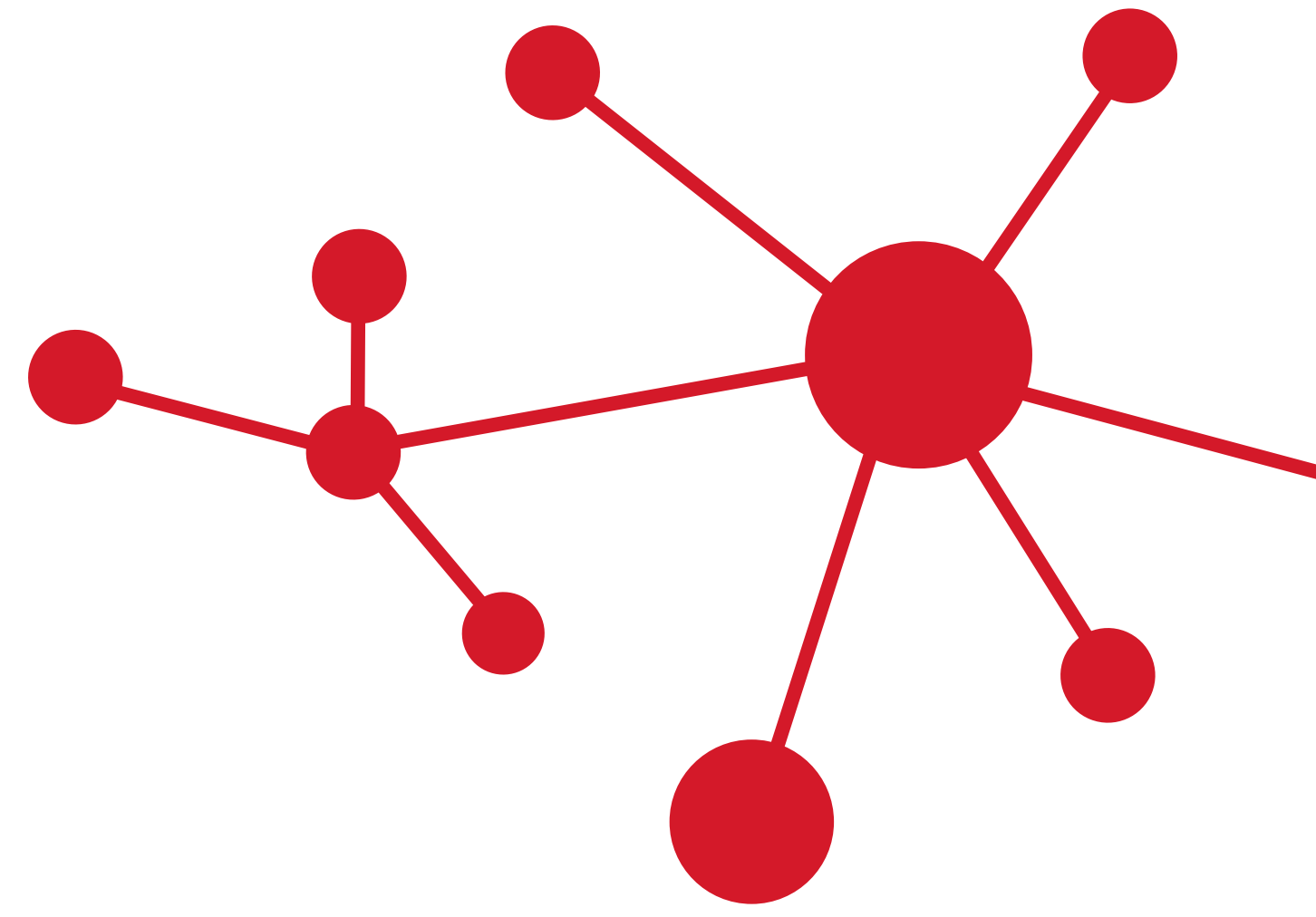


The Knowledge Project



Angela Duckworth:

Grit and Human Behavior

EPISODE #109

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Shane Parrish: Welcome to The Knowledge Project. I'm your host, Shane Parrish. This podcast sharpens your mind by helping you master the best of what other people have already figured out.

Today I'm speaking with Angela Duckworth, the founder and CEO of Character Lab—a nonprofit with a mission to advance scientific insights that help children thrive. Angela's book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, was a New York Times bestseller.

This conversation dives into whether human behavior is constant or circumstantial, grit and other mindsets that help us succeed, lessons for parents, developing our passion, reps versus hours, negative self-talk, personal rules for success, and so much more. It's time to listen and learn.

Shane Parrish: I'm curious about human behavior. Can we explore a bit to what extent behavior is predictable versus to what extent it's situational?

Angela Duckworth: The “person versus situation” debate is the question that you're asking about. And you could say that this has been the central question in all of psychology for as long as we've had psychology, right? And then if you want to predate it even more, you could say philosophy. You could argue that there are other questions as well, but this is central.

Am I generous because I'm a generous person or am I generous because of the exigencies of the situation? And the contrary too? When you witness selfish behavior, is that because the person is selfish or because of contextual factors? And as a psychologist, one of the first things I learned about was this war. Have you ever heard this expression, the person versus situation war in psychology?

Shane Parrish: No, never.

Angela Duckworth: It was about 1968, so I could be off by a year or so. But Walter Mischel, one of the greatest psychologists to ever live who lived into his 90s passed away a couple of years ago. He wrote a book called

Personality and Assessment. It was really a monograph, like a long essay. But it was like 300 pages, so let's call it a book. And young Walter at that point (it was like two years before I was born) asked the question; how consistent is our behavior across situations? Because that of course would be an argument for the person.

Shane is generous when he goes to buy coffee in the morning, Shane is generous to his family. Shane is generous to his friends. Shane is generous to a random person at the bus stop.

When you looked at the available data of which there was dramatically less, at least circa 1968, Walter was able to squint and say, "Not so much is the answer to how much consistency there is across situations." Which is an argument in favor of situations over the person.

The correlation that he observed across situations had a maximum of about 0.3. And sometimes people call this the 0.3 ceiling. So if I observe somebody at home versus at work, the correlation in a dataset of lots of people who are observed in both situations might only approach 0.3. So the reason why it's a war, you need an enemy to have a war, right? On the other side of this debate, even in the 1960s, and you had people who said that's ridiculous.

