

# Stuck in the muck? the role of mindsets in self-regulation when stymied during the job search

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Although there is a vast amount of literature on the psychologically harmful effects of unemployment, there has been less scholarship aimed at helping those struggling with the motivational challenges involved in a frustrated job search. This conceptual article draws on theory and extensive research in educational, social, and organizational psychology to explain the likely role of mindsets in self-regulation during the job search. Specifically, the authors outline how a person's mindset can cue patterns of functional and dysfunctional thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during a range of job search tasks. They then provide practical advice for counseling individuals—and for people helping themselves—through the job search process.

*Keywords:* job search, implicit theories, mindsets, self-regulation, employment counseling, job search interventions



The job search process is often a bumpy ride, full of false starts, knock-backs, and dashed hopes. These experiences can be demoralizing, demotivating, and harmful to a person's physical and mental health. For instance, frustrated job search progress may lead to anxiety or depression stemming from having self-defeating thoughts of hopelessness, giving up, and negative expectations (Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). The challenges of dealing with setbacks during the job search are particularly acute when viable job opportunities seem scarce and/or when financial hardship imposes a pressing imperative to quickly become employed (Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010).

Considering the potentially devastating and derailing nature of setbacks encountered during the job search, this article focuses on self-regulation of one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior during the job search process. Specifically, we discuss how people's implicit theories of ability (Dweck, 1986, 1999)—more intuitively known as *mindsets* (Dweck, 2006)—may affect the quality of their self-regulation when frustrations are encountered, along with their subsequent job search outcomes, such as successful job interviews and the speed and quality of employment.

We begin by introducing the concept of mindsets and review how mindsets affect the self-regulation of thoughts, feelings, and behavior when striving to attain



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a challenging goal. This discussion of mindset implications lays the foundation for our theorizing about how people's mindset may affect their self-regulation when frustrations are encountered while engaging in the job search, along with their resulting job search outcomes. We conclude by discussing future research directions and implications for maintaining effective self-regulation throughout the potentially harrowing job search process.

## MINDSETS

Mindsets are the assumptions people hold about the malleability of their personal attributes, such as intelligence and personality. An *entity implicit theory* (Dweck, 1986), relabeled by Dweck (2006) as a *fixed mindset*, embodies the belief that abilities are largely static and cannot be cultivated very much. It is reflected in statements such as "Your intelligence is something very basic about you that you can't change very much" and "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Conversely, an *incremental implicit theory* (Dweck, 1986), also relabeled a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006), represents the belief that abilities can be developed, especially when a person makes a concerted effort to improve. Statements such as "You can always substantially change how intelligent you are" and "People can always turn over a new leaf" reflect a growth mindset. Mindsets refine the concept of internal attributions within the locus of control (Rotter, 1966) because fixed and growth mindsets reflect attributions to static versus malleable internal causes of human behavior, respectively.

Mindsets create a mental framework that guides how people think, feel, and act in achievement contexts (Dweck, 1986). Considerable empirical research has revealed the self-regulatory and interpersonal consequences of mindsets (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). When people hold a fixed mindset, they assume that performance capabilities largely reflect innate talent and that little can be done to develop their presumably rigid abilities. This leads to avoiding challenges that may result in poor performance and negative evaluations of their supposedly fixed traits (Dweck, 1999). Persistent effort to develop one's abilities is construed as largely fruitless (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), and corrective feedback is disregarded (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006). People who presume that abilities are essentially carved in stone tend to have strained relationships as a function of judging others harshly when things go wrong (Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999), rather than helping them to improve (Heslin, VandeWalle, & Latham, 2006). Fixed mindsets also cue feeling threatened by the success of others instead of learning from them (Dweck, 2006).

On the other hand, when people hold a growth mindset, they construe performance capabilities as malleable and thus able to be developed. They set learning goals (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013) and relish challenging developmental opportunities, even if doing so may entail frustrations and setbacks (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). Effort is regarded as essential for development (Blackwell et al., 2007), and corrective feedback is studied for the potentially useful insights it can yield (Mangels et al., 2006). Setbacks are viewed as informative about what to do differently, rather than as predictive of what a person can ultimately achieve. The

conviction that personal dispositions are pliable prompts a focus on how others can grow and change. This cues an impulse to forgive (Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Wood, 2010) and help others to develop (Heslin et al., 2006), rather than to condemn and punish them for what they have apparently done wrong (Gervey et al., 1999).

