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The fuzziness of mindsets: Divergent conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset theory and praxis

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# The fuzziness of mindsets

## Divergent conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset theory and praxis

Fuzziness of  
mindsets

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore conceptualizations of mindset across disciplines with particular attention to scholars' care in defining and operationalizing the construct of mindset. Theories of mindset have witnessed increased attention through a variety of disciplines for their applicability as processes with the potential to influence individual and/or organizational outcomes. Exploration of mindset conceptualizations and characterizations reveal substantial divergences.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual paper generally examines the utilization of mindset constructs via a multidisciplinary review of literature and specifically details three mindset theories (implemental and deliberative, global and growth and fixed mindsets) to illuminate such disparities.

**Findings** – This paper categorizes the significant variations of the mindset construct and research via three distinct streams. Each stream highlights knowledge as instrumental in the mindset construct; however, the ways in which varying aspects of knowledge, knowledge mechanisms or knowledge as a component of an individuals and/or organization's identity correspond to the inherent presuppositions of varying articulations of mindset theory and praxis.

**Practical implications** – Effectively influencing an individual and/or organization's mindset necessitates an accurate assessment of the mindset construct. Further, evaluating the applicability of mindset research and/or feedback from a consultant warrants attention to the assumptions undergirding the mindset construct.

**Originality/value** – Generally, mindset studies and theories have scantily attended to both the historical development of mindset research as well as divergences in the research record within and across disciplines. This paper attempts to address this deficiency. Further, this paper appears to be the first attempt to compare and identify varying conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset theory and, therefore, identifies previously unidentified assumptions.

**Keywords** Mindset, Mindset theory, Global mindset, Deliberative and implemental mindsets, Fixed and growth mindset, Mindset definitions

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Mindset theories are increasingly being heralded as imperative for individual and or organizational success in the midst of global interconnectedness (Brooks *et al.*, 2012; Dweck, 2006, 2012; Gagné and Lydon, 2001; Issa and Pick, 2010; Javidan *et al.*, 2007; Kennedy *et al.*, 2013; Levy *et al.*, 2007b). However, the ways in which scholars implement and conceptualize theories of mindsets vary significantly. These divergent conceptualizations reveal disparate theoretical frameworks and definitions and fluctuate, not only between disciplines but also among scholars of the same discipline in the study of the same mindset. Such disparities should not be trivialized, as they



represent a gap in mindset literature. Consequently, this article attempts to address this gap by exploring how the construct of mindset is used and supported in scholarly research. This exploration presumes that divergent conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset will be plainly evident and argues that customary expectations for scholarship concerning incorporation of conceptual and empirical research are generally un- or, at the very least, under-developed within scholarly study of the mindset construct. Subsequently, a categorization of three broad streams of mindset conceptualization is offered as evidenced via three specific mindsets (deliberate and implemental, global and growth and fixed). This examination will permit discussion concerning the fuzziness of mindset as an indistinct, vague concept as well as potential implications that may positively influence organizational praxis.

### **Early theory and definition of mindset(s)**

The origins of scholarly incorporation of the term mindset emerged from some of the earliest psychological experiments through a process which Oskar Külpe called abstraction (Gollwitzer, 1990; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011). Early in the twentieth century, members of the Würzburg School of cognitive psychology pioneered the mindset concept (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999):

These early cognitive psychologists discovered that becoming intensely involved with the solving of a given task activates exactly those cognitive procedures that help task completion. The created mindset (i.e. the sum total of the activated cognitive procedures) should consist of the cognitive orientation that is most conducive to successful task performance (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999, p. 405; Gollwitzer, 2012, p. 528).

Fundamental to the original Würzburgian theory of mindset is the tethering of a specific task and a particular grouping of cognitive processes. Mindset theory and characterization therefore attempted to identify both a task and the cognitive mechanisms that were activated to successfully perform said task. This theoretical understanding and characterization of mindset remains relatively unchanged in the cognitive psychology stream of mindset research. Interestingly, despite a strong research record stemming from the beginning of the twentieth century and continuing today, the theoretical study and use of the term mindset has deviated from this conceptualization and subsequent implementation.

