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Is Dweck's Mindset Overblown?

How firm are the foundations of mind-set theory? The claims appear stronger than the evidence.



Principle

Growth Mindset claims may be overstated.

Quote

"We found that the strength of the claims appears to outweigh the strength of the evidence, at least for university students."

So What - Application

If growth mindset claims are overstated, what do we do with the evidence? Most psychological research shows tiny effect sizes. It appears to be relatively difficult to reliably alter human behavior. At the same time, when you have a tiny tweak that reliably works, it seems it could inform our efforts to change.

If growth mindset works, but only mildly, what could we do?

For policy and business, the recommendation is to temper the claims so it doesn't sound like a cure-all for education.

Individually, rather than touting growth mindset, we could pause in the middle of a difficult task and ask ourselves - am I avoiding this task to avoid failure? Can I reframe failure as part of normal growth and learning? Can I let go of worrying about my performance and looking good and settle in to learning what's before me?

The Research Story

Three researchers from Michigan State University and Case Western University surveyed 438 students about their growth or fixed mindset and 5 other variables related to mindset claims. Then they checked not only if mindset predicted these other claims, but also how strong the effect was.

They believe that claims about growth vs fixed mindset are overstated and mounted existing evidence that they are. Their survey tested 6 mindset claims and found the following:

- #1 Growth mindset does predict having learning goals (the good kind of goal), but the effect was small.
- #2 They found that fixed mindset predicts having performance goals (not as useful), but again the effect was small.
- #3 Fixed mindset didn't predict having performance avoidance goals.
- #4 Fixed mindset didn't predict the belief that talent alone and not effort creates success. (LeAnn - I think few people would agree with that extreme statement. Even talented people have to work hard. It's when facing the limits of your own abilities that you face the dichotomy - do I have what it takes? Is it talent? Or can I develop by failing a bunch at this growth edge?)
- #5 Growth mindset did not predict agreement with persisting to overcome a challenge. (LeAnn - again it's the situation. No one thinks they will stop because they might fail, unless you are quite self-aware. But people are bad predictors. But in the face of imminent failure, they often do stop trying.)
- #6 Fixed mindset predicted persisting on a task after failure, which is the opposite of what mindset theory says will happen. (LeAnn - good data point here. They actually put them in the situation.)

It sounds like I'm all for the mindset theory. I resonate with it because I've experienced avoiding failure, wanting my performance to look good, choosing easier tasks to look good, not persisting, etc. The mindset solution is to normalize failure as part of learning, which has been instrumental in helping me meet personal goals. Is the mindset theory unfounded? Maybe. There's lots of points in the constellation of mindset research and this is one.

Something to consider - did this study debunk mindset theory? Or show the difference between predicting our actions and actually acting?

When psychology research gets popular in the public, it can get overblown and deserve scrutiny. At the same time, psychology research produces such tiny effects, any individual claim can hardly seem worth applying in real life.

Burgoyne, A. P., Hambrick, D. Z., & Macnamara, B. N. (2020). How Firm Are the Foundations of Mind-Set Theory? The Claims Appear Stronger Than the Evidence. *Psychological Science*, 31(3), 258-267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619897588>

