Stuck in the Muck? The Role of Mindsets in Self-Regulation

When Stymied During Job Search

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In press at Journal of Employment Counseling

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Abstract
While there is a vast 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 paper draws on theory and extensive research in educational, social, and organizational psychology to explicate the likely role of mindsets in self-regulation during job search. Specifically, we outline how a person’s mindset can cue patterns of functional and dysfunctional thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during a range of job search tasks, which have important implications for counseling individuals 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, knockbacks, and dashed hopes. These experiences can be demoralizing, demotivating, and harmful to physical and mental health. For instance, frustrated job search progress may lead to anxiety and/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 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).

Given the potentially devastating and derailing nature of setbacks encountered during job search, this paper focuses on self-regulation of one’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior during the job search process. Specifically, we discuss how a person’s implicit theories of ability (Dweck, 1986, 1999) – also more intuitively known as mindsets (Dweck, 2006) – may affect the quality of their self-regulation when frustrations are encountered, together with their subsequent job search outcomes such as successful job interviews, as well as 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 the goal to become employed. This discussion of mindset implications lays the foundation for our theorizing about how a person’s mindset may affect their self-regulation when frustrations are encountered while engaging in job search, together with their resulting job search outcomes. We conclude by discussing future research directions, as well as 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 recently 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 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 elucidated the self-regulatory and interpersonal consequences of mindsets (cf. Dweck, 1999, 2006; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). When people have 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 have 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 seen 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 prognostic 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 their perceived transgressions (Gervey et al., 1999).

People’s mindsets can differ across domains. For example, a person might have 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 mindset 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. In the following section 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 a person holds at a given point in time often manifests in their attributions, their goals, and their self versus other-referent focus, each of which have implications for 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). By 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 (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 meagre 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 a person has a growth mindset, they are inclined 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”),
they 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 those praised for the effort that they exert
on a project (i.e., for “working hard”). Such individuals typically choose to work on more
challenging tasks, believing that even if they fail it would merely reflect having not yet expended
enough effort to master the task (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). In short, while praising the effort
people have exerted orients them towards tackling challenging tasks that can cultivate their
under-developed 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 they make for their performance and in the goals that they set, mindsets also affect the extent to which people compare themselves to others. When people have a fixed mindset, they tend to evaluate their success (or failure) in terms of how other people faired 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” that illustrated a 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 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 father 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 thereby sows the seeds for feeling anxious and/or depressed, as discussed next.
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, as well as 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 a fixed mindset cues dwelling on how one performed and will perform, as well as 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 one cannot do much to relieve their anxiety. To the extent that people have a growth mindset, however, they attribute performance outcomes to their effort, strategies, and abilities that they construe as amenable to development. 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 following 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 had agreed with these statements (indicating a growth mindset) displayed higher social adjustment and fewer depressive symptoms by the end of freshman year.

When people believe that they are not able to change how they feel, they presume that learning to control one’s 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, they are prone to building high quality relationships and being 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, as well as with a high quality process. Next we review the role of mindsets in the effort that people exert to attain their goals, the persistence that 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 seen 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 as a likely contributor to 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 readily signed up to take the remedial class. A growth mindset may thus 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 seen as futile as it is unlikely
to alter their deficient ability and their 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. While those focused on proving their ability (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 inclined to learn something new – not prove their capability – had persisted through the difficulty and received the highest grades. Focusing on learning and persisting to develop one’s abilities is likely to help enable the attainment of job search objectives.

Strategy Generation

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 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
A growth mindset is thus 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).