### **Divergent conceptualizations of mindset**

A vast majority of mindset scholars within the field of cognitive psychology identify either the many empirical studies by Gollwitzer and colleagues or the Würzburg School as the origins of academic uses of mindset as a theoretical construct. Nevertheless, some scholars within the study of cognitive psychology and many mindset scholars from other disciplines disregard, or at the very least, provide only cursory attention to the origins and theoretical developments of mindset within academic research. In the few cases in which scholars acknowledge the Würzburg School or the substantial research record within cognitive psychology, divergent conceptualizations are generally dismissed. Demonstrative of this, consider Gupta and Govindarajan's (2002, p. 116) assertion that:

[...] the mindset concept has had a long history in the fields of cognitive psychology and, more recently, organization theory, where scholars have focused on the question of how people and organizations make sense of the world in which they interact.

While Gupta and Govindarajan should be commended for their attentiveness to locating their conceptualization of mindset within academic literature, this statement reveals a problematic assumption. The assumption that conceptual differences between mindset as addressing the questions of individual and collective sense-making and “the sum total of activated cognitive procedures” (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999, p. 405) in response to a given task as negligible is indicative, at best, of an underdeveloped continuation from or, at worst, a specious homogenization of past mindset research, theory and characterization.

Although this lack of attention to conflicting conceptualizations is not an anomaly in mindset literature, the current work argues that such wanderings from the original conceptualization and characterization of mindsets are not necessarily useless. Rather, this article contends that greater care and attention to the concept, definition and theory of mindset is warranted. Regardless of how mindset is conceptualized, scholars must locate their understanding and use of the construct within scholarly discussion and, thereby, draw from the copious theoretical, conceptual and empirical studies in any one of the many disciplines in which mindset studies are published. With this in mind, three over-arching streams, generally categorized as cognitive psychology, social psychology and organizational leadership, and positive psychology, clarify the use of the term mindset in scholarly research.

### *Cognitive psychology*

As previously identified, the research of mindsets within the cognitive psychology stream has primarily built upon the Würzburg concept of mindset. Most notable is Gollwitzer’s theory of mindset or, more specifically, the mindset theory of action phases (Gollwitzer, 1990, 2012; Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999; Gollwitzer and Kinney, 1989). Beginning in the 1970s and publishing multiple studies in the 1980s and 1990s, Gollwitzer’s work is accredited by a vast majority of mindset scholars spanning all streams of mindset research (Dweck, 2006, 2012; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011). In conjunction with others, Gollwitzer’s original theory was subsequently used as a baseline by which to examine additional facets stemming from his original work or to access novel ideas drawing upon the theory of action phases (Bayer and Gollwitzer, 2005; Freitas *et al.*, 2004; Fujita *et al.*, 2007; Taylor and Gollwitzer, 1995). However, in the cognitive psychology stream, almost all researchers recognize Gollwitzer’s initial and subsequent studies as formative for mindset research (Gagné and Lydon, 2001; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011; Nenkov, 2012).

Therefore, the general characterization and conceptualization of mindsets are founded upon the classic Würzburg definition of mindset, which “suggests that the mechanisms mediating mind-set effects are located in the cognitive process advancing the solution of the task that simulated the mindset” (Gollwitzer, 1990, p. 83). Definitions of mindset in the cognitive psychology stream are generally indistinguishable from the above and conceptualize the construct as both task(s) and cognitive processes:

- mindsets describe “the general cognitive operations with distinct features that facilitate a given task” (Torelli and Kaikati, 2009, p. 232);
- mindsets are the “activation of different cognitive procedures [...] which affect how people interpret subsequently encountered information” (Nenkov, 2012, p. 616); and

- a mindset “is evidenced by the effect of performing a cognitive or motor activity on the likelihood of performing a similar behavior in a subsequent unrelated situation [...] it reflects the activation and use of a cognitive procedure” (Xu and Wyer, 2012, p. 921).

Quite simply, the cognitive psychology stream conceptualizes mindsets as “the sum total of the activated cognitive procedures” (Gollwitzer and Bayer, 1999, p. 405) in response to a given task.