People's mindsets can differ across domains. For example, a person might hold a growth mindset about their mathematical ability and a fixed mindset about their public speaking ability (Dweck, 2006). Mindsets can also be induced by interventions such as manipulating performance attributions (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), task framing (Wood & Bandura, 1989), reading scientific testimonials (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007), and self-persuasion-based methods (Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005). The mindsets literature thus includes field studies that explore the correlates of prevailing mindsets, as well as controlled experiments to examine the effects of induced mindsets. The consequences of naturally occurring and induced mindsets are essentially identical (Dweck, 1999, 2006).

## MINDSETS AND SELF-REGULATION

In this section, we outline a range of basic mechanisms whereby people's mindsets affect their cognitions, emotions, and behavior in achievement contexts, such as striving for employment. We will address how such dynamics may play out in response to setbacks during the four job search tasks of networking, vacancy search, preparing for job interviews, and negotiating job offers.

### Cognitive Self-Regulation

*I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.*

—Albert Einstein

A frustrated job search can prompt burning questions about how to make sense of setbacks and what it takes to progress along the path to employment. The mindset people hold at a given point in time often guides their attributions, their goals, and their self- versus other-referent focus, each of which may affect whether they become distracted or exhibit a sustained focus on their job search.

*Attributions.* When people hold a fixed mindset, they assume that their abilities are static and that the areas in which they perform well are the result of an endowed ability. This way of thinking leads to attributing poor performance to deficient, fixed traits in that domain (e.g., “I failed the test because *I am dumb*”; Dweck et al., 1995, p. 267, emphasis added). In contrast, when people hold a growth mindset, they assume that their abilities can be continually developed through concerted effort and do not presume that an innate ability deficit is the cause of the setbacks or failures that they encounter. Instead, they focus on how their potentially inadequate effort and/or strategies may have contributed to their disappointing performance outcome (Blackwell et al., 2007). Focusing on what they can change (i.e., their level of effort and/or strategies) rather than what they cannot change (i.e., presumably fixed traits) fosters people's learning and achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 1999,

2006). Sustained job search progress is similarly facilitated by attributing apparently meager momentum to the arduous nature of the task, rather than to potential personal limitations.

*Goals.* When people assume that poor performance points to a lack of innate ability, they avoid tasks that have the potential to expose an inherent weakness. As a result, they are more likely to choose tasks that embody performance goals to elicit positive judgments of their ability and to avoid negative evaluations made by others (Blackwell et al., 2007). On the other hand, believing that abilities can be nurtured leads people to view challenges as a chance to further develop their skills. When people have a growth mindset, they are prone to choose tasks that embody learning goals aimed at developing what they can do, even at the risk of eliciting negative judgments about their capabilities (Burnette et al., 2013).

When fixed mindsets are cued by praising people's intelligence (i.e., for being "smart"), people are more likely to choose to work on easy tasks to avoid looking incompetent, presumably because if they failed on a difficult task it could jeopardize their identity as being smart (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). This is in stark contrast to when people are praised for the effort they have exerted on a project (i.e., for "working hard"). What results is that people tend to work even harder! They also take on more challenging tasks and goals, believing that even if they fail it merely reflects them having not yet developed the required ability to master the task (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In short, although praising the effort people have made orients them toward tackling challenging tasks that can cultivate their underdeveloped competencies, praising even highly positive traits (i.e., being smart, brilliant, or gifted) cues them to become risk averse in ways that stifle their development and limit their opportunities.

*Self- versus other-referent focus.* Aside from differences in the attributions people make for their performance and in the goals that they set, mindsets also affect the extent to which they compare themselves to others. When people hold a fixed mindset, they tend to evaluate their success (or failure) in terms of how other people fared in that domain. For example, when students who held a fixed mindset were asked when they felt smart, they responded with statements such as "when others are struggling, but it's easy for me" and "when I turn in papers first" (Henderson & Dweck, 1990). In contrast to this other-referent focus, when students held a growth mindset, they tended to indicate that they felt smart "when I'm working on something I don't understand yet" and "when I'm reading a hard book." These statements illustrate self-referent criteria for evaluating one's attainments. Even when people who have a fixed mindset are not learning a great deal from a particular task, they tend to feel most successful when they outperform other people. When people hold a growth mindset, they are more likely to feel successful when they sense they are making progress on a challenging task (Dweck, 1999).

