

***Theories of Intelligence and
Learned Helplessness:
The Role of Social Psychology in
Schools***

“Team AWESOME!”

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Self-Theories of Intelligence

Entity Theory

•Intelligence is a fixed trait that is
unchangeable through effort or
experience.



Incremental Theory

•Intelligence is a malleable quality that can be developed.

Students' self-theory of intelligence impacts behavior
through goal selection, attributions made for failure,
and beliefs about the role of effort in their subsequent
performance.

Entity theorists tend to:

1. Select performance goals
1. View academic setbacks or failures as a direct,
negative reflections of their intellectual abilities
1. Expend less effort on tasks similar to the failure
experience because they expect to fail.

Interestingly, an entity theorist's confidence in their
ability appears to be fragile. Challenging tasks that
require hard work cause them to question their ability
so they avoid tasks that could lead to growth in their
ability.

Incremental theorists tend to:

1. Select learning goals
1. View academic setbacks or failures as clues about their strategies or effort
1. Work harder because they believe effort is the key to overcoming obstacles and achievement

Attributions made about effort and ability influence task persistence. An incremental theorist focuses on effort as the way to accomplish challenging tasks at which they persist longer in order to foster their intellectual growth.

Two Questions:

1. Can theories of intelligence be changed?
1. Does a student's theory of intelligence impact academic achievement?



Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002:

- Group of college students taught to view their intelligence as malleable (incremental theory). Students who learned this theory had higher G.P.A.'s at the end of the study than the comparable students who were not taught the theory.

- Effect was especially notable for the minority students.

Aronson & Good 2002:

Junior high students in a computer class learned that their intelligence can grow through learning. Mentors helped each student create a web page that advocated the malleable nature of intelligence.

At the end of the school year, the students in the experimental group earned higher scores in math and reading on the state achievement test.



The intervention was especially helpful for the female students. The gender gap in math scores that existed in the control group disappeared for the females in the experimental group.

Blackwell, Dweck, & Trzesniweski, 2003:

Two groups of at-risk junior high students received training in important academic skills, concepts. Students in one group were also taught that you can get smarter through learning – intelligence is malleable (incremental theory).

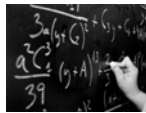


At the end of the semester, math grades of the students in the experimental group were significantly higher than those in the control groups.

Importantly, teacher noted increased motivation and an eagerness to learn in the students in the experimental group

Considerations for schools:

One of the National Mathematics Advisory Panels recommendations for preparing students for success in algebra is to “encourage effort and persistence.”



Academic interventions generally focus on teaching or strengthening skills students lack. In the studies presented, students in control and intervention groups had equivalent skill levels, but the students who also learned about the nature of intelligence showed achievement gains.

Learned Helplessness

Accepting a painful fate without attempting to remove yourself from the unpleasant situation.

Work on learned helplessness began when psychologists were studying avoidance learning in dogs. The dogs learned to accept shocks to their paws, even though they could jump away.



Explanatory Style

- The reformulation of learned helplessness theory focuses on the cognitions a person has that may lead to feelings of helplessness, or the explanations that people give for events in their lives.
- These explanations are referred to as **causal attribution**.
- The next three slides highlight the 3 categories for attribution for the causes of events.

Explanatory Style

External Explanatory Style	Internal Explanatory Style
Believing that the causes of events are outside of one's control	Blaming yourself for events

Explanatory Style

Stable Explanatory Style	Unstable Explanatory Style
The cause of a situation is permanent and stable	Causes of events are temporary and not long lasting

"My paper's poor grade was due to the fact that I am not a good writer"

"My paper's poor grade was due to the fact that I was tired when I wrote it"

Explanatory Style

Global Explanatory Style

Causes affect many situations in all of life

"I was robbed because all people are bad"

Specific Explanatory Style

Events happen due to very specific causes

"That person who robbed me is bad"

Explanatory Style

Pessimistic Explanatory Style

Emphasizes internal, stable, and global causes



Optimistic Explanatory Style

Emphasizes external, temporary, and specific causes



Explanatory Style

- Our explanatory styles have shown to be a stable characteristic over time.
- The pessimistic style puts a person at risk for feelings of helplessness and poor adjustment.
- Studies have shown that a pessimistic style in college predicted poorer health 20 to 35 years later.

Learned Helplessness in the Classroom

- Children who have a tendency to overreact when negative feedback is provided to them will typically give up after failure
 - these children have also been referred to as learned helpless. Previous studies suggest that these children tend to explain academic failure in terms of stable and global causes and explain achievement in terms of unstable, specific causes
- When a child perceives that they have no control over what they do and what happens to them (that the two are independent of one another), they will give up or lower the level of their performance

Learned Helplessness in the Classroom

- Children usually approach a task with some notion of how they will perform.
- After they have completed a task they will evaluate their performance and compare it to their initial expectation. The actual performance is said to play a key role in the way that the child revises his or her perception of their own control over their environment.
 - the helpless child will rationalize his or her failure and then lower his or her expectations of future success .



- A child learns to explain failure primarily from the evaluative feedback that they receive from the adults in their life (parents and teachers).
- When a child is told to try harder or put more effort into a task, more damage than good can occur.
 - In some cases, children try their best and are not capable of mastering the academic task. Despite their effort, they do not succeed at the task, and therefore are left to conclude that they are lacking the ability.

Interventions to Combat Learned Helplessness in Schools

- Environmental Enrichment
- Attribution Retraining
- Parental Intervention

Environmental Enrichment

- Have adequate rewards available in the setting
- Rewards should be contingent on what a person does
- The most important part: People
 - Students and teachers must be responsive to each other
 - Praise as opposed to material goods should be present in abundance



Environmental Enrichment Cont.

- The enriched environment may not be enough for students who are already helpless
- Must repeatedly call the individual's attention to the changes and encourage him or her to test the reality
- Helpless individual should not be told to change his or her thoughts, but to test new beliefs against evidence
 - Be careful for backfire – the practitioner must anticipate the results that the "experiment" will show



Attribution Retraining



- Change the way students and teachers explain bad events
 - If someone uses an internal, stable, and global cause to account for bad events...
 - Teach them to employ external, unstable, and specific causes

Attribution Training Cont.

- Attend not only to “correct” but also “incorrect” answers on assignments and tests but also to *why* some answers are better than others and *how* students can produce these better answers.
 - Attention to achievement should bolster the student’s sense of efficacy and his or her conscious use of strategies.
- Encourage students to explain failure in terms of lack of effort as opposed to lack of ability
- Teachers should facilitate these attributions by commenting on a student’s work ethic “You worked very hard on that assignment” as opposed to ability “You’re so smart!”



Parent Interventions



- Study found that parents who explained bad events that involved their children with internal, stable, and global causes had children who consistently failed to live up to their potential
- Parent-teacher conferences and other school activities can be used to help parents learn to use a different explanatory style with regard to their children
- Workshops or lectures considering this can be used to help parents learn the importance of optimism and the effects that their optimism can have on their children’s classroom achievement and behaviors