Of course, there's such a thing as a generous person, you're not going to marry a random person. You marry them because of their character, because of their personality. It can't be that we are so chameleon-like, that there's no consistency within us. There's no such thing as our character. Around that decade or so, there was also this research on the big five. Now I want to ask you, this is like a psychology quiz, Shane, have you ever heard of the big five?

Shane Parrish: No. Are these the Cialdini sort of liking, loving principles or are these something completely different?

Angela Duckworth: No. The big five refer to the five personality factors that are kind of like the North, South, and East and West of personality except for they're five not four, inconveniently. It's a taxonomy of personality traits.

So: extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and emotional stability. You can think of them, just to mix metaphors here, like as continents and then

like specific character or personality traits would just be on these continents. So like grit, which is something I study, would be on the conscientiousness continent but sitting next to self-control and punctuality and politeness, et cetera.

I think it's really interesting that around the time that people began to ask seriously and interrogate the data on whether it was the person or the situation that determined behavior, this kind of contrary to Walter tradition was emerging, which is to say, yes, there is such a thing as personality. And furthermore, we can actually a map of human personality that is consistent across culture and across time.

Children seem to have characters or personality attributes that could be classified into the big five. You can say of a child like, "Oh, that child is pretty high on extraversion, relatively low in conscientiousness, kind of in the middle on emotional stability," et cetera, et cetera.

I guess where I would say that we've advanced to in 2020 is the following resolution of this debate or this war, which is that it is both the personality of a person and their situation determine what they will do. And what's more, I can say that the wrong way to think about it is like 80/20, 70/30, 40/60. Because it's like a conversation where the personality of the person changes the situation.

Conscientious people select jobs that require conscientiousness. But then the situation talks back to the personality and shapes the personality. After you've been in a job that requires lots of detail orientation and diligent methodical work, you yourself after years will be shaped by it and so forth. So I believe that the situation matters. I believe that we do have characters, strengths, or personality traits. There's a lot more complexity to get into, but I think the metaphor that we want to use is that there's a conversation going on between ourselves and the circumstances in which we are.

Shane Parrish: And is that a conscious conversation or is that a conversation between our unconscious brain and our circumstance or physical environment, or-

Angela Duckworth: Well, now that you got me thinking historically, right? So I'm 50, I've been alive a half century. And in that time, this debate between the person and the situation happened and kind of was resolved I think. And at the same time, another, I think important discovery or advance was made in the same period in psychology, basically the

affirmation that Freud was right. Freud was wrong about a lot of things, but one thing he was very right about is that so much of our behavior and even our emotion and our motivation happens below the surface of consciousness. The idea that we do things and don't always know why we do them is important, but it's not just that insight because you could say like, "Oh, really, it took Freud and 50 years of science after Freud to figure that..." It's like how much of our behavior and our emotion and motivation could be going on without our conscious awareness.

I do think a lot of the conversation between who we are and our circumstances is happening without our being aware. Although you can bring our awareness to our behavior—that's where Freud was wrong, by the way. Freud was like, "You'll never know. It's under the floorboards and you can't pry open the floorboards in the basement of your mind." I think that this dialogue that happens below the surface of consciousness can be raised, most of it, to conscious awareness. And then you could have a conversation like we're having, and then you can think like, hey, what is it about my job that's sort of bringing out the worst in me? Let me think about that. I'll talk to my spouse about it and then proceed from there.

Shane Parrish: I'm going to switch gears a little bit here. History shows us that the best opportunities come from sort of seizing and spotting opportunities. And they don't come in the good times, they come in the bad times. It seems like an art. If you follow that, then there's a staggering advantage to be gained by positioning yourself to capitalize on bad times. And one of the ways that we can do that is our mindset. If you think about the mindsets required for this, what comes to mind?

Angela Duckworth: I've worked with some great professional coaches of professional athletes. And more than one of them has said something that surprised me, which is when we start talking about how to develop their players and especially their younger players. Usually, when you recruit a professional athlete, they're technically still in adolescence, psychologically anyway. Brain still developing. Prefrontal cortex not quite mature. It sometimes gets them in a lot of trouble. And I thought the whole conversation would be like, "Tell me what to do when my players are having a bad day."

And one of the things that surprised me most was that so often it's the players who are having a really good year that actually end up for a variety of reasons. That's its own kind

of crisis in a way. When things are going well, you get picked one and two in the draft, you know you're going to be MVP, et cetera, you can just see how that could lead to all kinds of problems. From the trivial: oh, you get lavished with attention on social media and people throwing themselves at you and not telling you what they really think anymore because they want to be hanging around in your entourage. But also I think it creates a lot of fear for people because now you have everything to lose.

Some of the most successful people, right? People like Kobe Bryant were able to maintain an underdog mindset, or even Tom Brady. Long past the time where you could legitimately say that you're an underdog. They are at some level manipulating themselves. You, I'm sure watched the Michael Jordan documentary, Last Dance. And if you think about Michael Jordan basically, he must have a team, not a stupid guy, right? An extremely intelligent person and very psychologically intuitive. I am guessing that he used certain tricks to get himself riled up and he kind of knew he was using them. He would pick on a certain argument that he had with the opponent team or opponent player. He's manipulating himself. I think this underdog mindset, or you keep the chip on your shoulder is partly, if you ask why, it's because they know it improves their performance.

So then you could ask the question, why doesn't everybody do that? I think that the reason why that is is that for the vast majority of people, let's say for 99% of people, you're just trying to get to a certain threshold of excellence. How many people when they're already getting a 99 in a course, or frankly, a 93, whatever the watermark is for getting an A, how many people would keep trying and really try?

Just try, the marginal gain of knowledge is not small, there's no diminishing marginal return. I'd say 99% of people are like, oh, you only try up to the point where you get the A or you make a certain, whatever, amount of money, or you get a certain amount of accomplishment. And then you withdraw effort accordingly. Therefore the really, really smart people who have a high ROI are like those taxi drivers in the famous study who on a rainy day, even though they can earn more money, so they should stay out for like an 18 hour shift, actually go home early because they make their till.