This relative homogeneity within the cognitive psychology stream of mindset research has facilitated an impressive body of experimental studies that have attended to a variety of tasks and groupings of cognitive procedures (i.e. mindsets). Adding to Gollwitzer and associates’ original emphasis on the mindsets activated in pursuit of a goal, scholars have examined mindsets for their relationship and influence on behavior, perception, attitude and mood (Gollwitzer, 2012). Although far from a comprehensive account, the following areas of study demonstrate the width and breadth of empirical research using the mindset construct in the cognitive psychology stream: switching between mindsets (Hamilton *et al.*, 2011), relationship between values and behavior (Torelli and Kaikati, 2009), persuasion as observed in the response from the priming of political messages (Xu and Wyer, 2012), persuasion in advertising (Nenkov, 2012), immediate and delayed gratification (Cheng *et al.*, 2012), intimate relationships (Gagné and Lydon, 2001), personal risk and health protective behavior (Weinstein and Lyon, 1999), illusionary optimism (Gollwitzer and Kinney, 1989; Taylor and Gollwitzer, 1995) and strength of attitude (Henderson *et al.*, 2008). This research record further supports this paper’s assertion of cognitive psychology’s conceptualization of mindsets as the sum total of activated cognitive procedures for a particular task or set of tasks, and, as stated previously, demonstrates widespread conceptual homogeneity of the mindset construct. Research of implemental and deliberative mindsets exemplifies such assertions.

*Implemental and deliberative mindsets.* Gollwitzer (1990) is widely accepted as the theorist behind implemental and deliberative mindsets. These mindsets are the product of Gollwitzer’s mindset theory of action phases. Further, the aforementioned attention to the historical research record of mindsets, especially within the cognitive stream, typifies these mindsets. Furthermore, implemental and deliberative mindsets epitomize mindsets within the cognitive psychology stream.

According to Gollwitzer (1990, 2012), implemental and deliberative mindsets were constructed to study and experiment within the areas of goal pursuit and motivation. After examining the many notable scholars on these topics (e.g. Atkinson, Kuhn and Lewin), Gollwitzer and his advisor, Heckhausen, created the Rubicon Model of Action Phases. This model sought to address questions concerning “how people choose action goals, plan and enact their execution, and evaluate their efforts” (Gollwitzer, 1990, p. 53) through four action phases: predecisional, preactional, actional and postactional. Therefore, the concept of mindset was “employed to find answers to these questions in terms of the cognitive processes or orientations that allow for easy completion of the different action phases” (p. 53). Each action phase is, therefore, associated with a mindset: predecisional (deliberative mindset), preactional (implemental mindset), actional (actional mindset) and postactional (evaluative mindset). Although all four have received substantial attention via academic research and experimentation, for the

purposes of this review, implemental and deliberative mindsets will receive additional analysis.

Deliberative mindsets are used during the predecisional phase; simply, a deliberative mindset represents the cognitive processes that are used to assess the feasibility and desirability of accomplishing a specific goal. Consequently, a deliberative mindset is that which:

[...] clearly facilitates the task of the predecisional phase (i.e. to choose the most desirable wish that is also feasible) [and] should evidence the following characteristics: First there should be cognitive tuning toward information relevant to the issues of feasibility and desirability. Second, there should be an orientation toward accurate and impartial processing of such information. And finally, there should be an open-mindedness or heightened receptivity to information in general. This deliberative mind-set should originate whenever people become intensely involved with deliberating their wishes (Gollwitzer, 1990, p. 65).

Therefore, a deliberative mindset is the sum total of cognitive processes that facilitate deliberation of a specific goal (i.e. task). A deliberative mindset is considered particularly effective at impartially processing all available information and stimuli and is thought to more accurately assess the feasibility of accomplishing a goal.

Implemental mindsets, on the other hand, are used during the preactional phase or, said another way; an implemental mindset represents the cognitive processes that are used to accomplish a specific goal. Consequently, an implemental mindset is that which:

[...] facilitates solving the task of postdecisional (preactional) phase [and] should evidence the following characteristics: First, there should be cognitive tuning toward information relevant to when, where, and how to act; Second, there should be closed-mindedness in the sense of concentrating on information that helps to promote the chosen goal; and Finally, there should be a partial and optimistic analysis of information related to the chosen goal's desirability and feasibility, respectively. This implemental mind-set should originate whenever people become intensely involved with planning the implementation of their goal intentions (Gollwitzer, 1990, pp. 65-66).

Therefore, an implemental mindset is the sum total of cognitive processes that facilitate planning to accomplish an intended, specific goal (i.e. task). An implemental mindset selectively processes the totality of available information and stimuli and is thought to overestimate the feasibility of accomplishing a goal.

