Potential growth areas for implicit theories research

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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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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 clay 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 (Kamnarth & 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,
2010), they could be more brand loyal over time. In fact, there are multiple reasons to suspect that those with fixed mindsets would be more susceptible to branding efforts more generally. Multiple papers have shown that those with fixed mindsets engage more in lay dispositionism (e.g., Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). For example, those with fixed mindsets are more likely to draw trait inferences about others and rely on them when predicting their future behavior. A reasonable extension of this idea would be to expect that those with fixed mindsets would impute more meaning into brands and use them more as a basis for evaluating products. That fact that those with fixed mindsets process information in a more evaluative manner (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, & Sacks, 1997) could further enhance this process.

Other work has shown that entity theorists are more likely to impute entitativity to groups, that is, to believe that groups are a coherent unit, rather than as a collection of individuals who may differ in important ways from one another (Rydell, Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007). As a result of these entitativity beliefs, they engage in greater stereotyping. A plausible extension of this idea would be that entity theorists would be more likely to impute the core aspects of a brand identity onto brand extensions. Hence, although fixed mindsets among consumers may limit a brand’s ability to extend beyond its core, they may do so because the brand has a stronger and more coherent meaning for consumers, a desirable feature for most brand managers (see also Yorkston, Nunes, & Matta, 2010). Put another way, brand strength can sometimes limit brand extension, much as it did for Levi’s, but brand strength is typically positive overall.

Last, those with fixed mindsets could be more desirable for a third reason. Both those with growth mindsets and those with fixed mindsets process new theory disconfirming information in biased ways (Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005). Based on these findings, it could be that when fixed mindset individuals form an impression of a brand, they would be more likely to process subsequent information in a way that confirms their view of the brand as stable and unchanged. Those with fixed mindsets could be less likely to perceive changes by brands (e.g., worsening quality or shrinking package sizes), thereby rendering the brand identity more resistant to change over time. Similarly, those with fixed mindsets could process new information about brands (e.g., reviews inconsistent with their prior beliefs) in biased ways so as to maintain their view of the brand as unchanged. Hence, although incremental theorists could sometimes be more willing to forgive brands for transgressions, entity theorists could potentially be less likely to notice them in the first place. On the flip side, entity theorists could also be less likely to notice the improvements in a brand over time, making it less profitable for a company to improve. Clearly, there are many potential predictions one could make regarding how implicit theories will react with marketing variables such as branding, making this a fertile area for future research.

**The meaning of “growth”**

It may have seemed odd to predict that those with growth mindsets would be more likely to perceive declines in brand quality over time, given that people process information in theory-confirming ways. However, this inconsistency is due only to the label “growth.” Implicit theories have been labeled in multiple ways across the many papers that examine them. The present manuscript uses the terms “fixed” and “growth” mindsets, but a different set of labels that is frequently used for the same constructs is “entity” and “incremental” mindsets, respectively.

In our view, the former set of terms has the potential to restrict theory development because it implies that change can mean only improving over time. However, nothing in the measurement of these constructs nor in the typical manipulations implies that those with an incremental mindset believe that change can only be positive. The primary focus to date on positive change makes a great deal of sense given both the typical context in which implicit theories have been tested (e.g., in the development of children’s abilities) and in the near-universal adaptiveness that appears to characterize incremental mindsets. However, at some point during the lifecycle, people’s mental and physical capabilities decline. At some point during many companies’ lives, the brand starts to lose its leadership or relevance in its product category.

There could be contexts in which a greater acknowledgment of one’s potential for negative change could be bad. Could a belief in the company’s ability to grow worse, in some cases, lead it to overreact in the face of threats, taking measures to change when in fact the best course of action is keeping on the same tack? Could the acceptance that one has greater potential for getting worse sometimes lead to lowered confidence and worse performance? Could the belief that one is and always will be good sometimes beneficial for performance?

This idea touches on a paradox within the implicit theories literature. Entity theorists do not seem to completely believe in the stability of their characteristics. For example, it was suggested that entity theorists would prefer products suggesting that change would be easy (as compared with incremental theorists, who might prefer more difficult change), but the notion of change, whether easy or hard, would appear to contradict entity theorists’ belief in the stability of their own characteristics. Similarly, past research suggests that although entity theorists appear to believe that their abilities are fixed, they act as though any new failure could reveal their incompetence. Having established prior success, an entity theorist should be open to any challenge, because a subsequent failure would not indicate that one’s abilities have slipped. That is, an early success should establish a person’s (presumably unchangeable) ability as high, rendering subsequent failures attributable to chance, a fluke, or some other non-ability factor.