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**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, p.491) suggest that networking encompasses “individual actions directed toward contacting friends, acquaintances, and referrals to get information, leads, or advice on getting a job.” 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 introverts with a growth mindset
believed that they could cultivate their social competencies and were 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 and more proactive social strategies 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 may thus enable developing the network of mutually helpful relationships and social capital that facilitate 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 employment landscapes, 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 goal setting, feedback, and reward provision decisions. 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 re-exploring possibilities that had already 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. A growth
Mindsets During Job Search

Mindsets During Job Interviews

Like networking, going for a job interview can be a daunting prospect that requires a great deal of preparation. Such preparation involves people learning about not only the role for which they are applying, but also the department, organization, industry and/or geographical location of the position. Developing and practicing responses to anticipated questions, as well as 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 were informed that they would complete a brief IQ test and were given two minutes to complete the task. After the test period, participants were given feedback on their performance, as well as 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 to 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. The tendency for those with a fixed mindset to dwell on and worry about potential ability deficiencies might thus 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 detailing 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 where 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), as well as regarding mindsets and victimization (Yeager, Trzesniewsk, & 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 their expectations (Gervey et al., 1999). As a result of minimizing rumination on others’ perceived transgressions, a growth mindset may thereby 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. While 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 at particular moments during 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 a compelling account of how individuals may respond to frustrating challenges encountered during job search. However, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Wood & Bandura (1989) and the studies by Heslin and colleagues), most of the studies we have discussed have been conducted with school children or undergraduates in an educational context. While there is some 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 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 job search, as well as 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 job search. One such program might be the well-established JOBS program that enhances job seekers’ skills and self-confidence, and that helps them to prepare for demoralization during job search, speeds employment, and lowers rates of depression (Vuori & Silvonen, 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 re-employment (Yanar et al., 2009). Given 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\(^1\). Such research might also examine whether growth mindset training increases the impact and durability of learned optimism interventions (cf. Seligman, 2011) to boost resilience during job search.

Within the extensive mindset literature (Dweck 1999, 2006), there are also no published studies (to our knowledge) showing people benefiting from holding a fixed mindset. Perhaps the personal development focus associated with a growth mindset leads people to over-estimate 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 might also 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.

\(^1\) We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.
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 Dweck’s (2006) popular book, this article, and/or being presented with a suitably adapted presentation of the basic mechanisms regarding how their mindset at a particular point in time may influence the way they think, feel, and act in response to frustrations encountered during the job search process. A subsequent step for cultivating growth mindsets is to cue serious reflection on people’s capacity for self-development through considerable persistent effort that is prudently focused on skill development. A range of related self-regulatory heuristics for fostering and sustaining a growth mindset are provided in Table 1.

Pondering personally salient examples of the insights in Table 1, as well as identifying and taking specific opportunities to apply relevant strategies, has real potential to increase the extent and frequency with which individuals hold a growth mindset about their ability to learn and effectively perform the tasks required 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 career counseling, peer coaching, accountability partner, and/or a growth mindset workshop context.

Career counselors might influence more positive, growth-oriented mindsets through therapeutic approaches that help clients to (i) identify their fixed mindsets with regard to
particular career development tasks, (ii) gather evidence to evaluate the accuracy and usefulness of their fixed mindsets, and (iii) replace their maladaptive fixed mindsets with more constructive assumptions, based on the data collected during the second step. To assist counselors in this regard, Table 2 provides a sample of fixed mindsets with regard to a range of tasks involved in career exploration, preparatory job search, and active job search, together with more constructive alternative growth mindset assumptions.

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**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. In light of the role of mindsets in self-regulation, as well as the fact that mindsets can be cultivated, the mindsets literature nonetheless highlights *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 effectively during the tribulations of a job search.
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Figure 1: How Mindsets Moderate Self-Regulation Following Frustrated Job Search Progress

**Mindsets**

- **Fixed**
  - Cognitive: Distraction
  - Emotional: Anxiety, discouragement
  - Behavioral: Disrupted and/or erratic job search

- **Growth**
  - Cognitive: Sustained focus
  - Emotional: Equanimity, mild frustration
  - Behavioral: Persistent, systematic job search

**Job Search Tasks**

- Frustrated progress during:
  - networking
  - vacancy search
  - job interviews
  - job offer negotiations

**Job Search Outcomes**

- Successful job interviews
- Speed of gaining employment
- Quality of employment