Although this cursory treatment of deliberative and implemental mindsets is far from comprehensive, what should be evident is that each facilitates success. When considering whether to engage a plan of action toward a specific goal, critical, accurate appraisal of all information and stimuli is essential in deciding the feasibility and desirability when attempting to plan and act to accomplish a goal. Similarly, after deciding to pursue a goal, attending to information and stimuli that supports goal pursuit is beneficial to accomplishing a specified goal. Gollwitzer's (2012, p. 537) mindset theory of action phases, which "argues that becoming involved in these tasks leads to characteristic cognitive orientations (mindsets) that are beneficial for solving these tasks effectively" is clearly evident in this cursory account of deliberative and implemental mindsets. Implemental and deliberative mindsets typify the cognitive psychology stream. Both are conceived of as essentially a grouping of cognitive processes that attempt to successfully complete a specific task, demonstrate an



individual orientation or focus and have been explored via an impressive diversity of research supported by significant amounts of experimental data.

### *Social psychology and organizational leadership*

Scholars from the social psychology and organizational leadership stream seldom identify the work of scholars from the Würzburg School as the prototype of all mindset research. Unlike the homogeneity seen within the cognitive psychology stream, both the research and theories attending to mindsets in the social psychology and organizational leadership stream vary greatly. Even more, as most researchers in the cognitive psychology stream of mindset research identify Gollwitzer's many works as tethering the Würzburg School to their respective areas of focus, such identification rarely occurs within the research record of the social psychology and organizational leadership stream.

Therefore, the general characterization and conceptualization of mindsets founded upon the Würzburg definition is largely absent in the social psychology and organizational leadership stream. However, despite substantial variation in mindset conceptualization and characterization within this stream, the conceptualization of mindset can be demonstrated as dissimilar from the Würzburg understanding. Whereas the early twentieth century understanding of mindsets emphasized a specific cognitive process or a specific grouping of cognitive processes to a particular task(s), the defining characteristic of mindset conceptualization in the social psychology and organizational stream is a specific focus (or filter) used throughout the totality of an individual or organization's cognition:

- mindsets are “cognitive filters” (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002, p. 116);
- mindsets are “a predisposition to see the world in a particular way [...] a filter through which we look at the world [...] a predisposition to perceive and reason in certain ways [...] a means of simplifying the environment and bringing to each new experience or event a pre-established frame of reference for understanding it” (Rhinesmith, 1992, p. 63);
- mindsets are “a procedural tool kit, heuristic, or naïve theory used to structure thinking” (Oyserman *et al.*, 2009, p. 219); and
- a mindset is “a frame of reference” (Benson and Dvesdow, 2003, p. 997).

Within this stream, mindsets are identified as essential without attention to or interaction with previous mindset research (Bruchmann and Evans, 2013; Kray *et al.*, 2006; Zyphur, 2009). It is unclear why the vast majority of these conceptualizations neglect mindset studies from the cognitive psychology stream. However, regardless of whether the conceptualizations of mindset within this stream are similar or distinct from cognitive psychology conceptualizations, rigorous scholarship warrants acknowledgement and explanation of past research.

Although conceptualizations in this stream are far more varied, mindsets are generalized as cognitive filters that attend to and influence the totality of cognitive processes with or without an identifiable task. Perhaps Kennedy *et al.*'s (2013, p. 13) contention that “the language of mindset seems to have entered the field of leadership and organizational development as a way of characterizing changing assumptions and patterns of thinking” illuminates the deviance from the research and conceptualization

of mindsets within cognitive psychology as well as the seeming lack of attention given to previous research which scholars in others fields of study consider significant. Nevertheless, regardless of what instigated these variant conceptualizations of mindsets, what is clear is that the distinguishing emphasis of mindset conceptualization and characterization in the social psychology and organizational leadership stream represents a disparate understanding from the stream of cognitive psychology.

As mentioned in the introduction, such deviations from the original conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset are not necessarily inadequate. In the case of the social psychology and organizational leadership stream, study has facilitated an impressive body of conceptual and theoretical studies that attend to a variety of cognitive filters (i.e. mindsets). These include evaluation (Kennedy *et al.*, 2013), culture-as-situated-cognition (Oyserman *et al.*, 2009), relational processing (Kray *et al.*, 2006), social comparison (Bruchmann and Evans, 2013), research methodologies (Zyphur, 2009), decision-making (Benson and Dvesdow, 2003) and global versus local processing (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002). Mindsets within the social psychology and organizational leadership stream represent a vast array of conceptualizations and theories, which have and are witnessing what appears to be an increasing emphasis on the cognitive processes of filtering information and knowledge. Further, it appears that attention to mindsets within this stream will continue to expand, both in variety and attention, for the foreseeable future. All of this is well represented within the study of global mindset.