Consistent with these observations, Heslin (2003) identified that when executive Master of Business Administration (MBA) students held a fixed mindset, they tended to evaluate their career success relative to the outcomes and expectations of other people (e.g., what their peers had achieved or how much their fathers earned). This tendency to compare one's attainments to those of others can make people vulnerable

to self-deprecation when they see that others have outperformed them (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), even if they have personally made considerable progress. An other-referent focus can thereby sow the seeds for feeling anxious and/or depressed, as discussed in the following section.

## Emotional Self-Regulation

*I feel upset, ashamed at my failure, angry that I couldn't have done better, and even a little depressed. Basically, I think my GPA sucks, ergo, I suck.*

—College student with a fixed mindset (Robins & Pals, 2002, p. 313)

A lengthy job search can cue elevated levels of worry and anxiety, along with depressive symptoms (Wanberg et al., 2012). Next, we consider the potential role of mindsets in the emergence of these painful and potentially debilitating emotions.

*Worry and anxiety.* From the view of a fixed mindset, ability is unchangeable; what one is “good at” is the result of an innate talent, and what one is “bad at” reflects an innate deficiency. The frustrations of failure thus loom larger as failure reflects who one is, rather than merely what one did (or did not do). Concerned with what potential failure might signify about their identity and self-worth, fixed mindsets lead people to worry about how they will perform. For instance, in a study of mindsets and IQ test performance, Cury, Da Fonseca, Zahn, and Elliot (2008) observed that holding a fixed mindset cues dwelling on how one performed and will perform, along with worrying about how presumably fixed abilities will impede one’s capacity to improve.

The anxious feelings that stem from blaming setbacks on inherent ability deficits can be exacerbated by the related tendency to attribute successes to merely being lucky (Robins & Pals, 2002). The fixed mindset inclination to attribute the cause of successes and failures to uncontrollable factors intensifies perceptions that people cannot do much to relieve their anxiety. To the extent that they hold a growth mindset, however, people are more prone to attribute performance outcomes to the effort, strategies, and abilities they can develop. This provides a sense of control that helps alleviate distracting negative feelings when setbacks are encountered (Dweck, 1999).

*Depressive symptoms.* People can hold mindsets not only regarding their intelligence or personality, but also regarding the plasticity of their emotions. In a longitudinal study of students transitioning into college, Tamir, John, Srivastava, and Gross (2007) assessed mindset of emotion by examining the extent to which the students agreed with the statements: “If they want to, people can change their emotions” and “Everyone can learn to control their emotions.” When students disagreed with these statements (indicating a fixed mindset), they had less favorable emotion experiences, received less social support from new friends, and had lower emotion regulation self-efficacy. In contrast, those who agreed with these statements (indicating a growth mindset) displayed higher social adjustment and fewer depressive symptoms by the end of their freshman year.

When people believe that they are not able to change how they feel, they presume that learning to control their emotions is a fruitless task and subsequently tend to be less effective at controlling their feelings. When people believe that they can learn to control how they feel, however, they build more high-quality relationships and are relatively free of distracting, unsettling emotions.

## Behavioral Self-Regulation

*I think intelligence is something you have to work for . . . it isn't just given to you.*

—Seventh-grade student with a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, p. 17)

Two keys to an effective job search are to search intensely and persistently and to search with a high-quality process. In the following sections, we review the role of mindsets in the effort that people exert to attain their goals, the persistence they exhibit, and the development of effective strategies to achieve their objectives.

*Effort.* From the perspective of a fixed mindset, high performers are endowed with an inherent gift that enables their success in virtually any context. When successful outcomes are regarded as the result of a natural talent, struggling with performing a task is taken as a sign that one does not naturally have what it takes to be truly successful. In this way, people who hold a fixed mindset view ability as *either-or*: they either have natural ability in a certain area, or they have to work really hard and perhaps even then not perform particularly well (Dweck, 2006). Exerting significant effort to improve thus seems largely pointless.

