

## Implicit Theories and Conflict Resolution

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Prejudice is at the root of many intractable conflicts. Whether prejudice was born out of the dispute or existed before and contributed to the dispute, exaggerated beliefs about the character and motives of the other party often make reconciliation extremely difficult to achieve.

In this chapter, we argue that this relationship between prejudice and intractable conflicts may have its roots in people's theories about the malleability of human qualities. In our work, we have identified two theories that people can hold about the nature of human qualities. Those who hold an "entity theory" believe that human qualities—such as goodness or intelligence—are fixed. They are internal entities that people simply do or do not possess. Those who subscribe to this theory not only believe that people have immutable traits, but also that the goal of knowing others is best accomplished by identifying which set of fixed traits they possess. This, as you will see, is the view that leads to stereotyping of others.

The other view, which we have called an "incremental theory," instead posits that human qualities are malleable and can be developed. This theory does not imply that everyone will change, but rather that everyone has the ability to grow with education and effort. For people who hold this more dynamic view of human nature, the goal of knowing others is best accomplished, not through judging their fixed traits, but through understanding their psychology— their needs and goals, their thought processes and their culture.

Throughout the chapter, we show how the entity theory lends itself to rather rapid and rigid judgments of others—both of other individuals and other groups—as well as an inability to detect change or progress in others. We go on to show how the policies and practices that follow from this can pose serious obstacles to effective conflict resolution. In contrast, we show how the incremental theory leads to more tentative and flexible initial assessments, ones that are subject

to revision as others change. We go on to show how this view provides more opportunities for finding common ground and bringing conflicts to successful resolutions even while recognizing that others have shortcomings.

In order to understand an opponent and find a way to resolve conflict, one must be willing to admit potential fault — to acknowledge that one's own view is not the only correct view and that there might be more to be learned about the situation. We review research that explores how an entity theory often leads to more defensive, self-esteem boosting behavior at the expense of problem solving. An incremental theory, in contrast, tends to lead to a more open, challenge-seeking and learning-oriented stance, which is typically necessary to confront and resolve difficult conflicts.

Fortunately, the view that traits are fixed is, itself, changeable. In the final section, we review research demonstrating that changing people's implicit theories (by teaching them an incremental view) results in a clear reduction in people's tendency to label and stereotype, a clear increase in their sensitivity to progress and change, and a clear upswing in their desire to learn.

### Measuring People's Theories

In our studies, we measure people's theories by asking participants to rate their agreement with statements like “Everyone is a certain kind of person and there is not much that can be done to really change that” or “People can always substantially change the kind of person they are.” On average, approximately 40% of participants agree with statements indicating that people are fixed and 40% agree with statements indicating that people are changeable. The remaining 20% do not clearly demonstrate one of these two perspectives.

One might ask which theory is correct. Is the basic type of person you are something fixed or something that can be improved? There is no straightforward answer to this question and

individual traits likely differ in the degree to which they are changeable. That said, psychotherapy is founded, in part, upon the notion that individuals are able to change important aspects of their personality. Further, psychologists are increasingly adopting the view that even intelligence, an aspect of the self that some consider quite stable, is indeed changeable (Brown & Campione, 1996; Perkins, 1995; Resnick, 1983; Sternberg, 1985). Our own focus, however, is on what people *believe*, and on the powerful impact of that belief.

### Pinning Labels on People

People holding an entity theory demonstrate a willingness to label others as good or bad, or as moral or immoral, on the basis of little evidence (Chiu, Dweck, Hong, & Fu, 1997; Erdley, & Dweck, 1993). For example, in a study by Chiu, et al. (1997), entity theorists were far more likely to report that even insignificant behaviors (such as whether people made their bed in the morning) were a good basis for judging moral character. Beyond that, entity theorists were more willing to decide that a man was guilty of murder based on his appearance (Gervey, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1999). In this study, participants were asked to read a transcript of a murder trial. In one condition, the defendant was described as wearing a black leather jacket with multiple zippers and as sporting an earring on the day of the murder. In the other condition, he was described as wearing a business suit and carrying an attaché case. Entity theorists were unaffected by differences in the strength of the evidence and, instead, based their judgments of guilt and innocence on these descriptions of the way the defendant was dressed. They rated the defendant as less moral and were more likely to convict him if he wore a leather jacket and an earring. In contrast, participants with an incremental theory were unaffected by the defendant's apparel and were swayed only by strength of the evidence.