But the rare individual is never sated and there's no diminishing marginal return for achievement or understanding or learning. And so they're the Abby Wambachs. They're

the Tom Bradys. They're the Kevin Durants. They're the Jeff Bezos's.

Satisficing is a description of most people. And maximizing without end is a description of the people that I study. The thing I would amend to that, or I guess append to that, is that one of the things that I admire about outstanding performers is that they are never done. They're the opposite of complacent. I think one of the hidden dangers of success is that you stop working as hard as you need to. That's related to the first thing that we were saying, but just like, there are people that I know who really want to win their second Nobel Prize. The people who are just tireless. So they learn as much in bad years as they do in good years. And I think that's maybe, they're perennial learners.

Shane Parrish: Are those people born or are they made through life experiences? I think a lot of it is driven by life experience. This is my personal take, right?

Angela Duckworth: Yeah, I would love to hear what you think and I wonder... I would like to know what you think of yourself.

Shane Parrish: Oh God.

Angela Duckworth: How you are on those dimensions and whether that was kind of nature or nurture for you.

Shane Parrish: I'm very much of the Will Smith mindset, which is, I'll race you on a treadmill and-

Angela Duckworth: And you will not get off.

Shane Parrish: ... I'm just going to pass out before I give up. I have no idea where that comes from, but it's really good for grinding. It's been great.

Angela Duckworth: Were you always like that?

Shane Parrish: Yeah, I think so. I don't know why.

Angela Duckworth: Doesn't that lead you to a nature narrative?

Shane Parrish: Well, sort of. But then I have two kids and one of them is very much not like that. He's very much like, oh, I can do 30 seconds of work and get a 70, or I can do five

hours of work and get a 90. Why would I do five hours of work? I'm content with this 70.

Angela Duckworth: Tell him my satisficing hypothesis and see what he thinks.

Shane Parrish: That's my take.

Angela Duckworth: But your kids have different genes by the way.

Shane Parrish: Hold on, can we just broaden this nature, nurture thing to begin with? So nature would sort of be, in my understanding, just to make sure we're on the same page is like your genes. This is what you're born with genetically. It's the mutations and your parents and the combination of your history.

There are two types of nurture. There's chance and there's chosen, right? Chance is like what country I'm born into, what my parents do for a living, what my situation is, what my environment is like.

Angela Duckworth: Your circumstances that just happened.

Shane Parrish: My zip code, right? I had no say in any of that, that's all luck. But then at some point, there's a chosen nurture that kicks in, which is like, you're an adult and there's probably no light switch that flips. Some people will probably flip at 16, some people that might never flip. But you have this ability to take control.

Angela Duckworth: You have agency to change your situation. You're like, "Hey, these friends are not good for me. I'm not going to hang out with them anymore." So you can see how immediately this gets very complicated. My desire always when somebody asks me about this is to shove as much information into their heads as possible. Usually that's not that much. Usually people are like, well, I just want to know, is it nature versus nurture? So I'm always like, how about this?

The first complication, it's nature and nurture. Step one is, it is not either-or, it is definitely both and.

You have two kids, I have two kids. Our kids inherited DNA from their biological parents. They are absolutely influenced by that DNA. There is no characteristic at all, psychological or otherwise. Your risk of heart disease, your preference for broccoli, whether you like to

talk a lot at parties, whether you pray or not. There are published studies on all of those things, like documenting that if you are a twin, you are more likely to be like your sibling than if you are not a twin. Because at least probably you're identical twins, et cetera, et cetera.

So that's the nature part, but for the very same characteristics, which is like all characteristics, right? There's also evidence from the same twin studies, by the way, that nurture matters. And in these studies, very often nurture is just like, they take the nature part, which they come back into statistically and then just nurture is kind of everything else.

It kind of puts into one group the things that you had some control over, and then the things that you didn't. Although, okay, step two is like, okay, there's probably a conversation going on between nature and nurture because a very conscientious person says, "I'm going to go to summer school this summer and get away from my good for nothing friends," but also the kind of kid who chooses to go to summer school when they're 16 probably is being influenced by their genes. I don't know that most people want to shove this much information into their minds. So sometimes I just stop at: it's complicated and it's both.

Shane Parrish: What's the most credible research or arguments against your research?

Angela Duckworth: Well, there are a number of scholars, including Bettina Love, who have asked the question: is teaching grit anti-black? Is the whole idea of shining light on resilience and this whole conversation on agency, are we doing something dangerous here by ignoring structural poverty, racism, et cetera, et cetera?

My first reaction being a human being was defensiveness. What? How am I racist? That's, I think, natural, but hopefully temporary. And for me, I thought like, well, I am the head of Character Lab. It is not a good thing to just wallow in defensiveness. Maybe I should listen and read more. So I did, and we had some conversations in person. Then I read more and read Bettina's book. I read what other critics had said.

I think that the message or the perspective that's being offered has real value. If you are asking questions about underachievement and closing the achievement gap, et cetera, and the antidote that's offered is like, "Well, we should teach kids about growth mindset and grit and agency", then you might be overlooking the massive problem that stands in the

way much more so. Which is, terrible classrooms, terrible curriculum, no computers, none of the things that your kids and my kids have. I think that's an important message. I would like to think that we can accommodate both of these perspectives.

Almost always the answer is both and in some version. And to me, this goes all the way back to your first question about the person and the situation, right? A child's life is not just something that they have complete control over. I would hope that all children, not just black children or brown children, but all children are helped to learn some of the things that you and I learned and were not born with. Like knowing how to set a goal, make a plan, figuring out how to take an optimistic, growth-oriented stance toward adversity, understanding how to think about stress in adaptive ways, modifying your situation. Those have to be part of personal development. And so I try to say both and in a way that first of all, doesn't confuse people to know and also that kind of honors this perspective, which has a lot of value to it.

Shane Parrish: I want to explore it a little more, especially on the fulcrum of whether there are things that we can control, but there are things that we can't control. And what are those things that we can control? You don't choose who your parents are, but as an adult, you can choose who your exemplars are. You can choose who the people you model yourself after are.

Angela Duckworth: I hope this conversation is long enough that I'm going to talk about agency and control and the mindset that gets you to say, "Wait a second, I have a little control here. I think I can do something," which I do think is the mindset of a gritty person, usually a high achieving person.