In a study of entering freshman at a university in Hong Kong where all classes are taught in English, Hong et al. (1999) identified students who had performed poorly in previous English classes and asked them whether they would be willing to take a remedial course. Despite an imperative to be proficient in English, not only as a requirement for their studies but also for securing a high-quality job upon graduation, students who held a fixed mindset were less likely to take the needed remedial action, relative to those who held a growth mindset. As their poor English proficiency was perceived to be an unchangeable personal attribute, students with a fixed mindset were unwilling to exert the effort needed to cultivate their English-speaking abilities. Those with a growth mindset did not presume that extra work would be fruitless, so they readily signed up to take the remedial class. A growth mindset thus may increase the amount of effort people put into looking for work and developing relevant job contacts, resources, and skills, thereby facilitating their employment success.

*Persistence.* Beyond being reluctant to exert effort, a fixed mindset also cues giving up when the going gets tough. Persisting in an attempt to overcome obstacles is regarded as futile, because it is unlikely to alter one's deficient ability and subsequent performance. In contrast, a growth mindset is associated with greater persistence, even in the face of frustration and setbacks. Throughout an intense undergraduate chemistry course, Grant and Dweck (2003) observed that students' high motivation to learn (indicative of a growth mindset) was related to mastery-oriented indicators, including persistence. Whereas those students who were focused on proving their abilities (indicative of a fixed mindset) felt judged by disappointing initial grades, their peers who were motivated to

learn fundamentally changed their study strategies in response to this initial performance feedback. By the end of the course, those students who were inclined to learn something new—not prove their capabilities—had persisted through the difficulty and received the highest grades. A persistent focus on learning what employers are seeking and developing required competencies is likely to help people secure high-quality jobs.

*Development of effective strategies.* When poor performance is seen as reflecting limited innate ability, people sometimes wonder why they should bother generating strategies to cultivate a talent that they inherently do not possess. By contrast, when people hold a growth mindset, they attribute their struggles not to a lack of ability, but to ineffective strategies that they then strive to improve. In a study examining mindsets and music practice, Smith (2005) assessed mindsets about musical ability using items such as, “No matter who you are, you can significantly change your musical aptitude” and “You can always substantially change how musically talented you are.” When music students agreed with such items, indicating a growth mindset in the musical domain, they discovered and deployed a greater number of effective practice strategies, such as singing sections of the music, keeping a record of practice time and objectives, listening to recordings of oneself, using a metronome, working specifically on hard parts, listening to a recorded model, and counting rhythms. A growth mindset thus is associated with proactively exploring and engaging in a wide range of practice strategies to develop one’s abilities.

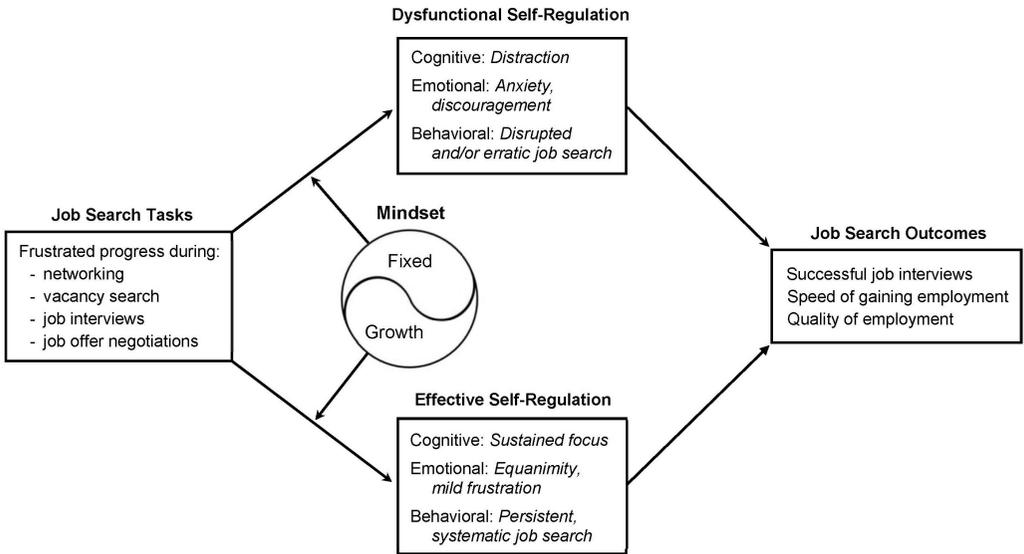
So far, we have outlined the basic dynamics whereby mindsets govern self-regulation in challenging contexts. Next, we discuss how mindsets may affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to setbacks encountered during the specific job search tasks of networking, vacancy search, job interviews, and job offer negotiations (see Figure 1).

