these reasons, A.J. and Kenya experienced college as a refuge in a way that the other young men did not. The tangible and immediate downsides of failing college fostered a sense of caution. A.J. worried most about his grades. Describing his first finals period in an essay, he wrote:

Terrible scenarios would spin through my head like a broken record from morning to night. In a dream, I saw myself getting bad grades, leading to me getting kicked out of from this university that I've worked so hard to get into. (A.J.'s writing)

With such worries front of mind, A.J. turned down an off-campus tutoring job that he believed would leave him too little time to study. "There's only 24 hours in a day," he later explained, looking back on his decision. "You've got to leave enough time for school."

For A.J. and Kenya, the sense that life outside of college could be a great deal worse also fostered a sense of contentment. With few pressing desires, they were less inclined to chase opportunities outside class. "It feels better," A.J. told me emphatically as he reflected on his new life in college. "I don't have the same excuses I had as when I was in high school." Similarly, Kenya was happy to be living with his best friend in the comparative safety of a campus away from threats of violence in New Orleans. He found that his spartan life in a mostly bare room with few possessions suited him just fine.

“I don’t care about material things,” he said. Indeed, as his birthday approached, I watched as friends and family members asked him what gifts he would like. He told everyone that he had everything he wanted.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on a two-year ethnographic case study about the transition to college for eight low-income Black men in New Orleans, this article describes social processes that pushed some of the young men to try so hard that their efforts became counterproductive, undermining their attempts to get ahead. Structural circumstances that prompt oppressed people to try unsustainably hard to attain their goals—such that additional effort decreases their chances of success or hastens their failure, thereby reproducing their disadvantaged position in social hierarchies—can be thought of as effort traps. For the young men in this study, effort traps emerged from class and race domination in society. Poverty pushed many of the young men to become overcommitted when they began college, because of the need to make ends meet and because of pent-up desire to chase multiple demanding goals at once. Simplistic training about grit in their high schools, rooted in hegemonic up-by-the-bootstraps ideology and racist and classist assumptions about their work ethic, primed the men to misinterpret signs of overcommitment as evidence of inadequate effort. Consequently, they doubled down on their efforts and remained locked into workloads that they would not be able to sustain. Trying harder felt natural to the young men, and it seemed beneficial at first, helping them temporarily catch up. But this extra effort ultimately undermined the young men’s chances of attaining the goals toward which they were striving, contributing to exhaustion and failure.

This article’s findings have implications for theory and policy related to the social reproduction of disadvantage, the double-edged nature of personal striving, and the teaching of grit. They also highlight the importance of studying effort sociologically—of investigating contextual processes that prompt effort and shape its effectiveness. Such questions have long been present in sociology, but this study brings them into sharper focus, helping set an agenda for future inquiry.

### Effort Traps and Social Reproduction

By introducing the concept of an effort trap, this article advances theory about mechanisms that keep young people stuck in poverty. Studies have identified a variety of structured processes that can prompt young people from low-income families to act in ways that are inadvertently self-undermining, from pursuing alluring but fruitless pathways through college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012) to rejecting education outright (Willis 1977). Effort traps

are another such process. One reason they are pernicious is that they are deeply counterintuitive to the people caught in them. For the young men profiled in this article, trying harder and harder was exactly what they had been trained to do, and it seemed like exactly the right course of action. Instead, it directly undermined their goal attainment.

Effort traps emerge from social context, not individual shortcomings. Individuals are not at fault for falling into effort traps; they are steered wrong by strong social currents. As research in psychology and management studies has begun to explore ways that vigorous effort can undermine goal attainment, it has tended to treat the inclination to overwork as an individual propensity (Miller and Wrosch 2007; Caesens et al. 2016; Khan et al. 2020). This is a mistake. The cases in this article show that counterproductive levels of effort can instead emerge from social processes that prime people to try too hard. Unpacking such processes is crucial for understanding how counterproductive levels of effort contribute to the reproduction of disadvantage.

The notion of effort traps helps sociologists think in more nuanced ways about how structural challenges interact with individual effort to undermine upward mobility. Scholars of social reproduction have long argued that effort is not enough to overcome the structural challenges of poverty (e.g., Williams and Kornblum 1985; Newman 1999; DeLuca et al. 2016). In making this argument, they have often used analogies that describe structural challenges as physical impediments, like “barriers” or an “undertow.” This imagery suggests an inaccurately simple effort-versus-structure model, in which personal advancement hinges on trying harder, having barriers removed, or both. The cases highlighted in this article help illustrate how advancement is not a one-dimensional push-and-pull struggle; it actually requires multidimensional balance and counterintuitive restraint. Effort is not uniformly helpful for getting ahead, and structural challenges stymie attempted upward mobility in many more ways than simply resisting effort.

