



The Relationship Between Flexibility of Mindset and Freshman Adjustment to College



Kayla McCusker & Linda Z. Solomon
Marymount Manhattan College

Abstract

Previous research on freshmen in college has shown a high dropout rate and other indicators of a difficult transition from high school to college. The present study related growth mindset (intelligence can be developed) to adjustment to college of students in introductory courses. Results indicated that growth (flexible) mindset was positively associated with overall adjustment (satisfaction with the school and new friends) and with adjustment to academic demands (ability to cope with the schedule and assignments).

Introduction

The personal and social transition required of new college students comes with a transition to a new academic life as well. The freshman is challenged with more difficult classes, more work to do outside of class, and more responsibility for deadlines and longer-term deadlines as well.

Beginning in the late 1980's, Dweck (1986) proposed that factors other than ability affect academic motivation and achievement. She described a positive, growth mindset, a belief that intelligence is flexible (rather than fixed at birth), that facilitates learning and resilience in the face of failure. The bulk of the related research has focused on elementary and middle school students (cf. Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002), but has consistently shown that mindset matters. Students with a growth mindset tend to perform better and become more publicly confident (Marshik, Kortenkamp, Cerbin, & Dixon, 2015). Students who participate more in class (presumably the more confident students) tend to do better academically (Kim, Shakory, Azad, Popovic, & Park, 2019).

In the present study, the authors correlated first year students' adjustment to college with the type of mindset (beliefs about intelligence) they seemed to have, flexible versus fixed. The authors hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between flexibility of mindset and adjustment to college.

Method

Participants

The participants included 60 traditional-aged college students who were enrolled in either fall semester freshman seminars or introductory psychology classes. All were students at Marymount Manhattan College, a small liberal arts college in New York City.

Measures

To measure mindset and adjustment, the authors developed a 21-item survey with 8 'mindset' questions, modeled on Dweck's (2006) concept of mindset – a continuum describing attitudes toward the nature of intelligence. Five of the items described a flexible mindset ("One can never stop learning"); three described a fixed mindset ("People find it hard to learn from their mistakes.") Thirteen of the items measured adjustment to college. Eight focused on the academic work in college ("I am overwhelmed with the amount of work I am given"); five focused on social/overall adjustment to the college ("I am comfortable at MMC.") Each item was followed by a 5-point response scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Positively keyed and negatively keyed items were interspersed.

Procedure

Students completed the survey during their classroom periods. Students were asked to provide demographic data so that the researchers could describe the participants and identify relationships with mindset and adjustment. Pearson's correlations assessed the relationship between mindset and adjustment

Results

Pearson's r's indicated that mindset and adjustment were significantly correlated as follows: Mindset and Academic Adjustment: (r(57)=.466, p=.001), Mindset and Social Adjustment: (r(58)=.443, p=.001). As predicted, the relationships between mindset and adjustment were positive and significant.

Conclusions

The results indicated that the more flexible the mindset of lower-level college students, the better adjusted they were likely to be. Despite the small sample, all of whom were students from a small liberal arts college in New York City, the results showed that overall, students' mindsets were associated with their academic and social adjustment to college.

The correlational design of the study precluded a cause-effect conclusion; however, previous studies with a younger sample (e.g., Dweck, 2006) have indicated the positive impact of brief interventions encouraging a flexible rather than a fixed mindset. Further research on the effectiveness of such interventions with college students might provide a means to improve their response to the challenges of freshman year.

Table 1. Relationships Between Measures

Pearson's R Correlations	Flexibility	Academic Adjustment	Social Adjustment
Flexibility	1	.466*	.443*
Academic Adjustment	.466*	1	.523*
Social Adjustment	.443*	.523*	1

* Indicates significance at the .01 level

Figure 1. Cronbach's Alpha of Subcategories

