



## Are implicit personality theories associated with parental reactions to child transgressions?



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Aggression  
Physical child abuse  
Implicit theories  
Mindset  
Parenting

### ABSTRACT

Implicit personality theories (IPTs) represent the beliefs people hold about the extent to which personality is malleable (i.e., incremental beliefs) versus fixed (i.e., entity beliefs). IPTs influence how individuals process, understand, and respond during social interactions. The research described herein examined (a) whether parents who view personality as fixed (i.e., high-entity belief parents) are more likely (relative to low-entity belief parents) to respond to vignettes describing child transgressions with negative affect, hostile attributions, and harsh parenting tactics; and (b) whether the IPT beliefs of high-entity belief parents can be altered through a brief intervention. Two studies were conducted. In Study 1, 187 parents (58.3% mothers) reported IPT beliefs and reactions to vignettes describing child transgressions. As expected, high-entity belief parents (compared to low-entity belief parents) were more likely to: 1) attribute cause for transgressions to children's personalities, 2) ascribe negative traits, 3) make hostile attributions, 4) and select harsh parenting strategies. Building on these results, Study 2 demonstrated that a modified IPT intervention significantly reduced entity beliefs in a sample of high-entity belief parents ( $n = 63$ ; 71.4% mothers). Collectively, findings suggest that IPTs may serve as a novel target for interventions designed to reduce harsh parenting practices.

Harsh parenting practices (e.g., shouting, spanking, slapping) are commonly used by parents in the United States (Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004; Straus, 1994; Straus & Stewart, 1999). For example, a national survey of parents in the United States found that the majority (65%) of parents of children between the ages of 19 months and 35 months reported having used spanking to discipline their children (Regalado et al., 2004). Despite their widespread use, a growing body of research suggests that harsh parenting practices may have adverse effects on children (e.g., Gershoff, 2002, 2013; Kazdin & Benjet, 2003; Knox, 2010; Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013; Simons & Wurtele, 2010; Straus, 1994; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010; but see also Ferguson, 2013).

As summarized by Gershoff (2013), considerable research suggests that harsh parenting practices are “ineffective at best and harmful to children at worst” (p. 136). Moreover, many medical and mental health organizations have issued statements discouraging harsh parenting practices, such as spanking (e.g., American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012; American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child, & Family Health, 1998). Despite these admonitions, many parents continue to use harsh parenting practices (Regalado et al., 2004). Additional research is needed

to advance our understanding of the factors that support use of harsh parenting practices, which in turn may foster development of interventions designed to promote use of positive parenting practices.

Research examining the risk factors associated with use of harsh parenting practices suggests that parental beliefs (e.g., authoritarian beliefs, Crouch et al., 2017; beliefs about spanking, Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006; for a review see Azar, Reitz, & Goslin, 2008) may influence selection of harsh parenting behaviors. In his social information processing (SIP) model of child physical abuse, Milner (1993, 2000) refers to such beliefs as pre-existing schemata that parents bring to the parenting context. Pre-existing schemata are thought to influence the types of evaluations, interpretations, and attributions that parents make during challenging parent-child interactions.

Implicit personality theories (IPTs) are one type of pre-existing schemata that a parent brings to the parenting role. IPTs are the beliefs individuals hold about the extent to which the personality attributes of others are fixed (i.e., entity beliefs) or malleable (i.e., incremental beliefs; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995a). Prior research indicates that the type of IPT a person holds (entity vs. incremental) guides how they process, understand, and respond to social information (see Dweck et al., 1995a; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995b, for reviews). Specifically,

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high entity-belief individuals tend to believe that the attributes of others (especially perceived transgressors) are fixed, non-malleable, and predictive of behavior (Dweck et al., 1995a). Thus, when confronted with the negative behaviors of others, high-entity belief individuals (compared to low-entity belief individuals) tend to engage in negative character judgments (e.g., interpret transgressions as indicative of negative traits) and make more internal, stable, and global attributions about the transgressor (Dweck et al., 1995a). Moreover, research suggests that once a high-entity belief individual ascribes negative traits to an individual, their reactions to that individual tend to favor retribution (versus rehabilitation; Dweck et al., 1995a).

In contrast, individuals who hold more incremental views of personality tend to believe that the attributes of others are malleable and flexible (Dweck et al., 1995a). For example, individuals who view personality as changeable are more likely to understand the behavior of others in terms of environmental and situational influences (as opposed to dispositional influences). When others behave negatively, individuals who view personality as changeable seek to promote improvement and growth through education and skills training (as opposed to seeking retaliation; Dweck et al., 1995a).

