

THE BIG IDEAS

Two Frameworks

Entity vs. incremental theories.

Two Goals

Performance vs. learning.

Attributional Retraining

How do you respond to failure?

Contingent Self-Worth

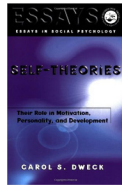
Pay attention to your praise.

Wholehearted Self-Esteem

A brilliant definition.

Strong Commitments

And earnest efforts.



Self-theories

Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development (Essays in Social Psychology)

BY CAROL DWECK · PSYCHOLOGY PRESS © 2000 · 212 PAGES

“I have always been deeply moved by outstanding achievement, especially in the face of adversity, and saddened by wasted potential. I have devoted my career to understanding both. For almost 30 years, I have done research on motivation and achievement. This book presents the findings from my research, and, as you will see, many of these findings challenge conventional wisdom. ...

My work is built around the idea that people develop beliefs that organize their world and give meaning to their experiences. These beliefs may be called ‘meaning systems,’ and different people create different meaning systems. In this book I spell out how people’s beliefs about themselves (their *self-theories*) can create different psychological worlds, leading them to think, feel, and act differently in identical situations.”

~ Carol Dweck from *Self-theories*

[Carol Dweck](#) is one of the world’s leading researchers on the science of motivation.

This book is a collection of brief essays on various aspects of “self-theories.” It’s essentially a bridge between her extensive academic research studies and her popular book [Mindset](#).

It reminds me of [Abraham Maslow’s Motivation and Personality](#) in that we get a peek into the mind of a brilliant, progressive scientist exploring the intellectual edges of their life’s work.

My book is nearly completely underlined and marked up and “wow”ed. The book is *densely* packed with wisdom. It’s a great, important read but it is certainly *not* a *quick* read. Dweck wastes no words as she offers a thoughtful, precise look at decades of research. I highly recommend it if, as a parent, leader and optimizer you’re looking to get a deeper understanding of one of the most important subjects we can ever explore. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I’m really excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in.

ENTITY VS. INCREMENTAL THEORY

“Some people believe that their intelligence is a fixed trait. They have a certain amount of it and that’s that. We call this an ‘entity theory’ of intelligence because intelligence is portrayed as an entity that dwells within us and that we can’t change.

This view has many repercussions for students. It can make students worry about how much of this fixed intelligence they have, and it can make them interested first and foremost in looking and feeling like they have enough. They must look smart and, at all costs, not look dumb.

What makes students with an entity theory feel smart? Easy, low-effort successes, and outperforming other students. Effort, difficulty, setbacks, or higher-performing peers call their intelligence into question—even for those who have high confidence in their intelligence.”

Dweck tells us there are two frameworks for understanding intelligence and achievement.

“In the course of examining this issue, we will come to understand better why some people exceed expectations, while others fail to fulfill their potential.”

~ Carol Dweck

"The hallmark of successful individuals is that they love learning, they seek challenges, they value effort, and they persist in the face of obstacles."

~ Carol Dweck

The first: The Entity Theory.

In her later work, Dweck describes this as the "Fixed Mindset." The basic idea is clear: With this perspective, you think intelligence is fixed—you either have it or you don't.

The ramifications of this are huge. Thinking that your intelligence can't be improved, you're basically always on alert and trying not to look dumb. This leads to focusing on easy stuff and avoiding the challenges where you can learn and improve.

Not a course for mastery. The other framework that DOES lead to mastery?

The Incremental Theory of intelligence.

Dweck tells us: "Other people have a very different definition of intelligence. For them intelligence is not a fixed trait that they simply possess, but something they can cultivate through learning. We call this an 'incremental theory' of intelligence because intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one's efforts."

It's not that people holding this theory deny that there are differences among people in how much they know or in how quickly they master certain things at present. It's just that they focus on the idea that everyone, with effort and guidance, can increase their intellectual abilities.

This view, too, has many repercussions for students. It makes them want to learn. After all, if your intelligence can be increased, why not do that? Why waste time worrying about looking smart or dumb, when you could be becoming smarter? And in fact students with this view will readily sacrifice opportunities to look smart in favor of opportunities to learn something new. Even students with an incremental theory and *low* confidence in their intelligence thrive on challenge, throwing themselves wholeheartedly into difficult tasks—and sticking with them."