If entity theorists can condemn others based on relatively inconsequential behavior, like bed-making or apparel choice, then we can legitimately expect them to assign even stronger and more rigid negative traits to people they view as a threat or as having done real harm to them. If conflict resolution involves stepping into the other's shoes and finding a way to compromise, then seeing the other as unalterably immoral (or incompetent) will surely be an obstacle to this.

### Pinning Labels on Groups

Often conflict is not between individuals but between groups—each composed of many and varied individuals. No nation, for example, consists of all evil people or all incompetent people. Yet group stereotypes tend to portray an entire group as suffering from the same deficiency. One group is called untrustworthy, another lazy, another greedy, another intellectually inferior. Is it entity theorists who are more likely to rely upon these group stereotypes?

Just as entity theorists are quicker to brand individuals with labels, they also seem more ready to characterize groups in sweeping terms both in studies with children (Levy & Dweck, 1999) and college students (Levy, Stroessner, Dweck, 1998). In both populations, entity and incremental theorists learned about groups of people that they had not encountered before. For children, the groups consisted of students from another school; for the college students, the groups consisted of social clubs at another university. In some cases they were told about a group in which a majority behaved in a negative way (for example, borrowing something and not giving it back or cutting in front of someone in line). In other cases they were told about a group in which a majority of the members acted in a positive way (for example, did something generous, helpful, or thoughtful).

Those who held an entity theory formed more sweeping stereotypes of both the positive and the negative groups. They also saw the groups as being highly homogeneous, even though an appreciable number of the group members did not perform the stereotyped behavior. Finally, when asked about an unknown group member, entity theorists just assumed he would be bad or good like the rest of the group. When entity theorists form a group impression, it appears that no one who belongs to that group is considered free from the stereotype. Instead, the group is seen as uniformly untrustworthy, greedy, lazy, or unintelligent—including members who did nothing wrong.

### Labels Dehumanize

Unfortunately, pinning a label on the whole group has the effect of dehumanizing the group members. In the research by Levy & Dweck (1999), we found that when children with an entity theory decided that they had nothing in common with the group members once they decided that a group was bad. No longer were the group members regular children with the usual needs and preferences. Instead entity theorists believed that the children in that group did not like the same toys and games that they themselves did and did not share the same worries and concerns. In other words, those children now belonged to a separate (and inferior) class of people—one with which they had no desire to interact.

In contrast, the children who held an incremental theory did not see the group as all bad, even though they were certainly not pleased with the children who acted in negative ways. What's more they still assumed that the group members were similar to them in many ways — preferring the same toys and games and sharing the same worries and concerns. Moreover, the incremental theorists were still willing to meet and get to know the kids.

The tendency on the part of entity theorists to treat individuals as walking embodiments of a group's stereotypes leads them to behave in ways likely to bring out the negative behavior they expect. We saw this clearly in a study by Levy, Freitas, & Dweck (1996) in which college students participated in a prisoners' dilemma-type game. In this game, participants have a choice between cooperating and competing with another person. If a participant cooperates and the other person does too, both parties benefit. However, if the participant cooperates and the other person decides to compete, nearly all of the resource goes to that other person. Both entity theorists and incremental theorists tended to cooperate when they knew nothing about the other party. When students were told that their opponent was a law student, however, we saw a large shift in the behavior of entity theorists (but not incremental theorists). Succumbing to the stereotype of lawyers and law students as competitive, entity theorists overwhelmingly chose to compete with them. Presumably, they were cutting off the law students' opportunity to get the better of them. At the same time, they were cutting off any opportunity for a mutually beneficial outcome.

It is not difficult to see how tarring a whole group with the same brush might stand in the way of resolving intergroup conflicts. The prisoner's dilemma game is meant to be a proxy for the sorts of conflicts that we see in the real world. Entity theorists are likely to approach interactions with individuals about whom they hold negative stereotypes with an air of mistrust and, as a consequence, to behave so as to guard against bad actions by the other party. In so doing, they are more likely to elicit the very behavior they expect than they are to find a way to resolve conflict. Incremental theorists who are less likely to act toward individuals on the basis of stereotypes about the group are more likely to find ways to cooperate with the other and resolve existing conflicts.

## Indelible Labels

The tendency for entity theorists to base consequential decisions on rapidly formed judgments is particularly problematic because, once formed, entity theorists are less likely to revise their judgments even in the face of substantial contrary evidence. Across a number of studies, participants with an entity theory were far less likely to change their initial view of a person's competence or character, even when the person gave clear evidence of changing. This phenomenon has been shown for managers toward employees (Heslin, Latham & VandeWalle, 2005), teachers toward students (Butler, 2000), and students toward other students (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck & Sherman, 2001). In contrast, incremental theorists updated their impressions in step with the information they were receiving (Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Plaks, et al. 2001; cf. Hong, Coleman, Chan, Wong, Chiu, Hansen, Lee, Tong, & Fu, 2004). In fact, incremental theorists sought to hold accurate views about others, as evidenced by their heightened sensitivity to both positive *and* negative changes in people's behavior (Butler, 2000; Heslin, et al., 2005).

