

Research Dialogue

Potential growth areas for implicit theories research

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Accepted by Joseph R. Priester, Editor

Received 24 June 2015; accepted 24 June 2015

Available online 30 June 2015

Abstract

Implicit theories have great potential relevance to shape theory and research in consumer psychology. Beliefs about the stability or malleability of human characteristics can affect the behaviors of companies and customers alike, including the ways in which the two interact with one another. In this paper, we speculate about potential extensions and boundary conditions for the effects of implicit theories on consumer behavior. We also propose a number of new directions for future research, especially regarding the role that implicit theories can play in persuasion and social influence.

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Keywords: Advocacy; Branding; Customer loyalty; Implicit theories research

Introduction

The dimension of stability vs. change is a basic aspect of perception, one with important implications for the perception not only of individuals, but also of other targets, such as brands and companies. Implicit theories therefore have considerable potential relevance for consumer behavior researchers. Despite the long history of research on implicit theories in social psychology, it is just beginning to make inroads into consumer behavior journals. The Murphy and Dweck target article is a welcome introduction to the topic for consumer behavior researchers, and it does well to illustrate the myriad potential applications of implicit theories to marketing contexts. We agree with the authors regarding the basic tenants of implicit theory research and its relevance to the field of consumer behavior. The core ideas of the theory have been supported by nearly 40 years of research and have been robustly replicated by multiple researchers (see [Molden & Dweck, 2006](#), in addition to Murphy and Dweck, current issue, for a recent review). Hence, in this commentary, we focus on potential future directions aimed at both delineating the scope of the theory as well as expanding it to previously unstudied domains. Our commentary

consists of four sections: (1) the adaptivity of growth vs. fixed mindsets for companies, (2) the desirability of consumers with growth (vs. fixed) mindsets, (3) the meaning of “growth,” and (4) the application of implicit theories to attitudes.

The adaptivity of growth vs. fixed mindsets for companies

A consistent theme in research on implicit theories is that growth mindsets are more adaptive than fixed mindsets ([Dweck, 2006](#)), and for good reason. Those with growth mindsets have repeatedly been shown to respond to failure in more adaptive ways. Specifically, they attribute failure to lack of effort rather than lack of ability, and as a result, are more likely to take remedial action ([Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999](#)). Generally speaking, growth mindsets are associated with “mastery-oriented responses,” and fixed mindsets are associated with “helpless responses” ([Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995](#)). Growth mindsets thus appear to be more adaptive than fixed mindsets, and as the target article suggests, businesses could potentially benefit by adopting growth mindsets over fixed mindsets. However, it is rare that any approach or mindset is universally adaptive, and so in this section, we speculate about possible boundary effects for the adaptive superiority of growth mindsets.

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Much of the research on mindsets and achievement has been conducted within academic contexts. In these contexts, children are enrolled in classes with limited options as to how to allocate their energies (e.g., they can't typically decide to abandon math for a different topic). It is therefore not surprising that a growth mindset—one associated with increased (vs. decreased) effort and greater optimism for success in the face of failure—would promote greater achievement.

However, in many business contexts, as well as real-life contexts more generally, success depends not only on improving within a single prescribed domain. Rather, it depends on directing one's efforts to where they will have the greatest effect, or in business speak, to find the "low-hanging fruit." Opportunity costs loom large for businesses and individuals alike, and directing efforts to improve in a domain one is poorly suited to compete in may be unwise, even if it does result in improvement within that domain. One could potentially have achieved still greater success had equal effort been allocated to a goal more naturally suited for one's skill set.

Put another way, it is likely true that most individuals and organizations can improve in a domain when appropriate effort is applied, but one must also have a keen awareness of one's own limitations in order to allocate effort efficiently. One's theories of malleability must be calibrated to reality. Those with unrealistic expectations for their own improvement could be more subject to sunk cost effects (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), believing incorrectly that they can make good on a bad investment. Those with unrealistic growth mindsets could also be more vulnerable to fruitless persistence in failed courses of action more generally. Though Murphy and Dweck are correct that a company with a fixed theory might overlook unserved but potentially fruitful market segments, a company with an unrealistic growth mindset might fruitlessly strive to serve markets for which they are ill-suited.