## **JOB SEARCH TASKS**

### **Mindsets When Networking**

Networking involves purposely developing and maintaining mutually helpful relationships with others who may be able to provide career assistance, such as information, influence, and support. Networking can foster social capital—the goodwill inherent in social networks—and is a valuable job search tactic that can speed the receipt of job offers and gaining employment. In the context of job search, Wanberg, Kanfer, and Banas (2000) suggested that networking encompasses “individual actions directed toward contacting friends, acquaintances, and referrals to get information, leads, or advice on getting a job” (p. 491). Reflecting on the nature of networking and the tasks it entails highlights that many networking behaviors involve proactively reaching out and connecting to other people. Evidence that extroverts are more inherently disposed than introverts to engage in such social behaviors (Barrick & Mount, 1991) raises the question of what might impel introverts to network.

Beer (2002) proposed that the mindset of introverts plays a role in how they construe and approach social interactions. Beer (2002) observed that when introverts



**FIGURE 1**  
**How Mindsets Moderate Self-Regulation**  
**During a Frustrated Job Search**

hold a growth mindset, they tend to believe that they can cultivate their social competencies and are thereby interested in learning how to master their shyness. Compared to introverts with a fixed mindset, those who held a growth mindset used less avoidant strategies and were more socially proactive, as a function of perceiving social interactions as valuable learning opportunities. They were subsequently judged by others as more socially competent than introverts who presumed that they could not improve their sociability. A growth mindset thus may enable developing the network of mutually helpful relationships and social capital that facilitates employment (see Figure 1).

### Mindsets During Vacancy Search

Competent job vacancy searches involve systematically identifying, selecting, and processing information about potentially suitable job opportunities. Given the idiosyncratic and dynamic nature of many job markets, vacancy search can be an ill-defined and frustrating information search and processing task.

Mindsets affect the extent to which people systematically tackle such complex challenges. Wood and Bandura (1989) conducted an experiment in which MBA students worked as managers of a simulated furniture factory. In this dynamic and difficult computerized task, participants were required to make multiple rounds of employee job allocation, as well as set goals and provide rewards. To optimize factory output over time, participants had to learn from the results of their prior decisions and then revise them based on feedback about employee productivity, while simultaneously maintaining high production standards. After experiencing setbacks, participants with an induced fixed mindset exhibited diminished self-efficacy and subsequently adopted a rather erratic approach of reexploring possibilities that had proven unfruitful. In contrast, the self-efficacy of participants with an induced growth mindset remained relatively high. They were subsequently more systematic in their choice of strategies by being less likely to repeat those that had not worked well. Thus, a growth mindset might also foster adopting a systematic and effective, rather than haphazard, approach to job vacancy search (see Figure 1).

### **Mindsets During Job Interviews**

Like networking, going for a job interview can be a daunting prospect that requires a great deal of preparation. It involves learning not only about the target role, but potentially also the department, organization, industry, and/or geographical location of the position. Developing and practicing responses to anticipated questions and developing strategies to minimize anxiety and present oneself in a positive light are important for preparing to perform well in a job interview (Stevens & Kristof, 1995).

Cury et al. (2008) observed that mindsets affect the extent to which people practice for an upcoming, challenging task. Participants in this study were informed that they would complete a brief IQ test and were given 2 minutes to complete the task. After the test period, participants were given feedback on their performance and a form containing a mindset manipulation. Those in the fixed mindset condition read statements such as “Everyone has a certain level of this type of ability, and there is not much that can be done to really change it” and “This type of ability depends on gifts or qualities that one has from birth.” Participants in the growth mindset condition read statements including “If one makes an effort, one can change one’s ability level” and “This type of ability is quite modifiable.” All participants were then informed that they would be given time to practice before taking the test again. Compared with those who believed they could modify their abilities, those with an induced fixed mindset spent more time worrying and less time practicing, thus undermining their subsequent performance. Thus, the tendency for those with a fixed mindset to dwell on and worry about potential ability deficiencies might weaken the quality of their interview preparation and performance, relative to those unburdened by such debilitating thoughts (see Figure 1).

