



Support for the domain specificity of implicit beliefs about persons, intelligence, and morality



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 April 2015

Received in revised form 28 May 2015

Accepted 30 May 2015

Available online 25 June 2015

Keywords:

Implicit beliefs
Implicit theories
Construct validity
Intelligence
Morality

ABSTRACT

Implicit theories are beliefs that pertain to the nature of person attributes. Entity theorists believe that a person's attributes are fixed entities, whereas incremental theorists believe that a person's attributes are malleable. Here, the theory was tested using confirmatory factor analysis and examining the relationship between the broad constructs of implicit beliefs about intelligence, persons, and morality and specific measures related to the broad domains. A model drawn from the theory provided strong evidence for implicit theories. Further, evidence in support of domain specific measures was also found. An additional study investigated a hypothesis regarding incremental belief endorsement. Discussion centers on the usefulness of implicit belief measures for basic and applied research.

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1. Introduction

Unlike other individual difference variables in psychology which have faded from fashion or empirical attention (e.g. dogmatism, locus of control), implicit theories have enjoyed over two decades of empirical interest and support. Implicit theories are beliefs that pertain to the nature of human attributes. Carol Dweck and her colleagues (see Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Molden & Dweck, 2006) have amassed an impressive array of novel outcomes associated with one's basic beliefs about the relative stability versus malleability of person-relevant attributes (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, & Sacks, 1997; Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998; Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005).

There are two types of implicit beliefs. Incremental theorists believe that a person's attributes, such as their intelligence and moral character, can be developed, cultivated and shaped. In contrast, an entity theorist believes a person's attributes are stable over time (i.e., a person's moral character or intelligence is believed to be a fixed entity or quality). A person with an incremental belief believes that a person's attributes can be shaped by the environment or personal growth, whereas a person with an entity belief about personal qualities believes that a person's attributes are hereditary or innate.

Implicit theories represent a single psychological construct. According to the theory, implicit beliefs are individual differences—they are relatively stable over time, and people either hold an entity belief very strongly or

strongly hold an incremental belief. Dweck et al. (1995) assert that the beliefs are “mutually exclusive alternatives” (p. 323). Further, implicit beliefs influence patterns of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to one's environment.

Implicit beliefs are unlike other individual difference variables because they are both stable, and capable of being changed (Dweck et al., 1995). Although the beliefs are contradictory, people may hold both an entity and incremental belief simultaneously (Dweck et al., 1995; Molden & Dweck, 2006). In other words, implicit beliefs vary both chronically and moment to moment. In the absence of experimental manipulation, they function much like individual differences and people have a dominant view that is chronically accessible. Interestingly, evidence suggests that people both defend against information that disconfirms their chronically accessible belief (Plaks et al., 2005) and that people may change their implicit beliefs to maintain their self-esteem or maintain cherished beliefs about others (Leith et al., 2014).

Three broad domains (person attributes, intelligence, and morality) have been studied extensively. In these domains, implicit beliefs are shown to produce qualitatively different patterns of behavior and cognition. Molden and Dweck (2006) suggest that if we know a person's implicit belief, then we can understand and even predict how that person will function, handle setbacks, regulate their self esteem, and how they view and interact with other people. Support for this claim is provided by research concerning implicit beliefs about intelligence, human attributes, and morality.

While there is a large body of research on implicit beliefs, there are no published studies on the construct validity of the scales used. Further there are no studies examining the relationship between the three hypothesized domains. In the current paper, the relationships between

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the three broad domains are examined, and the hypothesis that the domains are good measures of specific constructs with each domain is tested. Finally, sub-scales of the broad domains, such as a scale of dishonesty or music ability, are examined for their possible usefulness in research with specific hypotheses. If the sub-scales explain a significant proportion of variance in the hypothesized latent construct, and the three factor model fits the data then evidence for their use would be provided. Research within the three domains is discussed in turn. Subsequently, a short discussion regarding the measurement of implicit beliefs is provided.

1.1. *Implicit beliefs about intelligence*

Within the domain of intelligence, entity theorists are concerned with performance goals. They seek opportunities to document their intelligence and look to gain favorable judgments while avoiding negative or unfavorable judgments. Since entity theorists believe that their intelligence is fixed, they try to avoid evidence that would suggest that they are not intelligent. Entity theorists exhibit negative self-cognitions, negative affect, ineffective problem solving strategies, and maladaptive patterns of behavior to overcome failures, partly because they associate effort with low ability (Diener & Dweck, 1978; Dweck et al., 1995; Licht & Dweck, 1984). In other words, entity theorists tend to believe that people expend a lot of effort only when they have low ability or low intelligence.

Incremental theorists, in contrast, seek learning goals and are concerned with developing their intelligence. They exhibit constructive self-talk, self-monitoring, positive affect, and problem solving skills in the face of failure. Also, unlike entity theorists, they believe that effort is a means to develop their ability.