*Global mindset.* Generally, any acknowledgement of mindset research from Gollwitzer or the Würzburg School is largely absent in the characterization and conceptualization of global mindset. Few exceptions are observed in the reviewed literature, but two are worthy of comment. First, Felício *et al.* (2012) cite Freitas *et al.* (2004, p. 469) in support of their explanation of mindsets as “promot[ing] non-specific guidance for a particular task, representing the global predisposition to respond in a certain way”. However, such an identification is the exception within the study of global mindset, as evidenced in the very next sentence of Felício and Caldeirinha’s work (Felício *et al.*, 2012, p. 469), which quickly re-defines mindset as a “repository of meaning”. Second, Gupta and Govindarajan (2002) acknowledge research from the discipline of cognitive psychology as contributing to the development and research of mindsets, but allocate very little attention to the ways their research intersects or diverges from the theoretical development of the concept in cognitive psychology. Alternatively, most global mindset scholars, who define or interact with the origins of global mindset theories, point to the rapid global growth of multinational companies (MNCs) as the precipitating cause of global mindset research (Javidan and Walker, 2012; Levy *et al.*, 2007a; Story and Barbuto, 2011).

A large majority of global mindset scholars identify Perlmutter (1969) as the thinker initiating the study of global mindset (Chatterjee, 2005; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Javidan and Walker, 2012; Levy *et al.*, 2007a; Story and Barbuto, 2011). Perlmutter’s (1969, p. 11) focus was solely concerned with MNC’s successful operations in multiple contexts globally, in which he identified “states of mind or attitudes [...] described as ethnocentric (or home-country oriented), polycentric (or host-country oriented), and geocentric (or world-oriented)”. This focus was, for all intents and purposes, fixated on issues surrounding cultural complexity.



Rhinesmith (1992) is often identified as the next significant thinker influencing the development of global mindset research (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002; Story, 2010). Rhinesmith (1992, p. 63) conceptualized and characterized a mindset:

[...] as a predisposition to see the world in a particular way that sets boundaries and provides explanations for why things are the way they are, while at the same time establishing guidance for ways in which we should behave.

This conceptualization and characterization of mindset emphasizes cognitive complexity, which naturally incorporates the complexities stemming from cultural diversity. For all the variant understandings of global mindset, widespread agreement can be found in the recognition that consensus has yet to be reached in defining and implementing a unanimous construct (Jokinen, 2005; Story and Barbuto, 2011).

Reviewing the ways in which scholars define global mindset reveals the often unidentified assumptions undergirding the conceptualization and characterization of a mindset. A sampling of the literature reveals that global mindset is conceptualized as:

[...] an openness to and awareness of diversity across cultures and markets with a propensity and ability to synthesize across this diversity (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002, p. 117)

[...] a highly complex cognitive structure characterized by an openness to and articulation of multiple cultural and strategic realities on both global and local levels, and the cognitive ability to mediate and integrate across this multiplicity" (Levy *et al.*, 2007a, p. 244)

[...] the stability to develop and interpret criteria for business performance that are not dependent on the assumptions of a single country, culture, or context and to implement those criteria appropriately in different countries, cultures, and contexts" (Begley and Boyd, 2003, pp. 25-26)

[...] the set of attributes that help a manager influence individuals, groups, and organizations from diverse cultural, political, and institutional backgrounds" (Bird and Osland, 2004, p. 38).

This sampling of global mindset definitions highlights several noteworthy divergences concerning the conceptualization of mindsets. Scholars of global mindset diverge in their respective understandings concerning whether a mindset is an individual or collective construct as well as whether a mindset is a set of attributes or competencies, a cognitive structure or some amalgamation of the two. Nevertheless, global mindset exemplifies the social psychology and organizational leadership stream. Global mindset parallels the social psychology and organizational leadership stream via a conceptualization and characterization of mindsets as cognitive filters, an orientation to both individuals and organizations, and are supported by a significant amalgamation of theoretical and conceptual studies.