So, we have the *entity* mindset where one believes that intelligence is fixed. Then we have the *incremental* mindset where one believes that intelligence can be grown.

Dweck walks us through *decades* of FASCINATING, rigorous research testing various facets of the impacts of these two different frameworks and just how powerful (/pernicious) they can be.

The short story?

Entity and incremental theorists are actually very similar when everything is easy and going well. It's when things get HARD that you see the entity theorists crumble while the incremental theorists rub their hands together and lean into the challenge (and, therefore, get better).

One group becomes vulnerable and demonstrates a helpless response while the other is hardy and demonstrates a mastery response.

Why?

Because, depending on your mindset, you have very different GOALS when you engage in life. For the fixed/entity mindset group, the goal is to look good. Whereas, for the growth/incremental mindset group, the goal is to LEARN.

It's impossible to overstate the significance of this. Let's drill in a little more deeply.

PERFORMANCE GOALS VS. LEARNING GOALS

"A performance goal is about measuring ability. It focuses students on measuring themselves from their performance, and so when they do poorly they may condemn their intelligence and fall into a helpless response."

A learning goal is about mastering new things. The attention here is on finding strategies for learning. When things don't go well, this has nothing to do with the student's intellect. It simply means that the right strategies have not yet been found. Keep looking. ...

"This means that with a learning goal, students don't have to feel that they're already good at something in order to hang in and keep trying. After all, their goal is to learn, not to prove they're smart."

~ Carol Dweck

The study showed the power of goals. We did not start out by identifying children who were prone to a helpless or mastery-oriented pattern. We simply gave children different goals and showed how these goals could *produce* the helpless and mastery-oriented responses. When children are focused on measuring themselves from their performance, failure is more likely to provoke a helpless response. When children are instead focused on learning, failure is likely to provoke continued effort."

So, we've established the fact that entity theorists are concerned about their performance because they believe their intelligence is fixed and each performance is a measure of their intelligence while incremental theorists are excited to learn because they believe their intelligence is malleable and each performance gives them an opportunity to get better.

(Yes, I'm deliberately repeating myself. Let's get this.)

Dweck shows that, independent of the students's default setting, they can be *given* either a performance goal or a learning goal simply by telling them that they will be evaluated on their performance in the upcoming task or that they should use the upcoming task to learn some valuable things.

The group that is told they will be judged is vulnerable and demonstrates helpless responses in the face of challenges. The group that is told they have an opportunity to learn cool stuff is hardy and demonstrates hardy responses in the face of challenges.

<— That's REALLY REALLY important—for our kids and for ourselves.

Spotlight on YOU: Are you constantly telling yourself (or your kids) that you need to perform perfectly at whatever you're doing or are you coaching yourself to see how much you can learn?

Of course, performance goals matter. But, let's move from constantly trying to *look smart* to constantly trying to GET SMARTER. By focusing on progress rather than perfect results, we will, paradoxically, get our results much faster.

ATTRIBUTION RETRAINING

"The other group received training in how to interpret their failures. This was called 'attribution retraining' because we were teaching a new attribution or explanation for failure. For them, 2 or 3 of the 15 trials in each session were failure trials. On these trials, students failed to finish the required number of problems within the time limit. They were stopped, shown how many problems they had needed in order to succeed on that trial, and told: 'You need [say] six, you only got five. That means you should have tried harder.'

Their failure was now interpreted in terms of effort rather than ability. These were students who strongly blamed their ability when they failed, and we were teaching them to focus on effort instead. ...

At the middle of the training, there was no real change in the group that received the success training. They were no more able to deal with failure than they had been before. However, the group that got the attribution retraining—the group that was given new meaning for failure—showed real improvement."

Attribution retraining. <— A fancy phrase for learning how to more wisely interpret failure. This wisdom is from a section on why confidence and success are not enough.