People with incremental theories use more adaptive strategies than those with entity theories in academic settings (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Further, incremental theories can be taught. Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) taught a group of students that intelligence is “muscle like” and malleable. Students in the control condition were taught that there were many components of intelligence (i.e., if you struggle in one course you may still do well in another). At the end of the term, those in the malleable training group were found to have higher grade point averages than those in a control group.

1.2. *Implicit beliefs about person attributes*

Implicit beliefs about the relative stability or malleability of human attributes influence person perception and trait attribution. Individuals who believe that traits are fixed human qualities (entity theorists) tend to also believe that traits cause behaviors, that traits can be used to predict future behaviors, and that people exhibit cross situational behavioral consistency (Chiu, Hong et al., 1997). Entity theorists place a greater emphasis on evaluating other people. They make stronger trait attributions, have stronger impression formation goals, and draw stronger inferences from behavior (Chiu, Hong et al., 1997; Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Hong et al., 1997; McConnell, 2001). Those who believe that it is difficult to change one's emotions report more psychological distress (De Castella et al., 2013).

Entity theorists also form and endorse more extreme stereotypes (Levy et al., 1998). Evidence suggests that part of the reason entity theorists make stronger trait attributions and endorse stereotypes to a greater extent than incrementalists is because they allocate more attention to stereotype consistent information while incrementalists allocate more attention to stereotype inconsistent information (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001; Plaks et al., 2005).

Finally, some research suggests that entity theorists process and store evaluative information differently than incrementalists. Hong et al. (1997) suggest that entity theorists encode information with strong evaluative tags and store positively and negatively valenced information separately in memory to more easily produce evaluative

judgments. Further, when positive and negative information are segregated, one's impression tends to be more global and strongly valenced so that judgments made later will be based on either positive or negative information, depending on which information store is more strongly accessible.

Incremental theorists, in contrast, store valenced information in the same location and integrate positive and negative information so that later judgments will be based on recall of both positive and negative information. In contrast to entity theorists, individuals who hold incremental beliefs about human attributes search for mediating information that may help them form an impression or to explain a person's behavior (e.g., a person's mental states or goals, or information about the situation is sought). Incremental theorists do not make strong trait attributions, they are unlikely to believe that traits are good predictors of future behavior, and are likely to believe that a person's behavior varies across situations. Incremental theorists seek to understand other people, and their judgments are more specific, more conditional, and more provisional than judgment made by entity theorists (Dweck et al., 1993). Finally, incremental theories buffer people against negative effects of setbacks during goal pursuit enabling them to reach their goals more readily than entity theorists (Burnette & Finkel, 2012).

1.3. *Implicit beliefs about morality*

Within the domain of morality, entity and incremental theorists differ in terms of the importance they associate with duty versus rights based moral systems and differ in terms of their attributions about other's moral character. For example, entity theorists recommend harsher punishment for a wrong doer than incremental theorists (Erdley & Dweck, 1993). Further, entity theorists base their judgments of guilt more on the appearance of a criminal than on explicit evidence, and they predicted that a criminal would commit more crimes in the future as compared with incremental theorists (Dweck et al., 1993). Entity theorists make more extreme judgments about a person's moral character from a single instance of behavior than incremental theorists (Chiu, Dweck et al., 1997; Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Wood, 2010).

Chiu, Dweck et al. (1997) found that entity theorists are more concerned with duty based morality than incremental theorists. They support the status quo, and their moral code focuses on sanctioning and punishing deviance. Incremental theorists, however, are concerned with a rights based morality, whereby one must uphold principles of fairness. Incremental theorists support social change and their moral code focuses on people's rights to equality. In a number of experiments, entity theorists endorsed items related to duty based morality to a greater extent than incrementalists. Further, incremental theorists were more likely to endorse items related to rights based morality than entity theorists. Further, evidence suggests that incremental theorists are more likely to forgive and trust others compared with entity theorists (Haselhuhn et al., 2010).

1.4. *Measurement of implicit beliefs*

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, the implicit belief theory has accumulated a great deal of empirical support. Further, implicit beliefs have strong predictive validity. One can predict how a person will act, feel, and behave based on the implicit belief they hold. However, there have been no studies examining the relationship between the three constructs or the relationship between broad constructs and more specific constructs. In fact, since 1988 there has been only one construct validity study conducted on implicit beliefs, and unfortunately, it was not published. In Study 1, I sought to remedy this problem by using confirmatory factor analysis to test the implicit belief theory.

Implicit beliefs are measured via disagreement with entity beliefs and items depicting incremental theories are not included. Pilot studies (Leggett, 1985, as referenced in Chiu, Hong et al. (1997) found that there

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