### *Positive psychology*

The positive psychology stream is perhaps the least theoretically developed of the three streams. Not unlike the social psychology and organizational leadership stream, the positive psychology stream attends minimally to research from the cognitive psychology stream and seldom references the social psychology and organizational leadership stream. Additionally, while some scholars cite various Gollwitzer studies, the onus of attention in the positive psychology stream is placed generically in psychology,

namely, positive psychology. However, what separates this stream from the cognitive psychology and social psychology and organizational leadership streams is a broader conceptualization and implementation of the mindset construct beyond the processes of cognition.

Within the positive psychology stream, the general characterization and conceptualization of mindsets emphasizes individual or organizational beliefs:

- mindsets “are just beliefs” (Dweck, 2006, p. 16). “Mindsets frame the running account that’s taking place in people’s heads. They guide the whole interpretation process” (Dweck, 2006, p. 215);
- mindsets “or implicit theories[...] are people’s lay beliefs about human attributes” (Dweck, 2012, p. 615); and
- mindsets are “common beliefs” (Brooks *et al.*, 2012).

Clearly, such a conceptualization of mindsets has moved beyond a specific cognitive process or cluster of processes associated with a task and past the association of filtering information that affects the totality of cognition. Indeed, this understanding of mindsets emphasizes and assumes that mindsets include cognition, cognitive processes and responses to tasks, but also inherent beliefs or views of reality.

Generally, positive psychology is an emergent discipline (Brooks *et al.*, 2012) and therefore does not boast the same depth of experimental research typical of the cognitive psychology stream nor the breadth of conceptual and theoretical attention typical of the social psychology and organizational leadership stream. In addition, some scholars within the positive psychology stream, notably Dweck (2006), have widened their particular focus to include popular writings about mindsets for the general public. But generally, the scope of attention within the nascent positive psychology stream includes education (Brooks *et al.*, 2012), ethics (Issa and Pick, 2010) and beliefs about nature versus nurture or whether human traits or abilities have the potential to grow (Dweck, 2006, 2012). Although scholars within this stream tend to focus on either conceptual/theoretical or experimental research, it is generally observed that each conceptualizes and characterizes mindsets as individual or collective beliefs. This is well evidenced in the study of growth and fixed mindsets.

*Growth and fixed mindsets.* Generally, acknowledgement of mindset research from Gollwitzer or the Würzburg School is seldom referenced for its place within the development of mindset research within the positive psychology stream. Dweck (2006, 2012) briefly identifies Gollwitzer’s work, as it pertains to a specific idea, but does not include discussion of the research record of mindsets or mindset conceptualization. Of the three streams, the positive psychology stream appears the least focused on presenting their research via the standardization widely assumed to be typical of the academy. Of the studies examined, none scrutinized the development of mindsets, and it appears that the discussions presented largely presupposed the existence of mindsets and the clarity of the concept (Brooks *et al.*, 2012; Dweck, 2006, 2012; Issa and Pick, 2010). Perhaps, this oversight stems from the general conceptualization and characterization of mindsets as common beliefs. Dweck’s (2006, 2012) characterization and conceptualization of fixed and growth mindsets further clarify these statements and highlight general characteristics from the positive psychology stream.

Dweck's (2006, 2012) conceptualization and characterization of growth and fixed mindsets stems from and mirrors the debate in psychology concerning whether nature (fixed) or nurture (growth) is more influential for an individual's abilities. A fixed mindset therefore assumes that human beings are largely limited to enduring talents and abilities, whereas a growth mindset assumes that human beings have the potential to develop their talents and abilities. How an individual understands his or her own human identity is a belief, a mindset and part of their personality. Mindsets, i.e. beliefs, are therefore alterable. Hence, growth versus fixed mindset publications contend that people can change their beliefs concerning abilities and behaviors and therefore experience wide-ranging benefits to intelligence, negotiation skills, romantic relationships, shyness, athletic abilities, conflict resolution, peace efforts, aggression, cross-race relations and willpower. Growth mindsets, or the belief that one's abilities and skills can improve and change, are consistently exhorted as part of or *the* solution for an impressive list of situations, such as parity of gender in the fields of math and science, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, bullying, racism and ethics. Similarly, fixed mindsets, or the belief that human abilities are unable to change, are attributed – rather unconvincingly – as part of or *the* reason for events such as the collapse of Enron. Clearly, the benefits of a growth mindset and the perils of a fixed mindset appear to be inflated presentations that demonstrate the conceptualization of a mindset as a belief and represent well the use of mindset within the positive psychology stream. Each is conceived of as an overarching belief, applicable to both individuals and organizations, and demonstrates an emergent field requiring additional empirical support.

