

Charles DeLapa

Schmidt

ERWC

16 October 2018

Mindset: Two Sizes Do Not Fit All

On October 25, 1964, during a football game between the San Francisco 49er's and the Minnesota Vikings, 49er's running back Kilmer was fighting for yardage when the ball was stripped from him, causing a fumble (Tomasson). The football was immediately snatched by Vikings defensive end Jim Marshall, who frantically sprinted for a touchdown. Only after scoring did he realize had run the wrong direction. In Carol Dweck's *Mindset*, she describes that after sitting in misery during halftime, Marshall had a change of mindset, leading him to play "some of his best football ever and contributed to his team's victory" (Mindset 34). In reality, the Vikings won because, as Chris Tomasson of Twin Cities Pioneer Press describes, they held onto a lead despite this blunder that occurred, not before halftime, but in the fourth quarter. Jim Marshall had no miraculous rebound as Dweck describes. The team did not win because of his mindset, but because they had already been ahead. This false portrayal of events exemplifies a recurring theme in *Mindset*: a failure to apply theory to reality. **While** Dweck's idea of mindset is valid in theory, her practical application of the theory is oversimplified and does not account for extraneous factors.

One failure of Carol Dweck's theory is that the impacts of one's mindset are unduly exaggerated. Dweck introduces the book with the dubious claim that changing people's beliefs

about mindset will “have profound effects” that “permeates every part of your life”(Mindset 1). Whereas Dweck provides evidence that changing one’s mindset has an extensive impact, the majority of research on the actual impact of mindset shows that a change of mindset does not have any profound impact on academic success. Abigail Beall of WIRED Magazine reports that a meta-analysis of 316 previous studies found that the correlation between mindset and academic success is minimal. Co-author of the study Brooke Macnamara says that despite “hugely overblown claims,” evidence suggests that “teaching children to hold a growth mindset” is “more like a tiny nudge in the right direction than a life-changing panacea”(Beall). Dweck’s proclaimed revolutionary idea has no empirical evidence to support it. Moreover, the evidence suggests the opposite: mindset is a minimal factor in determining success. Dweck attempts to apply a concept to the masses, yet lacks evidence to suggest it can be applied to the masses. Therefore, through analysis of objective data, it is clear Dweck overstates the effects of one’s mindset.

Supporters of Dweck’s theory may claim that the multitude anecdotes she provides throughout *Mindset* are ample proof for her theory. The stories of success that she provides follow the idea of mindset and give her proposal credibility. Proponents of mindset are right to argue that those anecdotes can provide insight into what makes someone successful, but they exaggerate when they claim that those anecdotes can be translated into foundational evidence to develop a theory. However, anecdotal evidence has not only shown to be insufficient, but it has also shown to be undermining to objective evidence. Scientific American writer Michael Shermer says that humans are hardwired to “pay attention to anecdotes because false positives are usually harmless, **whereas** false negatives,” neglecting a causal relationship between two factors, “may take you out of the gene pool”. Shermer uses the case of the belief that vaccines

can cause autism in children. **While** no scientific research has shown any relationship, anecdotes of parents noticing autistic symptoms shortly after getting their child vaccinated are powerful enough for people to “ignore contrary evidence”(Shermer). Similarly, in the case of *Mindset*, despite objective evidence showing that one’s mindset has a minimal effect, Dweck’s anecdotes falsely lead the reader to conclude that mindset determines success. Believing mindset has a profound effect on success when it does not should be harmless, **whereas** ignoring a relationship between mindset and success would be giving up potential success. Hence, readers are inclined to favor Dweck’s faulty anecdotes as opposed to scientific evidence. However, in the case of mindset, assuming a false positive is bound to result in allocating resources towards developing a “revolutionary” mindset. **Because** evidence shows that using resources in this way has minimal impact, those resources would be effectively squandered on false ideas. Rather than being an innocuous assumption to err on the side of safety, using anecdotes to make decisions becomes harmful as the conclusions drawn result in the waste of precious resources. Carol Dweck’s theory residing upon a collection of stories is a great flaw, not a strength.

Finally, in applying her theory, Dweck disregards other factors **while** attempting to draw connections between a growth mindset and success. For example, she tells the story of Bernard Loiseau as a man who crumbled at the first notion of failure. Loiseau had a restaurant with a coveted Michelin rating of three stars, but when rumor spread that he might lose a star, he killed himself because, “the idea of failure had possessed him”(Mindset 34). She concludes that this was a result of his fixed mindset; the potential of a, “lower rating gave him a new definition for himself: Failure,” and this alone had led him to kill himself (Mindset 34). However, this account is an oversimplification of the story behind his death. While it is true that the thought of his

rating dropping disturbed him greatly, it does not necessarily follow that he killed himself because he was trapped in a fixed mindset. According to Kim Severson of The New York Times, people close to Loiseau said he was, “feeling tremendous job pressure” in the months leading to his death. She goes on to note the rampant, “mental health issues,” in the restaurant industry, “exacerbated by the seemingly endless pressure to deliver perfection”(Severson). **While** attempting to apply her idea of a fixed mindset, Dweck ignores a blatant factor in Loiseau’s suicide: mental health. Under the immense pressure he had been experiencing, the idea of losing his rating broke him. It was not because he had a fixed mindset, but because the intensity of the job had made him mentally unstable. Thus, in an attempt to apply to her theory to real life, Dweck does not account for all factors, leading to the oversimplification of a nuanced issue.

Jim Marshall made a disastrous mistake in the fourth quarter of a football game, yet his team still won. However, it was not simply because his mindset had allowed him to carry the team to victory, in fact his mindset had a minimal impact on the game. Instead, extraneous factors, like the fact that the team had already held a lead and it was late in the game, were the reason for his team’s victory. Dweck’s neglect of these factors make her theory of mindset appear to be an amazingly simple solution to many issues, yet empirical data and facts tell a different story: one in which two mindsets do not fit all.

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