Quick re-cap: Dweck studied kids with "*extreme helpless response to failure*." She split them into two groups. One got "success training"—which basically means they performed well on tests. The other group got the attribution retraining—in which they "failed" but were then told that they did so because they didn't try hard enough. (Note: These kids all had EXTREME helpless response to failure so their default to failure was to blame their ability.)

Fast-forward to the next part of the study where all the kids experience challenges. The ones briefly trained in how to reinterpret their failures (by trying harder!) outperformed the other.

Remember: Entity and Incremental Theorists tend to perform the same when it's easy. It's when challenges enter the picture that things shift.

So: We need to give ourselves and our kids some attribution retraining!!

—> When you fall short of your goals, how do you tend to respond?

Let's remember to avoid the entity response of blaming our abilities and focus on how we could work harder and/or employ better strategies!!

CONTINGENT SELF-WORTH

"I am not suggesting that failure and criticism are more beneficial than success and praise. Nor am I arguing that a feeling of confidence isn't a good thing to have, but I will argue that it is not the heart of motivation or the key to achievement."

~ Carol Dweck

"In a sense, the person-oriented feedback seems to be instilling a sense of 'contingent self-worth.' When people have a sense of contingent self-worth, they feel like worthy people only when they have succeeded, and they feel deficient or worthless when they fail. This concept forms the core of several traditional personality theories, such as those of Carl Rogers (1961) and Karen Horney (1937, 1945, 1950). In these theories, some parents' reactions to their children teach the children that the parents consider them worthy of love and respect only when they behave a certain way or meet a certain standard. Children then adopt the idea that they are persons of worth only under those circumstances.

It had struck us before that the helpless young children in our earlier studies were displaying a clear sense of contingent self-worth. They behaved very much as though they expected major rejection from their parents (and their teachers) for their failures. And they told us that they themselves felt as though they were not good kids as a result of making a mistake or receiving criticism.

Now we see that the person criticism and the person praise can actually create this by leading children to be proud and happy with themselves only when they succeeded and to be globally self-denigrating and unhappy with themselves when they erred."

Dweck dedicates a considerable amount of energy to establishing the fact (!) that the type of praise we give kids directly impacts the types of goals they choose for themselves.

In short, if we're constantly praising the "person" via such comments as "You're such a good girl!" or, "You're really good at that!" we're unknowingly (yet powerfully) conditioning them to have contingent self-worth such that they do the very thing we hope they won't do—becoming vulnerable and helpless in challenging situations lest they lose their sense of self-worth by proving to *not* be good at everything.

On the other hand, by praising the EFFORT and STRATEGIES of the "performance" via such things as "I see that you tried really hard and figured that out!" + "You found a good way to do that; can you think of other ways that would also work?" we're cultivating a mastery-oriented approach where challenges are faced with enthusiasm rather than fear.

As the father of a three-year-old, I read this book with a huge level of enthusiasm. We've practiced [a parenting approach called RIE](#) which advocates a similar type of "warm neutral" communication but it's amazing how easily I fall into "Wow! You're so smart!" kind of praise.

It's REALLY (!!!) fun to practice focusing on how hard Emerson *tries* and celebrate his *effort* + *strategies* rather than his "natural" ability.

For example, I take him on an "adventure" (hah) every morning to the park. His new thing is scaling a little climbing structure that's right at the edge of his ability. As I watch him, I'm kind of blown away by his courage and agility to scale the thing. (Proud dad. Another hah!)

Without reading this book, I'm certain my default (and pretty much exclusive) response would be: "Wow! You're such a great climber!!" But now I know that if I do that, he's going to develop contingent self-worth. Over time, his goals will shift from (naturally) wanting to get better to wanting to LOOK good. Rather than lean into challenges that help him learn, he'll lean *away* from them fearing that his "being good" status is at risk.

As a still-recovering fixed mindset kid/adult, it's impossible to overstate how exhilarated I am to help cultivate a growth mindset in Emerson.

How about *YOU*? Are you celebrating EFFORT in your kids (and self and colleagues and ...) or performance?