Thoughtfully broadening sociology’s conceptual typology of structural challenges helps convey the range of mechanisms that undermine goal-directed efforts like attempted upward mobility. New analogies, like the “tightrope,” the “mobility puzzle,” and the “maze” (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012; Ray 2017; Paik 2021), better capture how structural challenges can manifest in fickle and vexing ways, punishing efforts that are misdirected or applied in the wrong order. Effort traps are a complementary theoretical idea, and they suggest additional analogies: quicksand, for example, or a self-tightening strait-jacket. These images convey that some structural challenges elicit struggle, only to turn it against the person exerting it. Concepts like the tightrope, the mobility puzzle, and effort traps offer sharp critiques of dominant effort ideology, conveying how the present system can subvert even the most earnest, zealous attempts to get ahead.



This study is an invitation to identify structural processes that prompt counterproductive effort in other cases and settings, with a particular focus on how these processes reinforce inequality. Although people in many different social positions can be prompted to work counterproductively hard, I have chosen to narrowly define effort traps as mechanisms that reproduce disadvantage. I have made this choice because socially structured counterproductive effort is likely far more consequential for people in oppressed social circumstances than in dominant social circumstances. I have also made this choice because being in a disadvantaged social position increases pressure to work hard, meaning that effort traps are likely inherent to many contexts of oppression.

Comparing the experiences of this study's participants to the experiences of affluent students in elite educational settings elucidates differences in the consequences of socially structured counterproductive effort across levels of privilege. The pressure cooker environments of elite schools—with burdensome parental expectations and fierce peer competition—can prompt affluent students to become overextended in ways that undermine their goal attainment and well-being (Demerath 2009; Deresiewicz 2014; Mueller and Abrutyn 2016). The worst-case consequences of these circumstances are terrible, including adolescent suicide (Mueller and Abrutyn 2016). But there are compelling reasons to expect that the consequences of structured overwork are, on average, far less severe for privileged young people. Affluent college students who overcommit and fail classes can easily reenroll and try again, for example. By contrast, this study's participants did not have such a safety net. The unforgivingness of circumstances at the bottom of social hierarchies is one reason that overwork reproduces disadvantage for the oppressed.

There are also compelling reasons to expect that pressures to overwork are more common for the oppressed. People in disadvantaged positions have higher baseline workloads to make ends meet and accomplish daily tasks, putting them at greater risk of expending effort past a sustainable threshold. And in our individualistic society, they also receive a constant stream of messaging that blames them for their social position and encourages them to get ahead through hard work. Just as these oppressive features of the class hierarchy pushed this study's participants into effort traps, analogous features of the gender hierarchy do the same to women. For example, Hochschild and Machung describe how working mothers, inculcated with a "do it all" ethos that demands perfection at home and at work, fall into cyclical patterns of overextension and exhaustion ([1989] 2012).

Because social pressures to overextend are probably more consequential and more common for the oppressed, they likely play a larger role in reproducing disadvantage at the bottom of social hierarchies than in undermining privilege at the top of them. Pressures to overextend and consequences

of overextension are part of the machinery of oppression. The concept of effort traps helps attune us to these dynamics, revealing yet another way that social disadvantage can be self-perpetuating.

### Grit Training

A straightforward policy implication of this article's findings is that school-based grit training should be reconsidered. Research has already documented oppressive, anti-Black consequences of grit training (Love 2019; Golann 2021). This study builds on these findings by longitudinally tracing negative consequences of grit training in the years after students leave K-12 schooling. It shows that schools like Strive, which tell their students to "dig deep" and "put everything you have on the court," are inadvertently sowing seeds of overcommitment and failure. When Dorian thought to himself, "I'm going to persevere through this shit," he was being gritty in exactly the way his teachers had preached, and it was to his detriment.

For students, learning how to pace and regulate effort may be more important than learning to double down and try as hard as possible. This would involve giving students autonomous practice allocating their own effort. It would also involve balanced messaging very different than the melodramatic paeans to hard work that students currently hear throughout the school day. Instead of saying, "Dig deeper" or "Bust your butt," teachers and administrators might remind students, "Easy does it." They might brainstorm with students about how to get more sleep or how to balance schoolwork with the myriad other demands in their lives.

