



Incremental mindsets and the reduced forgiveness of chronic failures

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ABSTRACT

Holding an incremental, rather than fixed, mindset confers wide-ranging benefits. Such benefits may, however, be accompanied by increased judgmental harshness of others' shortcomings. Across 3 studies (Studies 1, 2a, 2b; $N = 416$), after an induction of either an entity or incremental view of empathy, aggression, or motivation, participants were asked to imagine someone continually failing to show, or showing in abundance, the particular trait, and were then asked how blameworthy/praiseworthy each of these individuals was. Incremental-induced participants blamed a person showing consistently maladaptive levels of the trait more than did entity-induced participants. Increased blame was mediated by increased perceived control over behavior. Study 3 ($N = 107$) extended findings regarding lay theories of empathy to protagonists in short narratives. Study 4 ($N = 184$) attempted to reconcile our findings with previous research, showing that increased blame attribution by incremental theorists occurs for continual, but not single failures. Overall results suggest that the benefits of an incremental mindset may be partially offset by greater judgmental harshness of others.

Messages of practically unlimited individual potential are ubiquitous, reinforcing the notion that with sufficient hours of practice, effort, desire, or even through sheer willpower, people can improve just about any aspect of themselves—whether they intend to lose weight, gain intelligence, or curb aggressive outbursts. There is a lay theory implicit in such messages—that we are not fixed, but changeable and improvable through persistent effort. But could such messages also, by emphasizing the efficacy of effort, convey that undesirable trait levels are a personal failing?

Implicit person theories capture the ways in which people organize and interpret their own and others' abilities. These theories are often categorized into one of two competing assumptions about a given attribute: an entity theory holds the attribute to be a fixed, nonmalleable, trait-like entity, while an incremental theory holds that the attribute is malleable and can be developed with effort (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). A student with an entity theory of intelligence, for example, believes that she has a certain level of intelligence, high or low, and that there is little she can do to change it. A student with an incremental view of intelligence, on the other hand, believes that intelligence can be improved, for example through extra time spent studying. Because incrementalists view trait levels as changeable, they emphasize the behavioral and psychological mediators of traits, such as effort and situational constraints, rather than the underlying levels of the traits themselves (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). Incrementalists are more likely, then, to work to improve levels of the trait than entity theorists are. Indeed, interventions that induce incremental mindsets

have been shown to result in academic improvements (e.g., Yeager et al., 2016), increased willpower (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010), reduced aggression (Yeager, Trzesniewski, Tirri, Nokelainen, & Dweck, 2011), and increased empathy (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014), among other improvements (see Dweck, 2012 for overview).

Such incremental mindset interventions are often designed to foster incremental mindsets towards specific traits. For example, an intervention may induce a growth (i.e. incremental) mindset regarding empathy by describing empathic behavior as the result of deliberate effort and thus empathy being improvable rather than fixed and unchangeable (Schumann et al., 2014). Exposing participants to an incremental view of empathy causes them to subsequently expend more empathic effort towards others (Schumann et al., 2014). Whether this increased perceived controllability is accompanied by an increased expectation regarding others' levels of empathy remains to be explored. One's judgments of another's unempathic behavior may depend on whether one believes people have control over their level empathy in the first place.

Because mindsets have implications for people's perceived capacity for change, generally improvement, they are likely to be connected to how people assign blame for shortcomings. Theories of moral responsibility would predict that because incremental inductions ascribe more control over traits and actions, they should result in incrementalists being harsher judges of poor behavior than entity theorists (Molden & Dweck, 2006; Plaks, Levy, & Dweck, 2009). According to these theories, a key component to moral judgment is whether the actor could have, or

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should have known to do otherwise (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). For example, Alicke's (2000) Culpable Control Model suggests that extent of personal control is the primary factor in ascribing blame. The Path Model elaborates upon this position, proposing that judgments proceed through stages, from control to morality (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). Indeed, manipulating capacity for choice affects blame attributed by participants (Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014).

The predictions of theories of moral responsibility seem to contradict findings regarding implicit person theories and moral judgment, where, despite perceiving increased control, incrementalists are nevertheless found to be more forgiving (Molden & Dweck, 2006; Plaks et al., 2009). Children with fixed theories of personality showed less empathy towards, and recommended more punishment for a new student behaving badly, and emphasized what a behavior revealed about a person's good or bad character, while incrementalists focused instead on mediating factors (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Heyman & Dweck, 1998). Among adolescents, entity theorists desired more revenge than incremental theorists did, and exposure to an incremental induction reduced this desire (Yeager et al., 2011). College students who were entity theorists regarding morality made more dispositional attributions for social transgressions and experienced greater negative affect in response to these transgressions than incremental theorists did (Miller, Burgoon, & Hall, 2007). However, the generalizability of these studies is limited in two ways. Firstly, these studies examine moral judgment in the context of global personality theories or lay theories of morality itself. Moral judgment could also, independently of these more global lay theories, depend on the theory of the specific trait along which one evaluates another's behavior. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, these studies typically examine singular transgressions, rather than continual patterns of behavior.