Yet, theorizing suggests that entity theorists fear that any test could reveal their inability. It is as though entity theorists have asymmetrical fixedness beliefs, thinking that failure indicates a permanent lack of ability, but that success is only temporary. In research on implicit theories, those with entity theories appear to believe feedback manipulations, but if they are true entity theorists, they should do so only if they had no prior idea what their ability was (otherwise those pre-existing ability beliefs would be fixed). Elucidating this paradox regarding the simultaneous fixedness and malleability of entity theorists’ beliefs would be a useful development for theory.
Implicit theories of attitudes

The focus of the Murphy and Dweck paper was on implicit theories regarding skills and personality dimensions (e.g., brand personality). There is an additional domain of implicit theories that has ready applicability to consumer behavior that previous research has generally overlooked, specifically, implicit theories regarding attitude stability. Much like implicit theories regarding other characteristics, people can vary in their beliefs regarding the stability or malleability of attitudes and opinions. Some people believe that one’s likes and dislikes are relatively fixed, whereas others believe that they are malleable. Not surprisingly given the importance of evaluative processes for consumer behavior, these implicit theories of attitudes have important implications for marketers.

For example, some prior research has shown that entity theories of attitudes are associated with greater attitude certainty (Petrocelli, Clarkson, Tormala, & Hendrix, 2010). Attitude certainty is important to marketers because certain attitudes are more likely to guide behavior (Fazio & Zanna, 1978; Tormala & Petty, 2002). Additionally, certain attitudes are more resistant to persuasion attempts (Bassili, 1996; Krosnick & Abelson, 1992). Taken together, these literatures further suggest the prediction that those with entity theories would be more brand loyal customers, both in exhibiting stability in brand preferences over time and in acting on those preferences through purchase.

Our own work (Akhtar & Wheeler, 2014) has considered the implications of implicit theories of attitudes not only for attitude strength, but also for sharing one’s opinions (e.g., word of mouth). In our work, we have broadened examination of implicit theories of attitudes to include not only how theories affect one’s own attitudes, but also how they affect perceptions of others’ attitudes as well. More specifically, in considering whether to share one’s opinions with others, one might consider both the stability of one’s own attitudes as well as the stability of others’, and these stability perceptions could have opposing effects.

As reviewed above, some work has suggested that entity theories of attitudes are associated with greater attitude certainty (Petrocelli et al., 2010). Other work has shown that attitude certainty increases the likelihood of advocacy (Akhtar, Paunesku, & Tormala, 2013; Barden & Petty, 2008; Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). Taken together, these findings would suggest that entity theories would increase the likelihood of trying to persuade others. However, one could also make the opposite prediction. Specifically, if one believes that the opinions of others are not malleable, there would be little point to trying to persuade them.

Our research (Akhtar & Wheeler, 2014) has shown that both of these predictions are true and operate simultaneously, leading to a net zero overall effect of implicit theories on likelihood of trying to persuade others, but significant, simultaneous opposing indirect effects. That is, entity theories increase the likelihood of trying to persuade others—and they do so via attitude certainty—but they also decrease the likelihood of trying to persuade others—and they do so via perceptions that others are not persuadable. Subsequent studies showed that entity theories could either increase or decrease advocacy, depending on the focus of the individual and the framing of advocacy. A focus on the self (and hence one’s level) vs. others (and hence, their level of persuadability) increases advocacy among entity theorists. Framing advocacy as standing up for one’s beliefs, thereby rendering more relevant than others’ persuadability, does the same.

These initial examinations of implicit theories of attitudes suggest that this construct could have applicability to a wide variety of marketing-relevant behaviors. As one final aside, the application of implicit theories to domains like attitudes is another reason why we find the term “incremental” to be preferable to “growth.” One’s attitudes can change in many ways without straightforward implications for growth or diminishment.

Conclusion

The research by Murphy, Dweck, and their colleagues on implicit theories has contributed greatly to understanding of areas such as achievement and social perception. Exploration of implicit theories within the consumer behavior domain holds equal promise for fruitful theoretical development. The Murphy and Dweck target article provides a useful introduction to implicit theories work and a brief overview of some of the findings to date, and it points to several promising areas for future research. We agree that implicit theories are important to consumer behavior and both hold growth mindsets for the future of implicit theories work in consumer psychology research.

References


