

Dweck Carol S. (1999) Self-theories: their role in motivation, personality and development. Notes from Jo Tait of the Open University.

Contents, Chapter Headings and Summaries

1 What promotes adaptive motivation? Four beliefs and four truths about ability, success, praise and confidence

The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort and they persist in the face of obstacles. In this book I present research that explains why some students display these “mastery-oriented” qualities and others do not. This research challenges [... *established beliefs that...*]:

- ▶ students with high ability are more likely to display mastery-oriented qualities;
- ▶ success in school directly fosters mastery-oriented qualities;
- ▶ praise, particularly praising a student’s intelligence, encourages mastery-oriented qualities;
- ▶ students’ confidence in their intelligence is the key to mastery-oriented qualities.

(summarised from pp. 1 and 2)

Self-esteem [...] is not an internal quality that is fed by easy successes and diminished by failures. It is a positive way of experiencing yourself when you are fully engaged and are using your abilities to the utmost in pursuit of something you value. It is not something we give people by telling them about their high intelligence. It is something we equip them to get for themselves – by teaching them to value learning over the appearance of smartness, to relish challenge and effort, and to use errors as routes to mastery. (p.4)

2 When failure undermines and when failure motivates: helpless and mastery-oriented responses

[In our study] ...the helpless and mastery-oriented groups are equivalent in the cognitive skills they bring to a task. The reason they may end up displaying such different levels of performance is that one group essentially retires its skills in the face of failure, while the other continues to use them vigorously. ... The helpless response, if it is a habitual response to challenge, will not just limit students’ achievement of tasks that others give them. It will limit their achievement of their own goals. [...] If, on the other hand, difficulty is treated as a natural part of things and challenge is welcomed, how can this help but foster the achievement of goals. (p.14)

3 Achievement goals: looking smart versus learning

Over-concern with ability and worrying about its adequacy leaves students vulnerable. (p.19)

4 Is intelligence fixed or changeable? Students’ theories about their intelligence foster their achievement goals

[...S]tudents’ theories of intelligence set up an emphasis on performance versus learning goals. [...P]erformance goals may mean different things to entity and incremental theorists. For incremental theorists, a performance-goal task tests a specific skill at a specific point in time, for an entity theorist, the same task tests their global intelligence now and into adulthood. [...] This difference may create a focus on and fear of failure among entity theorists, but it may allow incremental theorists to flexibly adopt and coordinate both kinds of goals. (p.28)

5 Theories of intelligence predict (and create) differences in achievement

We have seen that students’ theories of intelligence affect their achievement and their ability to cope effectively. How does this happen? The two theories seem to create entirely different frameworks for students. Once students adopt a theory of intelligence, it affects what they value, how they approach intellectual tasks and how they interpret and respond to what happens to them. A belief in fixed intelligence raises students’ concerns about how smart they are, it creates anxiety about challenges, and it makes failures into a measure of their fixed intelligence. It can therefore create disorganized, defensive, and helpless behavior. A belief in malleable intelligence creates a desire for challenge and learning. In fact, some incremental theorists tell us that they worry a task will be too easy for them and, essentially, not worth

their while. Setbacks in this framework become an expected part of long-term learning and mastery and are therefore not really failures. Instead they are cues for renewed effort and new strategies. (p. 38)

6 Theories of intelligence create high and low effort

It has become a common practice in much of our society to praise students for their performance on easy tasks, to tell them they are smart when they do something quickly and perfectly. [...] When we do this we are not teaching them to welcome challenge and learn from errors. We are teaching them that easy success means they are intelligent and, by implication, that errors and effort mean they are not. What should we do if students have had an easy success and come to us expecting praise? We can apologise for wasting their time and direct them to something more challenging. In this way, we may begin to teach them that a meaningful success requires effort. (p.43)

7 Implicit theories and goals predict self-esteem loss and depressive reactions to negative events

[...]implicit theories and goals can illuminate not just achievement processes, but even more fundamental processes of the self and even more basic coping processes. They can tell us who, in encountering difficulty in their lives, will maintain and who will lose self-esteem or a sense of worth; who will feel hopeful and who will feel devastated or become depressed; who will cope constructively and who will not. As with achievement, it is ironic that those who care most about proving themselves often act in ways that are least likely to bring that about. (p.50)

8 Why confidence and success are not enough

One of the reasons we have become so lavish, and perhaps indiscriminate, with our praise of students is that as a society we have come to believe that this will raise students' confidence. And confidence, we believe, is the panacea. (p.51) [...]The confidence they need is the confidence that they, or *anybody* for that matter, can learn if they apply their effort and strategies. (p. 58)

