

Research Dialogue

Mindsets and consumer psychology: A response

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Introduction

We are grateful for the warm welcome and stimulating commentaries we received as we took a leap into consumer psychology. We were delighted to see the directions the commentaries took as they built upon mindset theory and suggested new avenues for exploration. Our goal for this response is three-fold. First, we clarify what we mean by mindset and discuss the relative costs and benefits of a fixed and growth mindset. Next, we describe how mindsets relate to other “mindset-like” variables, including approach/avoidance and prevention/promotion motivations. Finally, we join in conversation with the commentaries to discuss how understanding mindset contributes to our understanding of consumer and organizational behavior.

Clarifying mindsets

Mindsets are the beliefs that people have about the nature of human traits and characteristics (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Specifically, mindsets center around people’s beliefs about whether traits and characteristics are fixed or whether they can be developed. If people believe that traits—like intelligence, personality, sports ability, etc.—are not controllable features of the self, and thus cannot be changed, they endorse a “fixed mindset” about those traits. If, on the other hand, people view their traits as controllable and changeable through effort, they endorse a “growth mindset.” Importantly, people can subscribe to a fixed mindset about some traits, like sports ability, but a growth mindset about

others, like intelligence. Indeed, mindsets are domain-specific and the correlations among mindsets about different domains are modest.

Distinguishing mindsets from other motivations

Rucker and Galinsky (2016-in this issue) suggest that multiple mindsets matter for consumer behavior. We agree; however it is important to clarify how fixed and growth mindsets differ from other “mindset-like” motivational variables. Fixed and growth mindsets are constructs that are grounded in how people construe the self. Can traits be changed? Or, are they fixed and immutable? This construal of one’s traits indeed affects the selection, encoding and retrieval of information and drives evaluations, actions, and responses (cf. Rucker & Galinsky). However, fixed and growth mindsets are different from other motivation-relevant tendencies, such as approach–avoidance, promotion–prevention, and power, which are viewed as more domain-general motivational tendencies and are not typically seen as based in self-construals. Moreover, fixed and growth mindsets are orthogonal to at least some of these other motivational tendencies. For example, as Maheswaran (2016-in this issue) argues, fixed mindsets can sometimes result in approach orientation (towards high status products and brands) and sometimes result in avoidance orientation (away from evaluation). Like Maheswaran, we consider mindsets distinct from self-regulatory processes and dual-process models of information processing although mindsets, as we have shown, have clear and important implications for them. We think that a more productive question may not be which is “king”, but: how do mindsets and other tendencies such as approach–avoidance and promotion–prevention orientations impact motivation and behavior both alone and in concert?

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Benefits and costs of fixed and growth mindsets for consumer and organizational behavior

In general, growth mindsets stoke motivation. When individuals believe that basic traits can change as a function of effort, they are motivated to work hard to improve and develop those traits. Fixed mindsets are often associated with less motivation and effort, particularly in the face of obstacles, as people who endorse this view of their traits are motivated to demonstrate that they have good traits and may back away from information to the contrary. There are, however, some situations where growth mindsets may lead to relatively negative outcomes and fixed mindsets to positive outcomes.

Indeed, the commentaries provide interesting hypotheses regarding consumer and organizational outcomes associated with fixed and growth mindsets. Wheeler and Akhtar (2016-in this issue) suggest that fixed mindset individuals may be more brand loyal and accepting of closely related brand extensions as they view brands as tied to the fixed self. However, fixed mindset consumers' inclinations to view brands as fixed may, over time, limit the brand's ability to adapt and change without risking or alienating its consumer base. Following this logic, John and Park (2016-in this issue) suggest a sequential "step-by-step" approach that brand managers may adopt that carefully moves away from existing lines and products over time so as not to alienate fixed or growth mindset consumers.

The commentaries also raise competing hypotheses that invite future exploration. For example, on the issue of mindsets and perceptions of company failures, Wheeler and Akhtar (2016-in this issue) suggest that growth mindset individuals may be less tolerant of company failures because they may blame the company for not trying hard enough. Maheswaran (2016-in this issue), however, suggests that growth mindset individuals may consider situational factors when considering a company's transgressions and thus may be more forgiving and less likely to lodge consumer complaints in the first place. Our research suggests that indeed individuals with a growth mindset are more likely to recognize situational factors as being highly important in producing outcomes (Molden, Plaks, & Dweck, 2006). Instead of simply blaming fixed traits for failures and seeking to punish those responsible, people with a growth mindset consider a variety of contextual, psychological, and behavioral variables (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997; Levy & Dweck, 1999).

Each commentary identified some consumer contexts in which fixed mindsets may be productive. For instance, John and Park (2016-in this issue) review a number of ways in which fixed mindset consumers are benefited by brands, as brands may serve self-enhancement and self-efficacy needs, assist with recovery following self-threat, and help people overcome challenges. These hypotheses are compelling and merit further study.

At the same time, some commentaries suggested contexts in which growth mindset consumers and companies may be at a

disadvantage. For example, Wheeler and Akhtar (2016-in this issue) hypothesized that growth mindsets may be less adaptive—contributing to unrealistic striving and misplaced effort—unless they are well calibrated to reality. This is an intuitively appealing prediction; however, research reveals that growth mindset individuals tend to have *more* self-insight and are *better* calibrated to reality than fixed mindset individuals (Ehrlinger & Dweck, 2007). Because fixed mindset individuals mostly attend to positive information that confirms their view of themselves, they miss negative information that would help them to better calibrate their self-assessments; as a result, they are often overconfident about their skills and abilities. Because growth mindset individuals attend to both positive and negative information regarding the self—seeing both types of information as key to learning—they revise and update their assessments, ultimately showing better calibration and more accuracy (Ehrlinger & Dweck, 2007).

Conclusion

Taken together, we are delighted by the wide-ranging ideas that emerged from this conversation. Mindset theory generated many interesting and novel directions for future research related to consumer and organizational behavior. We are eager to see what new insights emerge from the union of mindset theory and consumer psychology.

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