

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Growth Mindset: The Lost Dimension

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Abstract:

Do we feel increasingly confident and reassured that HE sectors have a clear direction for addressing inequalities in British society? Recent initiatives, like ‘Growth Mindset’ are tagged as hopeful avenues to reduce the access and attainment gaps of university students and staff alike. In this paper, I endeavour to interrogate some of these views, firstly by analytically presenting categories of ‘fixed’ and ‘growth’ mindset in 3D, highlighting its potential limitations (as a standalone solution) for narrowing the attainment gap. Secondly, I will share an alternative philosophy, in line with social reproduction theory, which shows different avenues of power pathways which I have coined the “hegemonies of knowledge”. The aim of my contribution is to challenge the conceptual takes on the issue of growth mindset and its ability to impact on stereotypes in HE, and in doing so offer some creative directions for consideration.

Paper:

The institutionalisation of inequality in higher education and its peripheries bears the taint and wonder of perennial déjà vu. Notwithstanding the recent media headlines, (eg. Weale, Adams, & Bengtsson, 2017), which are always at risk of seeming selective or sensationalised; large scale investigations highlight persistent ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities in student access, attainment, retention and progression to and through higher education (eg. Wakeling & Savage, 2015). Even where sophisticated analyses allow us to understand how diversity has evolved over time with respect to some of these gaps in facilitation (Kelly, 2019), it is clear that there is still much work to be done for certain underperforming and under-represented groups. These structural patterns can be elucidated from as early as the primary school level under conditions of ability grouping and extend well beyond to divergence in employment opportunities (Holsinger & Jacob, 2008). There are correlated effects with higher education staff too, starkly represented in somewhat cliched and overlooked factoids such as the statistic that of the 400 female BAME professors in the UK (9% of total female professors), only 25 are black (Advance HE, 2018).

Sociologists have approached such topics in two major strands. Social reproduction theorists have looked at overarching ontologies of societal structure (Giddens, 1984), though they have given way in recent times to cultural studies which focus more on activism within categories of race, class and gender. The other strand is the domain of stratification theorists who illuminate empirical distributions and seek *individual and group* interventions at the micro and meso levels (Bradley, 2006). One major recent study in this vein, funded by the HEFCE, (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015), stresses the deleterious nature of stereotype bias as a major contributor to differential outcomes and the gaps discussed above. Though the psychological nature of stereotyping has been investigated in education for decades (Steele & Aronson, 1995), this paper is specifically interested in the use of 'growth' mindset as an intervention and moderator of stereotype threat.

The concept of mindset (Dweck, 2006) is one of the latest celebrity fashions in academia and pedagogy. This is because of its fairly simple and accessible premise: those with a 'fixed' mindset believe that abilities are immutable 'gifts' and cannot change much, while those with a 'growth' mindset believe that abilities can be developed with effort and training. The idea behind advocating a growth mindset to combat stereotype threat is also reasonably straightforward. Stereotyping at its core involves a logical syllogism; "I believe that A implies B and person X has property A, therefore person X is B". For example, A could represent "being black" and B represent "being an underachiever". Such compound propositions are best sustained when properties A and B are deemed immutable or intransigent. Growth mindset works against this by dispelling the immutability argument of B – "being an underachiever".

Of course, this is conceptually amenable, but there are some issues with the practice. Firstly, like most psychological mechanisms, mindset is sustained empirically, but its efficacy has undergone challenges in a recent meta-analysis that casts doubt on the proclaimed effect sizes of interventions (Sisk, Burgoyne, Sun, Butler, & Macnamara, 2018). Secondly, mindset exhibits some theoretical instability; it is a looser brand of philosophical essentialism (Haslam, 2017) but also less reliable than personality orientations. This can lead to seemingly paradoxical outcomes in empirical studies and contexts where it is expected to be activated in a certain way (Stout & Blaney, 2017).

My contribution in this paper is twofold; firstly, it seeks to address some of these deficiencies by demonstrating analytically what the motivational profiles of persons with 'fixed' and 'growth' mindsets should look like, given their subjective beliefs about the difficulty of uncertain or 'risky' tasks. Specifically, I demonstrate how the impact of mindset on attribution beliefs, avoidance goals and effort beliefs, which are phenomenon typically presented in mindset path analyses (Dweck & Yeager, 2019), can be modelled under a 3-dimensional topology for 'achievement motivation'. I have established much of the supporting algebraic framework elsewhere (Jogie, 2019a), but the key message is that while growth mindset improves the overall motivational profile beyond that of a fixed mindset, this does not mean that every task one encounters will be met with higher motivation. Indeed, this specification holds explanatory value for some of the aforementioned paradoxes.

The corollary of this determination is that relying on a growth mindset to universally disrupt the syllogism of stereotype threat may be illusory, unless other realistic conditions pertaining to providing learning challenges are met. This has been acknowledged in part within a recent UK Office for Students funded intervention programme, 'Changing Mindsets', which also accounts separately for implicit (unconscious) biases within stereotyping (Devine, 2018). This brings me to my second

contribution for this paper, which is to recommend a strategy consistent with the philosophical focus of social reproduction theorists. This is in recognition of the way power imbalances can mutate irregularly in cultural settings, a characteristic which is derivative of culturally produced “hegemonies of knowledge” (Jogie, 2019b). The recommended intervention is based on Jacques Rancière’s postulate of equality in learning (Rancière, 1991) and essentially acts through a systematic inversion of the syllogism; “I believe that A implies B” is habituated to become instead “I believe that B implies NOT A”. It is my position that this degeneration of the logic through discourse is the crux of denying the philosophical ‘subjectivation’ (Chadderton, 2018) associated with stereotype threat.

This paper appeals to methodological creativity through the ‘lostness’ (Wegener, 2016) of the foundational algebraic principles of psychology as well as through bridging the ideologies of the strands of social inequality research.

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