9 What is IQ and does it matter?

Students' theories of intelligence and their definitions of intelligence appear to go hand in hand. It is much easier to believe in malleable intelligence when intelligence is about skills, knowledge and effort - although it is possible to believe in malleable capacity.... The goal of this book is not really to resolve what intelligence is, but rather to ask: what is the most useful way of thinking about intelligence and what are the consequences of adopting one view over another. (p. 63)

10 Believing in fixed social traits: impact on social coping

[This study] examined how implicit theories play out in close relationships and yielded strong evidence that those with fixed versus malleable theories of relationships approach their relationships in different ways and respond in different ways to challenges and setbacks within those relationships. We can now say that the ideas that we originally developed to understand how students think, feel, and act in achievement settings also hold the promise of helping us understand how people think, feel, and act in their social relationships. The ideas that help explain academic success and failure may help explain relationship success and failure. (p.72)

11 Judging and labeling others: another effect of implicit theories

[O]ur research indicates that entity theorists, once they have formed an impression, are often less sensitive to new, contradictory information [...] and may even try to avoid it [...]. This may well be for the reasons we have examined - that entity theories believe they are judging permanent traits that reliably express themselves in people's behaviour. (p.80 - 81)

12 Belief in the potential to change

In the earlier chapters we saw how entity theorists gave up on themselves when they failed. They condemned themselves, lost self-esteem, fell into a depressed state, and lost confidence in their future performance. Now we find that they give up on others too. Simply put, entity theorists don't grant people the potential to grow - not themselves and not others. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, see their own failures as problems to be solved, and

they see other people's failings that way as well. To them, people can make mistakes, follow the wrong paths, or do harm to others, but they are also capable, with the proper motivation and guidance, of going beyond this. (p. 88)

13 Holding and forming stereotypes

Is it wrong to hold stereotypes? Don't groups in fact often differ from each other in important ways? [...] Dangers arise when people lose sight of this complexity and go beyond the evidence to conclude that some groups are inherently superior or inferior to others, or that most members of a group share the same qualities. Dangers can also arise when people draw strong conclusions about groups from too little evidence. Holding an entity theory appears to raise the chance of this happening. Holding an incremental theory does not have to prevent people from seeing the facts. (p.94)

14 How does it all begin? Young children's theories about goodness and badness

How might children come to have a contingent sense of goodness? One way might be through parents who react to their behavior in a judgmental way. What the helpless children might have been telling us when they role-played harsh criticism and punishment from their parents is that they feel deeply judged by their parents when they transgress. [...] Is it possible that the helpless response arises in young children when they are treated in a judgmental way, as when their traits or their entire selves are evaluated from their behavior? Is this how they learn to judge themselves from their failures? We set out to answer this question. Now, you might think that what these children need is more praise for their ability and their goodness – to counteract the negative judgements and to prevent them from doubting themselves so quickly – but you'd be wrong. (p.106)

15 Kinds of praise and criticism: the origins of vulnerability

[...]no matter how good person praise or trait praise may make children feel at the time it is given, it carries with it a host of dangers. Is it just that young children, being young children, are unusually susceptible to the messages that adult feedback conveys? Was it just something about this particular experiment that produced these odd results? Given that our findings run so counter to conventional beliefs, we realised that we needed to test the ideas again in a different way. The next studies [...] show once again that person or trait-oriented praise has a host of negative effects and that some of these unwanted effects can be seen even before failure occurs. (p.115)

16 Praising intelligence: more praise that backfires

Our research shows that adults' praise conveys powerful messages to students. As a society, we've had the best of intentions in the messages we've sent. We wanted to send our students messages of respect and encouragement, ones that would arm them with confidence and allow them to go out into the world and succeed. The intentions were impeccable, but the way they were put into practice was faulty. (p.126)

17 Misconceptions about self-esteem and about how to foster it

[There are] two views of self-esteem. In one, low effort, easy success, and others' failures make students feel good about themselves. [...] In the other, facing challenges, working hard, stretching their abilities, and using their skills and knowledge to help others make students feel good about themselves. (p.131)

18 Personality, motivation, development, and the self: theoretical reflections

I have laid out an approach to personality, motivation, mental health, and development that is based on the belief systems people develop. These belief systems are relatively stable, but they are also dynamic and malleable. It is this fact – the fact that our personality is generally quite stable, but at the same time so responsive to situations and capable of change over time – that makes the field so exciting and so challenging. It is exciting to think of the potential that exists in people and to think of discovering the kinds of learning experiences that can help them realise this potential. Yet it is a formidable challenge for researchers to try to capture such dynamic processes in clear, precise and parsimonious ways.

19 Final thoughts on controversial issues

Some tough questions.