Entity theorists do not merely fail to seek out information that might disconfirm their views. Instead, Plaks, et al. (2001) found that entity theorists went so far as to *block out* evidence that contradicted their initial impression. In several studies, these researchers monitored the attention of the participants as they received evidence that confirmed or disconfirmed their view of an individual's intelligence or character. While incremental theorists paid special attention to information that challenged their existing view (and that perhaps provided them with a more nuanced and accurate view), entity theorists diverted their attention in ways that minimized their receipt of this information.



A reluctance to revise impressions of others, once formed, makes conflict resolution particularly difficult because misunderstanding the other plays such a great role in inspiring and exacerbating conflict. This is why those who seek to reduce conflict strive to bring members of both sides together, to educate each side about the others' cultures and histories, and to combat stereotypes and prejudice between groups. As Moshe Davan said, "If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies." Through this process, mistaken impressions are often dissolved and each party gains a better understanding of the other side's perspective. Past research suggests that having even one out-group friend can reduce prejudice toward the other group (for review, see Brown & Hewstone, 2005), even among groups embroiled in intractable conflict such as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, McLernon, & Neins, 2004). The openness that incremental theorists demonstrate toward new information is particularly conducive to promoting understanding between parties and resolving conflict. In contrast, the rigidity that entity theorists demonstrate can leave these methods ineffective and, ultimately, can hinder reconciliation.

#### *Are Incremental Theorists Always Open and Accurate?*

Are incremental theorists infallible information processors, always open to new information? Don't they have vulnerabilities as well? Plaks, Grant, & Dweck (2005) addressed this question and found that there *are* some kinds of information that incremental theorists do not like. Although incremental theorists are open to seeing evidence of performance decline (Heslin, et al., 2005), they are not very open to evidence that contradicts their belief that people are capable of change. They are, in fact, are threatened by such evidence (Plaks, et al., 2005).

This suggests that incremental theorists might be too ready to forgive and compromise with people who look as though they are trying to change, even if true and lasting change is not

forthcoming. In such cases, incremental theorists may too readily agree to a resolution that does not turn out to be in their interest.

### Strategies of Conflict Resolution

We have also directly examined how people with different theories about human qualities deal with conflict. Our participants have either told us about important conflicts in their lives and how they dealt with them, or we have posed conflicts and asked them how they would deal with them. The differences are interesting and instructive.

#### *Voicing Conflict – Focusing on information and discussion:*

Kammrath and Dweck (2005) looked at conflicts within close relationships. We asked people who were in serious relationships to tell us about a major conflict they had had with their partner in the last few months. They were told to focus on the one conflict that made them the most upset and then to report their strategies for conflict resolution. Entity and incremental theorists did not differ in how serious they thought the conflict was or in how upset they were following the conflict. However, they did differ in how they handled the conflict. Participants who held an incremental theory of personality (that is, who believed their partners were capable of change) were significantly more likely to voice their feelings. Relative to entity theorists, they gave higher endorsements than entity theorists to statements such as: “I openly discussed the situation with my partner,” “I tried to work with my partner to find a solution to the problem,” and “I tried to bring my concerns out into the open so that the issue could be resolved in the best possible way.”

Entity theorists, not believing in change, were more like to swallow their feelings and showed little motivation to work towards a solution. They gave stronger endorsements to items

like: “I accepted his faults and didn’t try to change him,” “I tried to accept the situation and move on,” and “I learned to live with it.”

In a follow-up study, people kept records of their daily experiences in their relationship for two weeks. Each day they were asked to report on their conflict experiences and to tell us the strategies they used to cope with them. Similar to before, people’s theories were not related to the number of conflict experiences they reported, the magnitude of the conflict, or the negative emotion they experienced. However, when we looked at the strategies used to address the conflicts, differences again emerged. The differences, by the way, were not apparent for minor conflicts, but as the conflicts heated up, incremental theorists became more likely to speak up and try to work through the issues, while entity theorists became angrier but *less* likely to voice their anger. Again, if their partner couldn’t change, serious conflict could not be discussed. However, this time entity theorists were not just quietly loyal. When conflict occurred, they were significantly more likely than incremental theorists to think about leaving the relationship. So for them the choice seemed to be either to remain quietly loyal or to exit. Once again, if you see your partner as incapable of change, it is a “take it or leave it” situation: you either live with your partner “as is” or you find a new one. There is little room for negotiation and growth.