Let's start with the mindset of "I can change something." I've done these research studies on this self-control technique called situation modification. And this work was done with collaborators, including James Gross at Stanford. He originally and mostly studies emotion. One of the things that's interesting about regulating your anger if you have a bad temper, or your sadness if you tend toward melancholy, or your happiness if you want more of that, or I guess if you want less of that, is that people can use these mental strategies, like what I pay attention to, how I'm going to frame things, my self-talk.

But also you can just change your actual situation. For example, if you constantly get into arguments at Thanksgiving with your brother-in-law, then maybe you should sit at the other end of the table or not go to Thanksgiving with your brother-in-law, or make sure that you're watching football while he is cutting up the pie. We extended that in a study of middle school and we've done it in all different age groups.

I'll tell you about a study we did with high school students where we randomly assigned them to watch a little video. It was about five minutes long. Then we told them some more things, but the intervention wasn't very long. And we were like, "You can change your situation. People think when they have to exercise self-control to study or do home school, they think it's all willpower. But actually, you could, for example, put your phone in another room. You could make sure that you study in a place that people aren't walking into and out of all the time."

In that study, there was a control group that learned about willpower and how important it is to use willpower to accomplish your goals. And then there was a neutral control group. And what we found is that the condition that increased academic goal attainment best was the one where you just explained to kids, "Hey, you can modify your situation."

I think that idea that your situation isn't just fixed or set but something you can agentically intentionally modify is one of the most important lessons you could learn in life.

Shane Parrish: I love that. I think that a lot of people are passive about life. It's like life just happens to them and things just happen to them. And it's sort of like, you can put that in the victim mentality sort of mindset, but it's really, it's deeper than that. Right? It's like "I have no agency over anything." It's just sort of like this general passiveness too. And I believe in a very active life. Right?

Angela Duckworth: Where did you learn that? Why do you think you have come out on that end of the continuum?

Shane Parrish: I don't know. I think I got that phrasing from Graham Duncan in a conversation we had in New York. He recounted a story to me about one of his friends who was driving with a portfolio manager and then this car swerved out and almost hit him. The guy driving the car was like, "Why does this stuff always happen to me?" And it was

just a very revealing sort of mindset.

It comes back to sort of that question, which is like, what are the mindsets that are going to enable us to capitalize on life in part, in bad situations, capitalize on bad, capitalize on good, intelligently prepare to put us on the path to success.

Angela Duckworth: I think you're onto something very important. I guess I have a fondness for great psychologists in their 90s. Because I have been calling Al Bandura a lot. He is a psychologist at Stanford, I think he's 96 now, who coined the term self-efficacy to describe the belief that you can do something if you try.

Self-efficacy about physics would be like, "I can learn physics if I try." I had this conversation with him a couple of weekends ago, where I asked him, "Al, you've spent your whole life studying self-efficacy, but there was this other person whose name is spelled R-O-T-T-E-R who studied locus of control." And locus of control was to me super similar. So I asked Al, "What's the difference? Because in locus of control theory, you either have an internal locus of control or an external locus of control, right? Life kind of happens to you or, that would be the external. Or like you're in control."

And he said, "Oh, there's a very important difference. I'm more interested in saying that I can control my behavior, not necessarily that that behavior is going to magically make everything the way I want." What locus of control is about is more just like, in the grand scheme is the actual outcome going to be my doing or not?

He's like, "All I want to say is that people have agency over their behavior, over their performance. Not necessarily that you're going to get hired just because you are the most qualified candidate, but that you could control your own behavior and performance."

I think that's a very important nuance here. Because I don't think that we want to teach our kids that they have control over whether the coronavirus vaccine is going to be made available in their municipality in one month or another, or whether they're going to get into a certain college because those things are a bit downstream. But where I agree with Bandura, first of all, is that we do have control. We do have agency and it's dramatically more productive to, when you think about your own behavior, really pay attention to the things you can control.

And I wonder, you probably haven't or maybe you're more well-read than I. Have you ever heard of Howard Thurman?

Shane Parrish: No.

Angela Duckworth: Okay. We need to resurrect Howard Thurman even before Freud, right? Howard Thurman was the mentor and the pastor for Martin Luther King Jr. And Howard Thurman, I had never heard of, because I'm deeply illiterate, but I was reading Arthur Ashe's memoir. For those who are younger than us maybe, Ashe is a great tennis player and I believe the only black male to win Wimbledon. He wrote this memoir called Days Of Grace, which I recommend. And in it, he talks about how important Howard Thurman was in his life.

So that led me to Howard Thurman who has all these sermons about how there is the final consent. He was like, "You cannot change that you were born into a racist society. You cannot change that you were born into a certain family, but you can always change how you react to it. And you're responsible for how you react to it."

Viktor Frankl said the same thing about his experience in the concentration camps. Terrible things can happen to you over what you do not have control, but you can control your reaction. I don't want to even say that you can control it 100%, but I do think you have some control. I think this agentic view is accurate and adaptive.

Shane Parrish: How do we as parents instill that mindset in our kids?

Angela Duckworth: I asked Al Bandura this: "Do you think that you could learn as much from failure as you could from success?" Because there are all these adages and aphorisms about failure, especially in startup land.

He said, "I 100% believe mastery experiences and success experiences are what build this sense of agency." If your kid has a Teflon life where everything comes easily in part because you make it that way—and there are a lot of parents who just make their kids' lives frictionless, right? Like, "Oh, you're struggling for 10 minutes, I'll get you a \$500 per hour tutor. Oh, your teacher is not so great. I'll get them fired." That's not the kind of success experience that Al Bandura is talking about because he's talking about success

after challenge, success after struggle.

I think Al Bandura's advice is the best advice. The number one thing is that people develop confidence when they have struggled to overcome something and come out victorious. The engineering problem for a parent is then to figure out the right size of challenge for the kid in the next moment in time. I think that we often get it wrong. The challenge is just too big or too small.

Shane Parrish: It's sort of monitoring and adjusting based on your particular child and the circumstances involved. How do we do it as adults? Do we seek out these opportunities to be challenged?

Angela Duckworth: We are benefited in large part by having a surrogate parent. Whether you're 50 or five, it's good to have somebody a little older and wiser than you who is helping you figure out the next challenge.