P.S. Alexandra and I have a number of goals as parents—chief among them, of course, is creating the environment in which Emerson can flourish and actualize. In addition to cultivating a growth mindset, we're also explicitly committed to helping him develop and maintain a strong attention—which science has also unequivocally placed at the top of things that matter.

Part of a longer chat, but in support of this goal, Emerson has never spent more than 5 minutes in front of a screen. It's been a fun contrarian experiment. We have no desire to shred his attention span at this stage of the game and it's been awesome to see him fascinated by life rather than constantly drawn to a screen. (I type this laughing at my own addiction to the screens and eager to see how we navigate that challenge as it arises in the years ahead. :)

WHOLEHEARTED SELF-ESTEEM

"Within an incremental framework, self-esteem is how you feel when you are striving wholeheartedly for worthwhile things; it's how you experience yourself when you are using your abilities to the fullest in service of what you deeply value. It's not about displaying your traits advantageously or showing that yours are better than someone else's. Moreover, in an incremental framework, what feeds your esteem—meeting challenges with high effort and using your abilities to help others—is also what makes for a productive and constructive life.

How can we as adults facilitate this kind of self-esteem? It won't come as news when I say, by emphasizing learning, challenges, effort, and strategies. We can show children how we relish a challenge by waxing enthusiastic when something is hard; we can talk about how good an effortful task feels; we can model the exciting search for new strategies and report the information we have gleaned from strategies that failed. And when children are working on their own tasks we can encourage these attitudes in them.

What's more, in this framework we can tell students the truth. When they don't have skills or knowledge, or they're behind other students, this is not a sign of a deep, shameful deficit. It's a sign that they need to study harder or find new learning strategies. If some students don't pick up a subject as quickly as other students do at the moment, that means they have to work harder than the others if they want to achieve as much. In other words, we can be frank with students about what they lack and what they need to do to get it."

What an awesome definition of self-esteem: "*Self-esteem is how you feel when you are striving wholeheartedly for worthwhile things; it's how you experience yourself when you are using your abilities to the fullest in service of what you deeply value.*"

Dweck makes the very important point that we cannot give our kids self-esteem.

She says, "Self-esteem is not something we give them. It is something that they are in charge of, and we can simply teach them how to live their lives so that they will experience themselves in positive ways."

As per our last Idea, our incessant person-praise does pretty much the opposite of what we're looking for—creating contingent self-worth rather than solid self-esteem.

Here's to teaching them how to live their lives by GETTING EXCITED ABOUT OUR OWN CHALLENGES and modeling the behavior we hope they embody!

"What would make some students chronically worried about failure? I suggest that an entity theory of intelligence may lie at the heart of this. Within an incremental theory, a failure just means that your present strategy or your present skills are inadequate, but within an entity theory, a failure can cast doubt on your global permanent intelligence—definitely something to avoid."

~ Carol Dweck

A LIFE OF STRONG COMMITMENTS + EARNEST EFFORT

"When I think of a life governed by an incremental theory and learning goals, I think of valued skills and knowledge accrued over time and put to use for oneself and others. Whether things have gone one's way or not, it adds up to a life of strong commitments and earnest effort.

Some years ago, as I reached one of the landmark ages, I asked myself what I would like to be able to say at the end of my life, and it was this: I want to be able to say that I kept my eyes open, faced my issues, and made wholehearted commitments to things I valued. I did not want to be haunted by a litany of regrets or left with a bundle of potentialities that were never realized.

As adults in this society our mission is to equip the next generations with the tools they need to live a life of growth and contribution. Can we make the commitment to help them become smarter than we were?"

A life governed by INCREMENTAL THEORY and LEARNING GOALS in which we make strong commitments and earnest effort to wholeheartedly use our gifts in greatest service to the world, helping future generations develop the tools they need to live a life of growth and contribution.

That's what we're looking for.

Here's to KNOWING that we can optimize and actualize as we use each day as another opportunity to get just a little bit better,

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "Self-theories"

CAROL DWECK



Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., is widely regarded as one of the world's leading researchers in the fields of personality, social psychology, and developmental psychology. She has been the William B. Ransford Professor of Psychology at Columbia University and is now the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her scholarly book *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* was named Book of the Year by the World Education Fellowship.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.