Though research on implicit person theories' impact on blame attribution for behaviors across longer time spans is sparse, initial evidence suggests that incrementalists can be less forgiving than entity theorists when dealing with continual failure. Incrementalists become harsher towards themselves than entity theorists do in the face of multiple failures to improve (Molden & Dweck, 2006). When a difficult continuous task was tied to self-esteem, incremental theorists who continually preformed poorly reported lower self esteem than did entity theorists (Niiya, Brook, & Crocker, 2010). Repeated failure to improve by others, despite effort to do so, likewise resulted in greater anxiety among incremental theorists than entity theorists (Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005). Since both incrementalists and entity theorists fit theory-violating information to their worldview, instead of adjusting it (Plaks et al., 2005; Plaks & Stecher, 2007; Xu & Plaks, 2015), it may be that incremental theorists are unable to reappraise an attribute as relatively uncontrollable when observing continual failure.

The entity theorists' view of limited potential for improvement may be accompanied by an acceptance of their own or another's limitations, be they real or imagined. Kammrath and Dweck (2006) found those with an entity theory regarding personality were more accepting of the faults of a dating partner following relationship transgressions, although at the cost of not working towards making changes that could improve the relationship. Subsequent research showed that incrementalist romantic partners, though initially more optimistic about their partners ability to change negative behaviors, were more likely to attribute failure to lack of effort and were more distrustful of partners exhibiting partial success at changing over a two-week period (Kammrath & Peetz, 2012).

The divergence between blame for singular transgressions and continual failures may be reconciled by an approach to moral psychology and philosophy known as virtue ethics, which suggests that judgment of specific acts can reflect what the acts reveal about the actor's character (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2017; Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015). It may be that, when evaluating transgressions,

incrementalists are more likely to assume a positive character that is capable of improvement, while entity theorists see the action as more diagnostic of character. Indeed, entity theorists have been shown to infer traits from singular actions more readily than incremental theorists (e.g., Dweck et al., 1993; Miller et al., 2007). If increased perceived control is accompanied by expectations of improvement across broader patterns of behavior, continual transgressions may provide evidence against an assumed positive character for incrementalists. For incrementalists, a single bad act might not be judged negatively, since it does not reflect being a bad person, and can readily be changed. However, a series of bad acts, betraying a failure to improve, might be judged more harshly. Manipulating whether participants see an actor's character as evil or good leads them to interpret the same action as more or less blameworthy, respectively (Newman, De Freitas, & Knobe, 2015). For entity theorists, a single bad act and a series of such acts might both signal a bad person, albeit one with limited control and, thus, responsibility.

Alternatively, it could be that the relationship between mindset and blame is not mediated by perceived control. In the study of prejudice, changing the perceived controllability of stigmatized characteristics does not reduce prejudice regarding those characteristics, because here controllability justifies attitudes, rather than causing them (Hegarty & Golden, 2008). The previously discussed Culpable Control Model likewise acknowledges that sometimes control justifies negative attitudes towards an actor rather than causing them (Alicke, 2000). When participants were exposed to a car crash in inclement weather in which the driver was rushing home to hide cocaine, as opposed to an anniversary present, participants rated the former driver as having more control over the car crash (Alicke, 1992). If controllability judgments do not precede blame attributions in the context of implicit person theories, we would expect to see no clear relationship between controllability induced by growth mindset inductions and blame. Given the increasing popularity of growth mindset interventions (e.g., Dweck, 2012), whether such interventions can increase blame attribution over longer patterns of behavior is a pressing issue.

If incremental mindsets increase control, and control increases blame, then those induced to have an incremental mindset should be more prone to blame for failings. However, control may not always be a predecessor of blame, and incremental mindsets do seem generally to be combined with a view of the core character as good, so single failures may be seen as aberrations (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2017). However, continual failures may overcome that tendency. Across longer patterns of behavior, those who see poor behavior as controllable may ascribe more blame than those who see it as diagnostic of bad but uncontrollable character. In this case, inducing an incremental mindset could increase judgmental harshness. To explore whether implicit person theories can result in increased judgmental harshness of undesirable behavior, we explore the effects of inducing implicit theories of particular traits on judgments of patterns of behavior. We hypothesized that consistently undesirable behaviors would elicit more blame and moral judgment among those who view the trait as changeable, by increasing perceived control over the specific trait. Thus, people who have been induced to hold an incremental mindset about empathy, and are then asked to judge another's consistent failure in that trait, may find that person more blameworthy for their failure. And, conversely, people induced to hold an incremental mindset about empathy may find those showing an abundance of the trait to be more praiseworthy. We also explore whether such findings would generalize to other traits for which the benefits of an incremental mindset have been demonstrated. We test incremental inductions regarding aggression, where inductions of personality as incremental have shown reductions in aggression (e.g., Yeager et al., 2011). We also explore willpower, where inductions have shown, for example, more adaptive attention allocation on cognitive tasks (Schroder, Moran, Donnellan, & Moser, 2014).

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