Most of the people I study never get out of being mentored. They have a management coach, they have a personal coach, they have a therapist. The ones I'm most jealous of have a peer for whom they coach each other. They have somebody who's like, "You should write a book." Because they're like, "Oh no, I can't write a book." "No, you should write a book." It's that kind of challenge setting that, of course you can try to do it on your own, but I think that we're always benefited by having another human being whose advantages are multiple. But one of them is that they're just not us. Right? So they have a psychological distance from our situation.

Shane Parrish: They have a better, a different aperture into our situation. One that removes a lot of the nuance. And the nuance in our case might be holding us back. Right?

Angela Duckworth: And the ego, right? Sometimes the people who are looking at us have a better sense of our strengths as well.

Shane Parrish: Two weeks ago, you gave a presentation that didn't really go as planned. I want to know what happened and how you spoke to yourself in the moment. What was that internal monologue?

Angela Duckworth: I don't have as many opportunities to dramatically fail as I did earlier

in life. But I had this presentation I was excited about on a new idea in behavior change for me. I got so excited about it and I was so confident about how excited everybody else would be about it that I ended up inviting more and more people. Now, in this case, it was Zoom. So everybody fit in the room, but some of my idols were there like Danny Kahneman and very, very important political officials.

Anyway, so the party grew, I delivered this presentation not having ever done it before and then also not being good at managing the dynamics of like 100 people on a Zoom call. Some of whom you would obviously want to say what they thought as opposed to just monologuing.

Ugh, it was just really bad. And right afterward, I had a call about feedback with one of my collaborators who was in the party. And he said, “That was not your best hour.” And then told me exactly how it was that that was such an impoverished experience for everybody, including him.

I was up all night replaying things and writing down notes. I revised my slides. I didn’t have anyone to give them to, but I just wanted to rearrange them and make them right. And then I sent emails to the people I had specifically invited and I apologized and I was like, “That was not a good use of your hour. I was under-prepared. I didn’t manage the structure of the time well, and I’m sorry. I do like the idea that I presented, but yeah, that was not good.”

Shane Parrish: Dive into that a little more. How did you speak to yourself in that moment? And then how did you change that conversation?

Angela Duckworth: I’ll tell you the self-talk that went through my head. “That was a shit show. I’m humiliated. I shouldn’t have managed the time that way. I shouldn’t have used polls everywhere. I should have rehearsed.”

Now that is actually productive self-talk because almost everything I said was changeable. It’s like, “Next time I’ll rehearse. Next time I won’t use polls everywhere.”

In my 20s, the self-talk I had when I screwed up was very different. I have all these journals, so I know what the self-talk was. I would say things like, “I am a bad person.” And that self-

talk's toxic because you can't do anything about being just a fundamentally bad person, whatever that even means. I have grown up a little bit in the 30 years since my earlier young woman failures.

Shane Parrish: How much of that was planted by that immediate feedback by one of your collaborators who called you and then would probably give you very specific feedback too, right? Versus when we're kids, we often don't get specific feedback. I remember when I first started working in my early 20s in an organization, my boss would just be like, "That doesn't work. That's not good." But it's like, well, what's not good? You have this vague sense that you're not living up to expectations, but you're unclear sometimes on what those expectations are. So you reinforce this vague self-talk in a way and then-

Angela Duckworth: Yeah. At the time, let me tell you, I was not appreciating the specificity of the negative feedback, right?

Shane Parrish: Of course. Yeah.

Angela Duckworth: And the dosage of it. Because after about five minutes, I was like, "Hey, let's talk about something else." It's 35 more minutes of specific things to say about how that didn't go well. I didn't respond well. And you're right that, to answer your question directly, I think I felt especially bad because I immediately got an avalanche of criticism that was both authoritative, detailed, and kind of unvarnished. I probably would have gone to sleep earlier or slept more soundly if there had been a little less of it, if it were a little less detailed. But I do think it was better to have gotten that than a kind of like, "Hey, it could've gotten better." All right. So let's talk about other things, right?

Shane Parrish: That wasn't your best effort, but dinner was great. What do you think?

Angela Duckworth: Feedback as they say is a gift, but most of us don't know how to unwrap it. It's not a gift that we usually want to receive at the moment it's given to us and the way it's given to us. I think it's a skill. And by the way, Shane, I truly believe that if somebody is eager for feedback, actively solicits it, tries to listen to it, and learns something from it; those are the people I never worry about.

I've had students who are not super socially intelligent. How do I know? Because other

students come and talk to me about them. But if that student is asking for feedback about how they can improve, they're going to be fine. And if you're the opposite of that, then I worry about you because then I think you're never going to be able to fix your own problems. Feedback is magic.

Shane Parrish: But I wonder what drives that behavior in terms of wanting feedback. Because if you want it from other people, you're probably really open to it from the world too when it starts giving you feedback, which is a lot vaguer than when other people are giving you it.

Angela Duckworth: I guess I have a first-layer answer and a second-layer answer. I think the first layer answer is like because I want to learn. I want to feel good in the moment, but I mostly want to learn. I'm driven to improve.

Shane Parrish: Your desire to learn overrules feeling good in the moment.

Angela Duckworth: Exactly. Either I can feel good right now and just get unalloyed praise or I can learn something that will make me a better presenter and scientist in the future. The weight is higher for me on the learning. So that's the first layer answer.

But then you can ask the question: why is that? Why is that ratio like that for you but maybe for other people, it's more important to protect their ego or they want to sleep well on a Friday night? Why? And I think for me the ability to take negative feedback (and I'm not perfect by any means) whatever ability I do have, does come from a history of mastery or success experiences. I have been encouraged enough to be a little vulnerable. And in early childhood, there's this idea of secure attachment. Have you heard of attachment theory?

Shane Parrish: Yes.

Angela Duckworth: For those who are less familiar, this is the idea that young children are attached to their primary caregiver—often their mother, but not necessarily. There are different styles of attachment. And the attachment style you want is the secure attachment style. Then there are various forms of insecure attachment. This became so important in developmental psychology because of the idea that your attachment style was going to be pretty influential in terms of the future relationships in your life.