Although beliefs about the malleability of personality predict the types of interpretations individuals make about other people, IPTs do not appear to predict judgments about the severity of specific negative behaviors (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). For example, Chiu et al. asked participants to rate the “wrongness” of specific types of transgressions (e.g., stealing a car) and how much they thought these behaviors were indicative of a person’s disposition (e.g., goodness or badness). As predicted, beliefs about the malleability of personality did not predict judgments about the severity of the transgressions; however, beliefs about the malleability of personality were predictive of judgments of the individuals committing the transgressions (Chiu et al., 1997).

Although IPTs may not influence severity ratings for negative events, it should be noted that the impact of IPTs on social information processes and behavioral responses appears to vary depending on the valence of social events (Dweck et al., 1995a). Specifically, beliefs about the malleability of personality tend to predict reactions to negative events, but not reactions to positive events (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980). Moreover, it remains unclear whether the impact of IPTs on social information processes increases as the severity of negative events increases (e.g., from minor personal transgressions to more serious moral transgressions).

In summary, IPTs (i.e., beliefs about the malleability of personality) are one type of pre-existing schemata that parents bring to the parenting context; however, the influence of IPTs on how parents respond to children’s misbehaviors has not been examined. Prior research indicates that the type of IPT beliefs a person holds guides the manner in which social information is processed, understood, and reacted to, especially during negative events (Dweck et al., 1995a). Moreover, the information processing and behavioral patterns exhibited by individuals who view personality as fixed (i.e., high-entity beliefs) are similar to the types of cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions associated with harsh parenting behaviors (Milner, 2003). To advance our understanding of the associations between IPT beliefs and parenting behaviors, two studies were conducted. The first study examined the relationships between IPT beliefs and anticipated reactions (i.e., cognitive, affective and behavioral responses) to vignettes describing child transgressions. Given that IPT interventions have been found to be effective in altering beliefs about the malleability of personality, a second study was conducted to assess the impact of an IPT intervention tailored to the parenting context. Specifically, the second study was a randomized clinical trial designed to examine the effect of an IPT intervention on parents’ IPT beliefs. In addition, we explored whether our modified IPT intervention influenced anticipated cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to vignettes describing child transgressions. In both studies, we explored whether the severity of transgressions (i.e., ranging from minor personal transgressions to more serious moral

transgressions) moderated the associations between IPT beliefs and responses to the child transgression vignettes.

## 1. Study 1

In Study 1, we sought to examine whether IPT beliefs were associated with how parents responded to vignettes describing child transgressions that ranged from minor personal transgressions to more serious moral transgressions. To achieve this aim, a convenience sample of parents was asked to complete a measure assessing their IPT beliefs, read a series of vignettes describing child transgressions, and answer questions assessing how they would react (cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally) to each transgression. Each set of vignettes included two personal transgressions, two conventional transgressions, and two moral transgressions. Based on previous research on IPTs and social information processing (e.g., Dweck et al., 1995a, 1995b; Yeager, Trznieński, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011), eight hypotheses (and one research question) were examined.

Specifically, it was expected that high-entity belief parents, in comparison to low-entity belief parents, would: (H1) attribute more cause for the transgression to the child’s personality; (H2) endorse more extreme negative trait ratings; (H3) attribute more hostile intent to the transgressing child; (H4) feel more negative affect related to the child’s behavior; (H5) be more likely to respond to the child using harsh parenting practices; (H6) be less likely to respond to the child using inductive parenting practices; (H7) be more likely to predict that the child’s behavior will be consistent over time; and (H8) not differ in perceptions of the wrongness/seriousness of the transgressions. Additionally, we explored (RQ1) whether the hypotheses stated above were moderated by type of child transgression (i.e., personal, conventional, or moral).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Parents were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Of the 212 participating parents, 11 parents were excluded due to missing data (i.e., left 10% or more items blank on any measure) and 14 parents were excluded for randomly responding. The final sample consisted of 187 parents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.4$  years,  $SD = 9.5$ ; 58.3% mothers).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Implicit Personality Theory (IPT) scale

The IPT scale (Chiu et al., 1997) was designed to assess respondents’ beliefs about the malleability of personality. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with items assessing entity beliefs (e.g., “The kind of person someone is, is something basic about them, and it can’t be changed very much”) and four items assessing incremental beliefs (e.g., “People can change even their more basic qualities”). Responses were made on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). To create a composite IPT score, incremental theory items were reverse coded and an overall IPT score was derived by averaging across all items. Thus, higher IPT scores represented higher levels of entity beliefs. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Butler, 2000; Chiu et al., 1997; Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005), participants with a mean IPT score higher than three were classified as high-entity belief parents, whereas participants with mean IPT scores of three or less were classified as low-entity belief parents. The IPT scale has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties (Cronbach’s alphas range from 0.90 to 0.96, with two-week test-retest correlations of 0.82; Dweck et al., 1995a, 1995b). In Study 1 the internal consistency of the IPT scale was 0.93.

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