Interestingly, analogous findings were obtained in a very different context. Wood, Phillips, & Taberero (2002), over a series of sessions, gave small groups of people a difficult managerial task to master. Some groups were composed of entity theorists (in this case, people who believed that managerial skills were a fixed ability), whereas some groups were composed of incremental theorists (those who believed that managerial expertise could be developed). Wood and his colleagues, assessing the groups over sessions, found that in the incremental groups there was a fuller discussion of the incoming information, presumably resulting from the

belief that everyone could learn the most from an open and complete exchange. Among entity theorists, who believe that “you have it or you don’t,” such full and open exchange was curtailed.

This sort of discussion can serve two purposes. First, as mentioned above, sharing of information can help parties to learn about each other and to dispel misunderstandings regarding the other parties’ nature and intentions. Therefore, by adopting a strategy of discussing the issues, incremental theorists naturally engage in a behavior that helps to resolve conflict. Second, conflicts are often assumed to be zero-sum, in that each concession made to one party is of equal value to the other party. However, different groups have differing goals. As such, conflict can be minimized by identifying resources that are unimportant but abundant for one group but highly valued and scarce for another. Yet, it would be quite difficult to identify when such solutions exist without opening the lines of communication. Incremental theorists are more likely to share the information necessary to discover such differences and goals and take advantage of them to resolve conflict. Because entity theorists do not engage in this discussion, they likely miss out on opportunities for reconciliation.

### *Punishment vs. Negotiation and Education*

What do people do when they are betrayed or when a contract is broken? One possibility is to try to punish or harm the guilty parties. Another is to try to negotiate with, influence, or educate them. In our research, entity theorists are often inclined toward the former: bad people should be punished or harmed. In contrast, incremental theorists lean toward the latter: people should be worked with to reach an acceptable solution.

In research by Chiu, et al. (1997), college students were confronted with a situation in which a professor had provided a grading scheme at the beginning of the semester. However, too many students had earned A’s by the end of the semester, so he changed the grading scheme to

make it more stringent. As a result, many students who had earned and expected A's were now going to receive B's. Plainly, a conflict had arisen. What did students say they would do?

Entity theorists, not believing in personal change, said they would try to get back at the professor—reporting him to a higher authority or finding ways to harass or harm him. In contrast, incremental theorists more often said they would try to talk to the professor, explain to him that he had violated a moral principle and try to get him to restore a fair state of affairs. One approach to the conflict was to inflict pain and suffering while the other was to solve the problem through education and negotiation.

In the same set of studies, Chiu, et al. (1997) asked participants to assume the role of a teacher dealing with children who had not fulfilled their classroom obligations. As before, entity theorists were more likely than incremental theorists to say they would mete out punishment. Incremental theorists were more likely to try to reach a solution through mutual negotiation—by questioning the children about the reasons for their lapse (learning their point of view) and by discussing remedies for the situation.

We have all seen instances of both approaches to conflict, both the approach in which people attempt to harm or destroy the bad guy or group and the approach in which people attempt to negotiate with the opposing party to reach a mutually acceptable solution. One can easily see how these approaches might be tied to beliefs about the potential for change in real world conflicts. When people believe that their opponents or those in positions of power are changeable, it makes sense to adopt a moderate strategy — one of working within the system to persuade others and bring about real change. When, however, people believe others to be fixed and unchangeable, a moderate policy makes little sense and more extreme measures are likely to be adopted. If people do not believe in the capacity of the other party to change, yet believe

change necessary, the only solution they may see is to marginalize, subjugate, or even eliminate the other people.

Thus far we have been looking at the consequences of implicit theories for how we view and treat others. When we see them as having fixed traits, we are more likely to stereotype them, and to ignore or reject information that refutes the stereotype. When we see others as fixed and conflict arises, we skirt the issue, tending to give up on them or even to punish or harm them. When, instead, we see others as having malleable qualities, we are more likely to try to understand their psychology, to see evidence of progress or change, and, when conflict arises, to favor negotiation and education.