## Mindsets When Negotiating a Job Offer

Negotiation offers an important opportunity for people to discuss what they want from their job and have it provided as part of their new role. Concern that fervent negotiating could jeopardize a job offer can be compounded by doubts about one's negotiation ability, especially if one holds the pervasive assumption that great negotiators are born, not made. Beliefs in this regard have important implications for negotiation performance that can ultimately affect the success of job offer negotiations.

In their study of implicit negotiation beliefs and performance, Kray and Haselhuhn (2007) examined the impact of negotiators' mindsets on negotiation outcomes. Before engaging in an employment negotiation task, half of the participants read an article that described how negotiation ability is relatively stable over time (inducing a fixed mindset). The other half read an article informing participants that negotiation ability can be developed (inducing a growth mindset). Participants then negotiated in pairs regarding a task wherein one person played the role of a job candidate and the other a recruiter, negotiating on issues such as salary and vacation time. By the end of the task, those in the growth mindset condition performed almost twice as well as participants in the fixed mindset condition, persevering through stalemates and other challenges to reap greater rewards.

Beyond doubting the malleability of one's negotiation abilities, negotiations with an employer can also be derailed by concerns about whether an employing manager can be trusted. Prior experiences in which employers did not deliver on promises may weigh heavily on the job candidate's mind and prompt becoming aggressive and/or defensive at difficult points of a job offer negotiation. Research on mindsets and trust (Haselhuhn et al., 2010), along with regarding mindsets and victimization (Yeager, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2013), has revealed that people who hold a growth mindset recover more easily from perceived trust violations and view negative social experiences as less permanent.

Willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt facilitates "moving on," rather than becoming anchored upon (Heslin et al., 2005) and punitive towards others whose behavior has fallen short of one's expectations (Gervey et al., 1999). As a result of minimizing rumination on others' perceived transgressions, a growth mindset may enable the positive outcomes that can stem from a collaborative approach to job offer negotiations (see Figure 1).

## DISCUSSION

Searching for a new job can be a long, arduous, and frustrating process. Self-regulation is often required to prevent becoming distracted or discouraged and thus failing to persist until one's job search objectives are accomplished. The broad range of factors that can influence self-regulation include genetics, early childhood attachment, and conscientiousness. Although such factors are predictive of self-regulation, little can be done to alter them.

The malleable mindset construct might enable not only prediction and understanding of why people exhibit effective versus dysfunctional self-regulation during the job search, but it may also guide the development of interventions to facilitate them responding to frustrated job search progress in a constructive manner. Before discussing some potential research and practical implications, a caveat is in order regarding the current state of knowledge vis-à-vis the role of mindsets in the job search process.

Dweck's (1986, 1999, 2006) empirically supported theory of mindsets provides the basis for a compelling account of how individuals may respond to frustrating challenges encountered during the job search. However, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Heslin, 2003; Heslin et al., 2005, 2006; Wood & Bandura, 1989), most of the studies we have discussed have been conducted with school children or undergraduates in an educational context. Although there is evidence that the mindset dynamics of children (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007) and undergraduates (e.g., Chiu et al., 1997) generalize to the cognitions and behavior of adults (e.g., Heslin et al., 2005, 2006), to our knowledge, there are currently no published studies that directly examine the mindsets of adults seeking employment.

## Research Opportunities

This highlights an immense range of opportunities for field research to investigate the role of mindsets in people's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to setbacks during the job search, such as those we have outlined. Such research might usefully include both correlational designs examining the relationships between prevailing mindsets and self-regulation during the job search, along with experimental designs to explore whether exposure to a growth mindset intervention (e.g., Heslin et al., 2005, 2006) can enhance job seekers' self-regulation and subsequent job search outcomes.