The thing to note about the secure attachment style is that if you imagine a mother in a new room with their toddler child, if that is a secure attachment, then the behavior of the child is not going to be to cling to the mother. It is because the child is attached that they will venture even five, 10 feet away from where the mother is sitting and pick up a new toy and then maybe run back and make sure mom's there. Whatever I have, that's like, okay, I can handle this criticism, it is probably because I've had enough mastery experiences to feel secure.

Shane Parrish: I think that's a really important place, right? You feel the safety so that you can take these risks, including learning and knowing that it doesn't change who you are, it doesn't change the relationships in your life. It's just making you better.

Angela Duckworth: And if you were a kid, it's driving you nuts because they are not taking risks and they seem to be afraid of failure. And by the way, that sometimes looks like laziness, right? Even though it's, underneath the surface, not at all laziness. Ask yourself if maybe they are not confident because they haven't had a string of experiences to make them confident.

Here again, it's the person versus the situation. Maybe your under-confident child is that way because of a series of situations. And all of the great coaches and teachers kind of just engineer these small wins, make things bite-size enough that there can be a few at-bats and a few hits.

Shane Parrish: Is there anything that you've learned significantly post writing your book on grit that you think should be added to the conversation?

Angela Duckworth: I'm a university professor, so my students are between the ages of 18 and 22. And when you just think of the word "grit", you think people need to learn about resilience and hard work, about how to practice on your weaknesses and get feedback, et cetera. And those things are all true. But honestly, the Ivy League students that I teach are pretty good at all those things already.

The other half of my class I teach called Grit Lab is on passion. And I find that many, many young people are struggling much more with the direction in their life than the determination that they need to bring to that pursuit. Even basic questions, like, "What

am I interested in?” How could you not know what you’re interested in? I will tell you that I have young people in my office hours who say, “I literally can’t tell you what I’m interested in. I don’t know, help me figure that out.”

Shane Parrish: Let’s talk about that for a second. How would you answer the question about, should we follow our passions? Should we not?

Angela Duckworth: I don’t think the verb follow is the right word, right? Because you see this 22-year-old senior who’s like, “Oh my God. I see adulthood on the horizon fast approaching and I don’t know what I want to do.” And then if I say to them, “My advice to you is to follow your passion.” How is that helpful? They don’t know where it is.

The verb I prefer is “develop.” Because I do think that if I retrospectively think about my relationship with psychology, if I went to Google Scholar and you picked a random article from a random year in a random journal on something about psychology, there’s a very good chance that I’m going to be fascinated by it.

Angela Duckworth: But there was a time in my life where I didn’t even know what psychology was at all. And there was a time in my life where this romance was very, very fledgling. It could have gone in lots of different directions. But it deepened and deepened, and deepened and got more mature. Like a marriage.

Your relationship with your passion evolves over time. So to the terrified 22-year-olds, or frankly probably there are some terrified 32-year-olds or whatever, on this conversation with us, change the verb from following to develop. It gives you a little bit of a clue as to what you need to do, which is to start dating some things. And then go on a second date with the ones where you’re like, “I kind of like you.” Then allow this relationship to evolve over what might take years.

If I think about my husband, Jason, my relationship to him today is just oceans deeper than when I first met him and I was like, “Oh my God, he’s so cute.” And if I had known that when I was 22, I think I would have relaxed a little bit because I spent a whole decade just tortured that I didn’t know what my calling was.

Shane Parrish: Back to the passion thing. My friend, Naval Ravikant has said, I’m going

to butcher this quote or phrase, but it's sort of like, "Do what is play for you but work for others." And then that's how you can sort of figure out, where are those things? Because now you're leveraging the need to make a career out of it and all of that stuff. I think that's interesting.

Angela Duckworth: I like that a lot. Alex Rodriguez was recently being interviewed by students in my class, Grit Lab. And he said, "I am a hard worker. Everyone will tell you that. But I feel like I haven't worked a day in my life." He's like, "I can't believe I get to do that." Another person that you may or may not have interviewed, Steve Levitt tells a story of how he became an economist. He is half of the Freakonomics-

Shane Parrish: Duo.

Angela Duckworth: Dubner and Levitt. Levitt tells a story of how he was a freshman. And he goes to Harvard, I think, and attends the intro economics class. He's walking alongside his classmate or roommate and they both say almost at the same time, like, "Oh God, that was ridiculous." Then Steve says, "Yeah, everything that was said was so damn obvious." And his friend was like, "I couldn't understand anything that he was saying."

So the idea of doing things that are playful for you but drudgery for others. In my class, the passion section of my Grit Lab course is called "Choose Easy." Then there's another section called "Work Hard." Do something that's like butter. It's like easy, cheesy lemon squeezy plus it's so fun. Choose those paths, walk down them long enough, and learn to work hard.

Shane Parrish: When are we most likely to give up? When it comes back to grit for a second, what are the times when we're most likely to give up? Do we intervene in those times? Is there a mental intervention we can have with ourselves? Or is there a recognition that this is that point, I know it's coming, I just need to get over this hump? I know you said grit was about the long term, but I feel like there's a lot of grit necessary in the times we're in right now too.

Angela Duckworth: Right. This kind of time limited crisis. It's not what we hope for.

Shane Parrish: But indefinite. We don't know.

Angela Duckworth: It's indefinite.

Shane Parrish: We know it's going to end, we just don't know when.

Angela Duckworth: Just to think about the psychological dimensions of 2020, the uncertainty amplified all of the negative emotions. I think we're much better at somebody saying like, "Hey, you're going to have to be in quarantine for 17 days. That's going to be terrible. And then the following things are definitely going to happen to you, brace yourself." Versus you wake up and then you don't know what's going to happen, but it's pretty bad.

And then some other bad things happen—that is by the way, what you do to an animal if you want to induce learned helplessness, which is the work of my Ph.D. advisor, Martin Seligman, where you have an animal and then you shock them. The key is that if they experience these traumas in an unpredictable way, not knowing when it's going to end, or the next thing's going to happen—then you get the symptoms of depression and giving up.

2020 has been a learned helplessness experiment. The suffering has been real and amplified psychologically because of that.

Well, let's start with not even gritty people, but when we give up and when we're most likely to give up and what's going on there. I think that when people say, "Oh, no, I'm not going to try anymore," there is a lack of confidence that you can prevail. Like, no, I'm not going to go for soccer again because I'll never make varsity or I'll never be very good. That's self-efficacy. That's agency. That's Al Bandura. That's what we were just talking about.