### **Self-Theories**

The theories people have about *themselves* can also play a key role in how they deal with conflict. Our research shows that people with an entity theory, believing that their traits are fixed, have recurrent concerns about proving those traits. They devote considerable attention to showing that they are the intelligent ones or the good guys (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley, Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997; cf. Robins & Pals, 2002), and they worry about revealing errors or deficiencies that may call their adequacy in to question (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999; cf. Mueller & Dweck, 1998). This concern with how they will be judged can interfere with the conflict resolution process, since resolving conflicts often involves both sides admitting error and working together toward a solution.

A striking example of entity theorists' unwillingness to admit deficiencies comes from a study by Hong, et al. (1999) performed at the University of Hong Kong, a premier institution in Hong Kong. In order to do well there students need to be fluent in English, since all the classes, papers, and tests are in English. However, many of the students arrive there with poor

proficiency in English. Hong, et al., approached freshman shortly after they arrived, told them that the faculty were considering offering a remedial English course, and asked them about their interest in this course. We actually knew their scores on their English proficiency test, so we knew who was proficient and who was not. Among students who were not proficient, those who held an incremental theory were eager for such a course, but those who held an entity theory were not. It appeared that they were not willing to expose their deficiency in order to remedy it. Instead, they seemed to prefer to put their college career in jeopardy.

In a series of recent studies, Nussbaum & Dweck (2005) also examined the way in which entity and incremental theorists cope with a deficiency, a deficiency that was a blow to their self-esteem. It was found, once again, that incremental theorists repaired their self-esteem by confronting their deficiency directly and learning the skills that they were lacking. But entity theorists repaired their self-esteem by finding people who were worse off than they were and comparing with them. Entity theorists also focused their attention away from the skills they lacked and toward the things they were already good at (cf. Ehrlinger & Dweck, 2005). Again, entity theorists were not willing to admit and confront their deficits head on. Needing to appear flawless or blameless (and therefore looking for flaws and blame somewhere else) is a recipe for trouble in any relationship, let alone relationships that are already fraught with conflict.

### Changing People's Theories

In this section we show that implicit theories, although relatively stable when left to themselves, can be changed through intervention. We also show that when people are taught an incremental theory, they show decreased stereotyping, greater attunement to others' progress and change, decreased defensiveness, and greater openness to learning—all things that should foster more effective conflict resolution.

Levy and colleagues (Levy & Dweck, 1999; Levy Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998) demonstrated that entity theorists were more prone to forming stereotypes, to seeing groups as overly homogeneous, and to seeing negatively stereotyped groups as completely distinct from themselves, but also showed that teaching participants an incremental theory reversed these tendencies. Participants who learned an incremental theory (by means of a scientific article that described the incremental theory and supported the idea that people can change) became more moderate in their assignment of labels, recognized the heterogeneity within groups, and saw the common ground that other groups shared with them.

In a management setting, Heslin, et al. (2005) taught managers an incremental theory by means of an article, film and self-persuasion exercises. After going through this training, these managers were significantly more sensitive to improvement in their employees' performance than were managers in the control group. Moreover, this change persisted over the 6-week period of the study. Thus, encouraging an incremental theory also seems to make people more open to positive changes in others — a factor that, as we have noted, is important for resolving conflicts. If we can recognize true progress in the other party, then we will be willing to reciprocate in ways that will facilitate further progress.

Changing people's theories about themselves also brings about changes in outlook that can lead to more effective conflict resolution. In the Nussbaum and Dweck (2005) studies, teaching an incremental theory of ability made participants more willing to admit and address their flaws and less likely to look for flaws in others to bolster their egos. Finally, Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck (2005) conducted an intervention to teach adolescent students an incremental theory of intelligence. Following the intervention, teachers reported an upsurge in the desire to learn and the willingness to invest effort on the part of many students who had



previously been apathetic and defensive. This renewed openness to learning has been replicated in two other intervention studies that taught students the incremental theory: a study by Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht (2003), also with junior high school students, and a study by Aronson, Fried, and Good, (2002) with college students.

### Conclusion

In summary, implicit theories create powerful frameworks that people use to organize and interpret their worlds. We have shown how implicit theories affect three main areas that are important to conflict resolution:

- 1) the rapidity and rigidity with which people label others as well as the ways in which these labels distance and dehumanize others;
- 2) the conflict resolution strategies people use and the effectiveness of these strategies for bringing about successful solutions;
- 3) the willingness of people to reveal deficiencies and admit fault in order to solve problems and learn.

Importantly, we have also shown that these theories can be changed and, that when people are taught an incremental theory, they organize and interpret their worlds in ways that are more conducive to effective negotiation and to rapprochement. We look forward to future work on the role that implicit theories can play in conflict resolution among individuals, groups, and nations.

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