The latter line of research could productively investigate if a growth mindset induction component can fruitfully complement existing counseling programs to facilitate the job search. One such program might be the well-established JOBS program, which enhances job seekers' skills and self-confidence and helps them to prepare for demoralization during the job search, speeds employment, and lowers rates of depression (Vuori & Silvonon, 2005). Another intervention trains job seekers to replace dysfunctional self-talk (e.g., "I can't find a job no matter how hard I try") with positive statements (e.g., "I know what I am capable of doing and I am very determined to get what I want"; Yanar, Budworth, & Latham, 2009, p. 592). This training fosters interview self-efficacy, interview performance, and reemployment (Yanar et al., 2009). Considering that being primed to adopt a growth mindset reduces the extent to which setbacks lower self-efficacy (Wood & Bandura, 1989), research is needed on whether a growth mindset intervention can add incremental value to existing employment counseling programs to enhance the resilience, persistence, and success of job seekers. In light of how growth mindsets guide people to focus on learning opportunities (Blackwell et al., 2007) and systematically generate fresh strategies (Wood & Bandura, 1989), rather than become anxious (Robins & Pals, 2002) and worry about their performance (Cury

et al., 2008) after a setback, research might usefully explore whether growth mindset training can increase cognitive flexibility (Uznadze, 1966) and decrease the experience of learned helplessness and possible depressive symptoms (Seligman, 1998) following unsuccessful job search initiatives. Such research might also examine whether growth mindset training increases the impact and durability of learned optimism interventions (Seligman, 2011) to boost resilience during the job search.

Within the extensive mindsets literature (Dweck 1999, 2006), there are also almost no published studies showing people benefiting from holding a fixed mindset (see Park & Kim [2015] for an exception). Perhaps the personal development focus associated with a growth mindset leads people to overestimate their capacity to grow and develop within relatively unenriched or unsuitable work roles, thereby resulting in poor person–job fit and job dissatisfaction. For example, some roles have limited scope for skill development and performance improvement, such as working on a production line when the quality of one’s work is already excellent and the rate of one’s work is limited by the speed of the line. A strong growth mindset also might not serve people well when they are underemployed, that is, working in a role that requires less knowledge and skills than they possess. Perhaps the lesser developmental aspirations of those with a fixed mindset could pave the way for greater person–job fit with such roles. Research might examine whether the relatively rigid self-concept associated with a fixed mindset (Dweck, 1999) helps people resist the temptation to accept unsuitable jobs that result in experiencing underemployment.

## **Practical Implications**

Pending the results of the research we have recommended, mindset theory and research has clear implications for initiatives that might be usefully applied to nurture job seekers’ growth mindset. A first step in cultivating and maintaining a growth mindset is being persuaded of the rationale for striving to do so. Job seekers may benefit from reading this article, or especially for those with limited literacy, a suitably adapted presentation of Figure 1 that describes how their prevailing mindset at a particular point in time can influence how they think, feel, and act in response to frustrations encountered during their job search. A subsequent step for cultivating growth mindsets is to cue serious reflection on people’s capacity for self-development through persistent effort that is focused on skill development. Numerous related ways to foster and sustain a growth mindset are provided in Table 1.

Reflecting upon personal examples of the insights in Table 1, along with identifying and taking specific opportunities to apply related strategies, has real potential to increase the extent to and frequency with which individuals hold a growth mindset about their ability to become employed. We suspect that the results from doing so may be substantially enhanced if examples and potential applications of the strategies in Table 1 are methodically processed and discussed within the career counseling, peer coaching, and/or a growth mindset workshop context.

Career counselors might influence more positive, growth-oriented mindsets through therapeutic approaches that help clients to (a) identify their fixed mindsets with regard