But the other thing I think is that it's not that you can't do it, it's just that it has no value to you. What am I even doing? This is a stupid job. When I quit management consulting—and some of my best friends are management consultants, so it's not like I think it's a meaningless industry— but for me, who had been so interested in kids and education, I literally said out loud, "If I go to my grave increasing the ROI for a hypodermic needle company, I just will not feel like I fulfilled my purpose." So it couldn't have been that I didn't think I could make partner or director. I think I could have. It was just that goal lost value for me.

If you ask the question: when do people quit? I think it's either because the value of the goal goes down for whatever reason or their belief that they can achieve it falters.

Shane Parrish: Talk to me about the 10,000-hour rule. When it comes to working hard, we seem to have this view that if we just do something for 10,000 hours, we can't help but be successful in it. To what extent is it the hours versus the reps involved and the immediacy of the feedback?

Angela Duckworth: You may know that Anders Ericsson passed away this year. Do you know that?

Shane Parrish: I had heard that.

Angela Duckworth: This summer. And it was his research, of course, that became paraphrased as the 10,000-hour rule. Anders would want everyone to know it's nothing about the magic number 10,000, first of all.

That number comes from a single study of German musicians at a music academy where the highest performing musicians had done on average, about 10,000 hours of practice. The next most expert group was at 5,000 and the group below that, I believe, was at 2,500. Most importantly, Anders would want everyone to know that it's the quality of practice that is remarkable. Because even in the next group down, they were still doing lots of practice. It just was that they had a higher proportion of ineffective practice or less effective practice. The high quality of practice that Anders called deliberate practice had three essential elements—if any one is missing, then you're not doing deliberate practice in Anders' view.

The first is hyper intentionality about a very specific weakness or a goal that you're trying to address.

The second is practicing with complete concentration. Many of his research studies, including the ones that I did with him, measured deliberate practice by whether you were doing practice alone because that was a proxy for concentration.

Then the third element was feedback. Ideally in most circumstances, immediate feedback. In some circumstances, you could argue that there's some benefit to a delay. And then the repetition of that cycle.

Ask yourself: how much of my day am I hyper-conscious about exactly what I'm trying to do? I have a movie in my head of what it looks like before I do it. And then I'm practicing

with full concentration. My phone's off, nobody's around me. I'm getting immediate feedback, and then I'm going to just do it all again. I don't know, there could be days that go by without any deliberate practice. I think that's the magic of what experts do.

Shane Parrish: Do you have personal rules, routines, or habits for success? I like to think that there are these automatic rules that we can adapt for ourselves that put us on the path to success to help us get what we want out of life. I'm curious as to what those habits, routines, or rules that you have are.

Angela Duckworth: I've been researching that a little bit. Personal rules, like I never, or I always. Always or never rules are really interesting to me and they are related. They're kind of in the same family as habits because you're not thinking about it. You're not deliberating, you're just doing. The reason I'm studying it is because very successful people have usually a small number of fairly inviolable rules and habits.

Why is that? The reason I think is twofold. So Colin Camerer at Caltech, who's a collaborator would say that the biggest reason why we have habits is they put us on autopilot and they free up cognitive resources for other things. Imagine if every time you had to cut yourself a grapefruit, you had to devote all of your energy to thinking stuff like, first I lift my wrist, then I clench my fist around the knife. It's like, no, some things can run on autopilot and habits are like that.

There's another reason I think Colin would agree with, that habits are a self-control device. If you're doing something as a matter of habit—like exercising or eating a salad for lunch, or writing thank-you notes, or doing other things which are good for you and others in the long run but maybe not the funnest, easiest thing to do in the short run—being on autopilot is very good for that.

It's not just so that we can free up cognitive resources to do calculus. It's also because many of the things about which we have habits and rules are self-control dilemmas where the immediate alternative is just better. I have a habit of checking my email after dinner, that's one. I don't want to check my email all day because that would make for a lot of email checking and not a lot of thought about behavioral science.

So the second thing is that when it's after dinner, I could watch reruns of Downton Abbey.

I could scroll through Twitter. I could do all these things. Those things are all going to be a little bit more fun for me than email. But if I make it a rule or a habit that after dinner, I check my email always, then that kind of avoids the temptation. So that's one of the habits I have.

I also have a habit of doing exercise at 6:00 PM Eastern time. Every time I do a public talk, I have a habit of sending a thank you email because I think it's the right thing to do to show some appreciation. As your producers know, there's a lot of backend stuff that somebody had to do to make that possible. And I always ask for feedback. Those are all habits that I have found to be very useful.

Shane Parrish: Just coming back to the rules versus habits or choices, there's a huge difference between somebody who's on a diet and somebody who doesn't eat dessert.

Angela Duckworth: Yes.

Shane Parrish: Right? Because if you're on a diet, you're consciously making these choices all the time. But if you don't eat dessert, it's a rule, you just don't eat it. You don't have to make a choice. Daniel Kahneman told me this in our conversation for the podcast; "Nobody argues with rules."

Angela Duckworth: He's the reason I started studying rules. I just noticed that when we were in conversation, he'd be like, "Well, I have a rule. I don't make a decision on the phone." And then he would say, "Well, I have a rule, I don't blurb books unless I read them in entirety and have a personal relationship with the topic or the author." I was like, wait, Danny Kahneman does it, Dan Gilbert does it, what's up with these personal rules?

In the small amount of research I've done, because we randomly assign people to, for example, set a rule about how many steps they were going to take. These are people we had recruited because they already had a Fitbit. And then we had other conditions where you just set a goal and various control conditions.

We did not find a benefit of setting an always/never rule, like "I always make 10,000 steps." I'm guessing that one reason is that even though for Danny Kahneman, certain rules can be certainly adaptive, there are some downsides to rules. Like when you don't make your

rule, you can have the halo effect. So I think that the rule on rules is probably that you should make up your own rules as opposed to somebody exogenously handing you one.