Numerous staples of marketing classes highlight this risk. For example, Levi's famously failed at trying to sell suit separates (Levi's "Tailored Classics") to consumers of tailored fashion suits, such as those sold by Burberry. A video documentary (Espar, Henry, & WGBH, 1981) details their unwavering but ultimately fallacious belief that they could convince such customers to wear a Levi's suit. As another example, manufacturers of Clamato (a clam and tomato juice drink) sought to increase their sales of Clamato to non-Hispanic Americans who found the notion of drinking clam juice distasteful. Their belief that they could alter their clam and tomato juice positioning was so strong that they launched a \$14 million campaign declaring that Clamato was "99.9% clam free." Not shockingly, the campaign was a major failure, and the company subsequently had greater success when they refocused their efforts toward serving Hispanic Americans who had a greater pre-existing affinity for the clam and tomato juice beverage. Though the growth mindset of Levi's and Clamato may have led them to have greater success with these marketing attempts than a fixed mindset would have, a more fixed mindset may have led them to adopt different marketing strategies altogether, ones successfully directed at more naturally matched targets.

Companies overly sanguine about their ability to change may also tend to over-promise and under-deliver, leading to

lowered satisfaction, particularly among customers who have growth mindsets themselves (more on this below). Because consumer satisfaction is determined, at least in part, by performance expectations (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996), companies that communicate inaccurately their ability to improve over time will face dissatisfied customers.

Our general point is that to be adaptive, the growth mindsets of companies and individuals may have to be reasonably well-calibrated to reality. To be sure, the notion that knowing one's limitations can be useful has not been entirely neglected in the literature. Dweck and Leggett (1988) wrote, "Although we have been emphasizing the vulnerability created by an orientation toward performance goals over learning goals, it is essential to note that there are also adaptive performance concerns. It is often important for individuals to evaluate their abilities or to gain positive judgments of their competence. Indeed, sometimes this may be a prerequisite to the successful pursuit of learning goals: Obtaining an objective diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses may be a necessary step in the learning process, and earning the positive judgment of those who control important resources may be a necessary step in one's pursuit of skills and knowledge. Thus adaptive individuals effectively coordinate performance and learning goals. It is when an overconcern with proving their adequacy (to themselves or others) leads individuals to ignore, avoid, or abandon potentially valuable learning opportunities that problems arise" (p. 260). Though present in some places in the literature, such cautions are absent from the present paper, and indeed, from most writing on implicit theories. To our knowledge, there has not been empirical exploration on how accurate calibration of one's theories affects the adaptivity of growth mindsets. It seems likely that in some cases, acknowledging one's limited ability to succeed in a domain, cutting one's losses, and moving on to greener pastures could be the most adaptive move.

The desirability of consumers with growth (vs. fixed) mindsets

The target article focuses on ways in which consumers with growth mindsets are better for firms, such as being more likely to forgive a company's transgressions (Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Wood, 2010). In some cases, however, consumers with growth mindsets may actually be less likely to tolerate a company's failures. In the relationships literature, for example, it has been shown that relationship partners with a growth mindset are more likely to blame their partners for failed change attempts, concluding that they did not try hard enough (Kammrath & Peetz, 2012). When one thinks that people (or businesses) have the ability to improve (whether or not this is actually the case), failures to improve can then be attributed to a lack of will or effort. Those with a growth mindset could ultimately attribute poor performance to a lack of firm effort, and this would likely be exacerbated to the extent that the firms themselves make promises for changes that are not achievable.

There are other ways in which consumers with growth mindsets could be less desirable than consumers with fixed mindsets. Given that those with fixed mindsets could be more likely to view brands as part of their identities (Park & John,

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