**TABLE 1**  
**Strategies for Fostering and Sustaining a Growth Mindset**

Strategy	Explanation/Insight
1. Go for growth	Seek to continually improve, rather than just prove your performance—accepting that this often involves initial struggle and setbacks.
2. Realize that growth is possible	Contrary to the popular notion that some people are innately ordained to mediocrity, neuroplasticity research reveals that throughout the entire life span fresh connections are formed within the human brain as new skills are developed.
3. Set learning and process goals	Set specific, challenging learning goals in the form: “I want to learn how to . . .” Set process goals such as: “I will submit five job applications each week, each with a customized cover letter.”
4. Engage in deliberative practice	Remember that expertise in almost any domain results from many hours of highly focused study, training, and practice of the next skill you need to master. Especially when frustrated with your progress, remember that sustaining considerable effort in your deliberative practice is the key to realizing your potential at virtually any endeavor.
5. Run your own race	Learn from others, but avoid constantly comparing yourself to them, because doing so can be distracting and demoralizing.
6. Remember that errors can enable learning	Rehearse relevant error management mantras, such as “errors are a natural part of the learning process,” “errors reveal what you are still able to learn,” or “the more errors you make, the more you can learn.”
7. Focus on what you can change	View setbacks as indicating a need for more effort and/or better strategies, rather than inadequate (innate) talent. Doing this is perhaps the most essential tactic for cultivating and sustaining a growth mindset when dealing with frustrating challenges.
8. Seek the insight from setbacks	Ask yourself: “What useful information might these results imply?” “What might lead to better results?” and “What alternative strategies might I deploy?”
9. Reflect on the potential costs	Recall and reflect deeply on a specific instance when holding a fixed mindset may have constrained you or someone you care about from realizing a valued aspiration. Doing so can be a powerful motivator to jettison your fixed mindset in favor of the growth-oriented alternative.
10. Convince someone else	Identify someone you care about (e.g., a parent, child, friend, relative, or protégé) who holds a fixed mindset about his/her capacity to develop a particular skill. Write this person a letter to convince them that they can indeed learn to do it, drawing on what you know about the nature and consequences of mindsets, a selection of the nine insights above that most resonate with you, and personal anecdotes about when you have doubted your ability to develop. Trying to persuade others is a powerful way to persuade ourselves!

to particular career development tasks; (b) gather evidence to evaluate the accuracy and usefulness of their fixed mindsets; and (c) replace their maladaptive fixed mindsets with more constructive assumptions, based on the data collected during the second step. To assist counselors in this regard and to enable people to assist themselves to stay motivated during their job search, Table 2 provides a sample of fixed mindsets with regard to a range of tasks involved in career exploration, the preparatory job search, and the active job search, along with more constructive alternative growth mindset assumptions.

**TABLE 2**

**Sample Client Fixed Mindset Assumptions and Growth Mindset Alternatives Regarding Three Stages of Employment Counseling**

<b>Tasks</b>	<b>Sample Fixed Mindset Assumptions</b>	<b>Growth Mindset Alternatives</b>
	Systematic Career Exploration Tasks <sup>a</sup>	
Investigate different career possibilities	There's no use trying to put a square peg in a round hole	I'll never know which work roles I'll enjoy most if I don't investigate a wide range of possibilities
Seek opportunities to develop skills	I know what I am capable of doing; you can't teach an old dog new tricks	I enjoy opportunities to develop my skills; with concerted effort, I can improve at virtually anything
Try specific work roles just to see if I like them	I'm just a (insert occupation here) and can't imagine being or doing anything else	Different work roles may enable me to discover skills that I would enjoy developing and applying
	Preparatory Job Search Tasks <sup>b</sup>	
Read an article about getting a job or changing jobs	Some people just have more innate talent than others at securing a good job	I am going to keep learning and preparing myself to secure the right role for me
Prepare your résumé	Like me, my résumé is what it is and so there's little point in endlessly revising it	Résumés routinely need to be systematically revised until they start yielding targeted job interviews
Talk with friends or relatives about possible job leads	People often hate being hit upon for a job lead, especially by those whose limited talent has led to them being unemployed	People are often willing to help those who are genuinely willing to help themselves
	Active Job Search Tasks	
List yourself as a job applicant on a career website	People may think I'm a desperate loser if they see me publicizing that I'm looking for a job	People who see I'm looking for a job are going to think I am taking the initiative to move ahead in my career
Send out résumés	The nonresponsive job market has indicated that I am not a particularly hot job candidate	I have not yet been offered the right job opportunity, but I will persist until I have
Attend a job interview	The interviewers are going to focus on evaluating and judging my inherent (in)competence	I am going to collaborate with the interviewers in exploring whether I am the most suitable candidate for this role

<sup>a</sup>Adapted from Stumpf, Colarelli, and Hartman (1983). <sup>b</sup>Adapted from Blau (1994).

**CONCLUSION**

As a simple assumption about plasticity and fixedness, mindsets are obviously no panacea for dealing with the immense potential agony of a frustrated job search. Nonetheless, in light of the role of mindsets in self-regulation, mindsets might explain why some job seekers may experience dysfunctional self-regulation and how they might enhance their self-regulation as they search for employment. Future research and interventions will hopefully explore and leverage the role of mindset theory and research for helping people to think, feel, and act more effectively during the tribulations of a job search.

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