CHAPTER 9

IMPLICIT THEORIES OF INTELLIGENCE

RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF CONFIDENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION

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INTRODUCTION

Self-confidence and its related constructs are among the most widely researched variables in the literature on achievement. However, findings on the link between self-confidence and achievement are not consistent. While some researchers have found significant correlations between self-confidence about one’s intellectual ability and achievement outcomes (e.g., Brookover & Passalacqua, 1981; J. G. Jones & Grieneeks, 1970; Marsh, 1984; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989; for a review, see Hattie, 1992), others find only weak associations between the two variables (for a meta-analysis, see Hansford & Hattie, 1982).
In this chapter, we argue, first, that confidence level may make less difference than is often thought in how people respond in achievement situations, especially when they meet with failure. Next, we argue that when confidence in one's intelligence does make a difference, its workings must be understood in the context of how people conceive of intelligence in the first place. More specifically, we will propose that people's conceptions or theories of intelligence often (1) play a more fundamental role than does confidence in predicting reactions to achievement setbacks and (2) predict when confidence will or will not make a difference for achievement processes. We also discuss how people's theories of intelligence can affect the maintenance of their self-esteem.

Implicit theories of intelligence are beliefs about the fundamental nature of intelligence, specifically whether intelligence is a fixed entity that cannot be changed (an entity theory) or a malleable quality that can be increased through one's efforts (an incremental theory). Before beginning, we will discuss more about implicit theories of intelligence and their measurement.

IMPLICIT THEORIES AND THEIR ASSESSMENT

Lay people, like scientists (e.g., Jensen, 1979; Piaget, 1972), may have theories about intelligence. Unlike scientists, however, lay people may not typically articulate their beliefs about intelligence. Thus, their beliefs may take the form of background assumptions or implicit theories. Our research has shown two implicit theories of intelligence to be widely held among lay people, with some believing that intelligence is a fixed permanent entity ("entity theorists"), and others believing that intelligence is malleable and can be increased ("incremental theorists"). We have proposed that these implicit theories of intelligence set up cognitive frameworks within which people interpret and react to relevant information (Dweck, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; see also Heider, 1958; Kelly, 1963; Murphy & Medin, 1985; Ross, 1989).

How do we assess people's implicit theories of intelligence? We do so by means of a questionnaire developed by Henderson, Dweck, and Chiu (1992). This questionnaire consists of three items, each depicting intelligence as a fixed entity.1 The items are: (1) "You have a certain amount of

1Items depicting an incremental theory are not included in this measure because several studies (Boyum, 1988; Leggett, 1985) have shown that even respondents who endorse items depicting entity theories have a strong tendency to endorse opposite items depicting the incremental theory, as well as a tendency to drift toward incremental choices over times.