Shane Parrish: Yes. You have to think for yourself—what are the rules that are likely to put me on the path to success? But I think about that in multiple ways, right? There are lifestyle rules, which is you want to get enough sleep. You want to eat healthily. What are the rules that you can create around that that help you just go on autopilot? It could be your alarm going off at 9:30 because it's time to wind down and go to bed. Why am I doing that? I'm doing that because that puts me in the best position to succeed tomorrow at work.

And then you have these rules about the type of person you want to become. What would that person behave like in these given situations? You have an identity-based rule system because I want to be a better person. I want to be a better spouse. I want to be a better version of myself. Or what does the best version of me look like in these moments? So you have these business rules, you sort of have these life rules, and then you have these personal rules. I'm curious as to your take on that.

Angela Duckworth: I read this essay once by James March, who was a brilliant classic and interdisciplinary thinker. And he said, “There are two kinds of logic that we can use to make choices. There's the logic of consequence and then there's the logic of appropriateness.” The logic of consequence is like cost/benefit analysis. It's thinking like an economist, the kinds of things that economists think we do all the time. To some extent, even if it's at a nonconscious level, we do. They're expected value decisions. And much of our conversation has been about that, right? Why are people ambitious? Why do they give up? Et cetera.

But March said, “There's a kind of logic that we apply in many situations that has nothing to do with calculating costs and benefits and probabilities, and it's the logic of appropriateness.”

And he said, “When you are operating according to the logic of consequence, the three questions are: what are the costs? What are the benefits? What are the probabilities? When you are operating according to the logic of appropriateness, the three questions are: what situation is this? Who am I? What does someone like me do in a situation like this?” This is all about identity, right?

Imagine that you are like me; a tired working mother who has a teenager at home. And

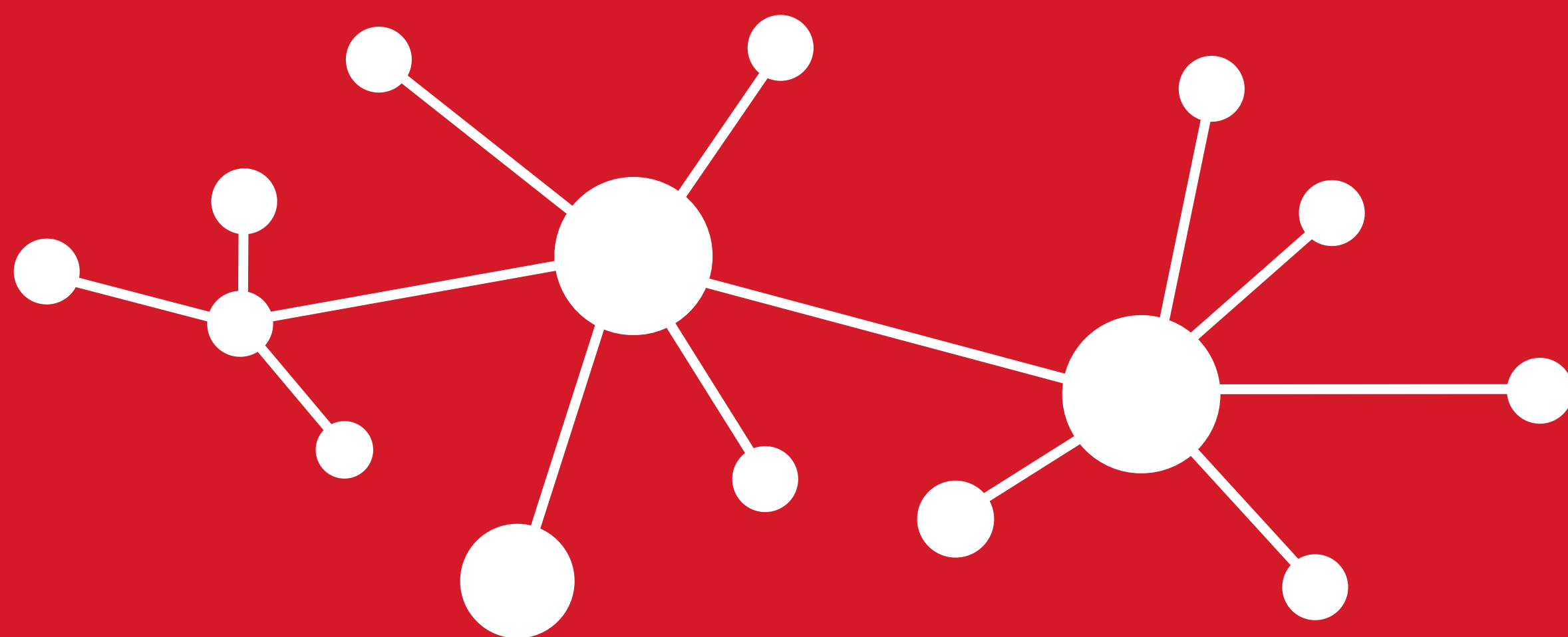
your kid is doing something totally annoying like asking you demandingly whether dinner could be ready in four minutes. There's this kind of like cost/benefit analysis—what are the benefits of responding kindly? What are the costs to me responding? What are the probabilities of that outcome? Or what situation is this?

My daughter is being grumpy. Who am I? I am a mother. What does a mother do when a child is grumpy? A mother is kind. I've been kind of fascinated by the logic of appropriateness and the importance of identity. If Shakespeare said that, "All the world's a stage and each of us its players," much of our lives we're like, what role am I in? Oh, I'm the doctor? Okay, I'll do that. Oh, I'm the whiny child, okay, I'll do that. And we step into that role and we play it out.

Shane Parrish: I think that's a great place to end this, Angela. I want to thank you so much for a fascinating conversation.

Angela Duckworth: Shane, I loved this conversation. Thank you for having me.

Shane Parrish: Hey, one more thing before we say goodbye. The Knowledge Project is produced by the team in Farnam Street. I want to make this the best podcast you've listened to and I'd love to get your feedback. If you have comments, ideas for future shows or topics, or just feedback in general, you can email me at shane@fs.blog or follow me on Twitter @ShaneAParrish. You can learn more about the show and find past episodes at fs.blog/podcast. If you want a transcript of this episode, go to fs.blog/tribe and join our learning community. If you found this episode valuable, share it online with the [#TheKnowledgeProject](https://twitter.com/TheKnowledgeProject), or leave a review. Until the next episode.



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