Proponents of grit might argue that such balanced messaging is in fact the proper way to teach grittiness. In their original article about grit, Duckworth and colleagues emphasize the importance of endurance, writing, "The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon" (2007, p. 1088). But while the marathon analogy suggests a slow-and-steady approach, other cues in their discussion of grit—such as their imagery of people "pushing themselves to their limits"—suggest an all-in approach (2007, p. 1087). And more importantly, data from this article suggest that teachers' conceptions of grit skew toward oversimplistic, misguided maximalism. Students suffer from the resulting lessons.

Targeting the type of grit training I witnessed at low-income children of color is part of a shameful historical pattern. For centuries, race and class stereotypes have been warping our ideas about laziness and hard work (Whyte 1943; Patterson 1998; Johnson 1999). The results exacerbate race- and class-based domination. Efforts to "reform" Black and Brown youth by teaching them hard work fueled the growth of state penal systems (Chavez-Garcia 2012). And fixation on rooting out purported laziness has helped gut the US welfare system (Hancock 2003).

Educational practices do not need to be overtly hostile to be oppressive. Notably, practices that undermine students are often framed as initiatives to help them (Horn 2018; Shange 2019; Ray 2022a). As an ostensibly helpful educational intervention with hidden pernicious downsides, grit pedagogy is part of a larger framework of educational oppression that perpetuates race- and class-based inequality from one generation to the next. Ending grit pedagogy will be an important step in the much broader project of abolishing systems of oppression in US schooling (Stovall 2018).

### Toward a Sociology of Effort

This article highlights the importance of thinking sociologically about effort. To be sure, sociology already offers rich insights about contexts that prompt effort, differentially reward it, and shape the meanings people ascribe to it. This article helps identify these threads and begins to weave them together, setting an agenda for future research focused on the social causes and social consequences of individual striving.

What shapes how hard people try? To answer this question, it is not always enough to know a person's material incentives or underlying personality. The sociology of effort picks up where these other answers fall short. Findings from workplace ethnographies are emblematic of the insights that can be gleaned by examining effort in social context. Workers often put forth more effort than the bare minimum required to maintain employment, and investigating the roots of this extra effort turns out to be richly revealing. Studies uncover social pressures, ideological norms, and personal meaning-making processes that supercharge exploitation (Burawoy 1979; Hochschild 1983; Woodcock and Johnson 2018). While workplace ethnographies identify in-the-moment processes that elicit effort, this study reveals a more durable set of influences. The stories of Dorian and the other young men profiled in this article show that the social impetus to work doggedly hard can emerge from long-internalized lessons. By the time the young men arrived at college, the seeds of sustained overcommitment—including years of pent-up desire and years of up-by-the-bootstraps indoctrination—were already planted.

Studying effort sociologically promises new insights for cultural sociology. Research about cultural know-how and personal advancement has tended to focus on dispositions that shape interactions, especially with authority figures (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Lareau 2011; Calarco 2011; Jack 2019; Golann 2021). But findings from this study and others suggest that learned intuitions about effort also matter a great deal. Contextual intuition about how to “work smarter, not harder” may be its own form of cultural capital. For example, Khan shows that young people in elite educational settings learn to seem very busy while actually strategically slacking off (Khan 2011). By contrast, this

study's participants learned very different lessons in their schools, absorbing ideology about hard work that set them up for failure. Like other forms of cultural capital, contextual know-how about pacing and regulating effort is not shared equally in society.

The meanings people ascribe to their efforts are also fertile ground for cultural inquiry, revealing roles that personal striving plays even when it does not contribute to material gain or social advancement. It is telling, for example, that when young Americans are stymied in their attempts to get ahead, they sometimes shift from working on advancement to working on *themselves*, seeking validation and redemption by exchanging one form of striving for another (Silva 2013). Young people also try again and again to advance through college, even when these efforts do not materially pay off, because they value their identity as “worthy strivers” (Deterding 2015, p. 297; Nielsen 2015). Effort can be at least as much a moral construct as it is a means to material ends. Findings from this study identify an important pitfall of the moralization of effort: such moralization can masquerade as instrumental advice. School-based grit training is moralistic effort-based ideology dressed up as practical insight about how to succeed. Telling the difference can be difficult. Dorian, for example, insisted that he was a savvy consumer of his school's effort-based messaging—that he believed in hard work not for its own sake but for what it would help him accomplish. Nevertheless, this messaging led him astray.

Broadly, a sociology of effort promises to scrutinize a foundational aspect of US society: widespread belief in the importance and efficacy of hard work. Its findings could contribute to the larger sociological project of explaining systems of oppression in society. Understanding effort traps helps advance this work, showing how effort-based ideology not only masks the true causes of inequality but actively reproduces it.

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