**Dysfunctional Self-Regulation**

- Cognitive: Distraction
- Emotional: Anxiety, discouragement
- Behavioral: Disrupted and/or erratic job search

**Effective Self-Regulation**

- Cognitive: Sustained focus
- Emotional: Equanimity, mild frustration
- Behavioral: Persistent, systematic job search
### Table 1: Strategies for Fostering and Sustaining a Growth Mindset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Explanation/Insights</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Go for growth</td>
<td>Seek to continually improve, rather than just prove your performance – accepting that this often involves initial struggle and setbacks (Dweck, 1999).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Realize that growth is possible</td>
<td>Contrary to the popular notion that some people are innately ordained to mediocrity, neuroplasticity research reveals that throughout the entire lifespan fresh connections are formed within the human brain as new skills are developed (Doidge, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Set learning and process goals</td>
<td>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.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Engage in deliberative practice</td>
<td>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 (Ericsson, Krampe, &amp; Tesch-Römer, 1993). 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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Run your own race</td>
<td>Learn from others, though avoid constantly comparing yourself to them because doing so can be distracting and demoralizing (Lockwood &amp; Kunda, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Remember that errors can enable learning</td>
<td>Rehearse relevant error management mantras (Keith &amp; Frese, 2008), 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.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Focus on what you can change</td>
<td>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 (Blackwell et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Seek the insight from setbacks</td>
<td>Ask yourself “what useful information might these results imply?” “what might lead to better results?” and “what alternative strategies might I deploy?” (Dweck, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Reflect on the potential costs</td>
<td>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 one’s fixed mindset in favor of the growth-oriented alternative (Heslin et al., 2005, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Convince someone else</td>
<td>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, as well as personal anecdotes about when you have doubted your ability to develop. Trying to persuade others is a powerful way to persuade ourselves! (Aronson, 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2. Sample Client Fixed Mindset Assumptions and Growth Mindset Alternatives Regarding Three Stages of Employment Counseling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systematic Career Exploration Tasks&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Sample Fixed Mindset Assumptions</th>
<th>Growth Mindset Alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>→ Investigate different career possibilities</td>
<td>There’s no use trying to put a square peg in a round hole</td>
<td>I’ll never know which work roles I’ll enjoy most if I don’t investigate a wide range of possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Seek opportunities to develop skills</td>
<td>I know what I am capable of doing; You can’t teach an old dog new tricks</td>
<td>I enjoy opportunities to develop my skills; with concerted effort, I can improve at virtually anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Try specific work roles just to see if I like them</td>
<td>I’m just a (insert occupation here) and can’t imagine being or doing anything else</td>
<td>Different work roles may enable me to discover skills that I would enjoy developing and applying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparatory Job Search Tasks&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>→ Read an article about getting a job or changing jobs</td>
<td>Some people just have more innate talent than others at securing a good job</td>
<td>I am going to keep learning and preparing myself to secure the right role for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Prepare/revise your résumé</td>
<td>Like me, my résumé is what it is and so there’s little point in endlessly revising it</td>
<td>Résumés routinely need to be systematically revised until they start yielding targeted job interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Talk with friends or relatives about possible job leads</td>
<td>People often hate being hit upon for a job lead, especially by those whose limited talent has led to them being unemployed</td>
<td>People are often willing to help those who are genuinely willing to help themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Job Search Tasks&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>→ List yourself as a job applicant on a career website</td>
<td>People may think I’m a desperate loser if they see me publicising that I’m looking for a job</td>
<td>People who see I’m looking for a job are going to think I am taking the initiative to move ahead in my career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Send out résumés</td>
<td>The non-responsive job market has indicated that I am not a particularly hot job candidate</td>
<td>I have not yet been offered the right job opportunity, though will persist until I have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Attend a job interview</td>
<td>The interviewers are going to focus on evaluating and judging my inherent (in)competence</td>
<td>I am going to collaborate with the interviewers in exploring whether I am the most suitable candidate for this role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman (1983)

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Blau (1994)