*Summary: divergent conceptualizations of mindset*

Conceptualizations of mindset differ and can generally be categorized as the sum total of activated cognitive procedures for a particular task or set of tasks (cognitive psychology stream), as cognitive filters (social psychology and organizational leadership stream) or as beliefs (positive psychology stream). The differences between these divergent conceptualizations should not be underestimated as each affects scholarly discussion and have been largely neglected in the academic study of mindsets. Such observations reinforce the purpose of this writing, not to argue for a homogenous conceptualization of mindsets, but rather to demonstrate the necessity that scholars locate their understanding and conceptualization of the construct within academic literature. Further, the categorization of three streams should not be misconstrued; conceptualization and characterization of mindsets does not fall neatly into three separate classifications, rather each stream should be recognized as representing multiple points within an unbounded spectrum of mindset theories that is likely best represented through a Venn diagram with permeable boundaries (Figure 1). Nevertheless, such divergences are conspicuous in the study of mindsets and highlight the fuzziness of the concept in all its variations.

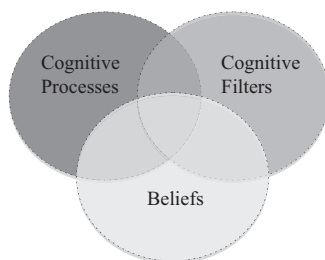
This fuzziness appears to stem from inadequate attention to theoretical and conceptual boundaries, which has created conceptual porousness in a relatively indistinguishable linguistic space. Finally, what should be abundantly clear is that conceptualizations and characterizations of mindset differ not only among the various streams but also as it pertains to specified mindsets within the same field of study.

### The fuzziness of mindset conceptualization

The conceptualization and characterization of various mindsets diverge, not solely because of different, specified foci but as a result of divergent understandings concerning what a mindset is. These divergent conceptualizations of mindsets substantially alter the theoretical and empirical assumptions underpinning the fundamental assertion of what comprises a mindset. Perhaps most importantly, claiming that each of these streams is attending to or studying the same phenomenon is not only questionable but also likely untenable. Certainly there are overlaps and convergences, but such radical discrepancies point to fundamentally distinct processes and concepts. A cognitive filter, for example, is not analogous to nor can it be compared with an individual's beliefs. Likewise, a cognitive filter is similarly different from a set of cognitive processes designed to best accomplish a specified task. Regardless of the stream, failure to adequately trace and explicate the concept or definition of a mindset, as it is being implemented, likely limits, if not skews, the research study. The study of global mindset epitomizes the ways in which neglected assumptions concerning the conceptualization of mindset may potentially limit and/or skew conceptual and experimental contributions.

There is little disagreement among scholars that the conceptualization of global mindset has become an all-encompassing description of everything global; yet there is widespread acknowledgement that the various conceptualizations of global mindset reveal potentially significant incongruities. As previously identified, [Levy \*et al.\* \(2007b\)](#) differentiate varying conceptualizations of global mindset based upon differing emphases in response to the influences of globalization (i.e. increased cultural diversity, cognitive complexity, etc.). Although a valuable framework, it may be more prudent to differentiate theories based upon the ways in which scholars define and conceptualize mindset. For example, several global mindset scholars appear to conceptualize the mindset component of global mindset as synonymous to a worldview or set of beliefs ([Clapp-Smith \*et al.\*, 2007](#); [Smith, 2012](#); [Stone, 2011](#)), whereas others conceptualize mindset within global mindset as a cognitive filter ([Levy \*et al.\*, 2007a, 2007b](#); [Vogelgesang \*et al.\*, 2014](#)). The former tend to view global mindset as synonymous to a theory of global leadership, whereas the latter tend to view global mindset as an epistemological filter needed for, but not representative of, global leadership. The most trenchant distinction between divergent conceptualizations of global mindset does not originate in the understanding or phenomena of global-ness, but rather in the – often unattended to – definition and operationalization of a mindset ([French and Chang, 2016](#)).

The issue in global mindset research as well as the vast majority of mindset studies is that the concept of mindset is not sufficiently defined for academic study, minimally



**Figure 1.**  
Representation of the  
fuzziness of mindset  
conceptualizations in  
scholarly research

attended to, and scholars have not adequately referenced how their use of the construct corresponds with or diverges from published theories and research. Simply, mindset scholars emphasize the phenomenon or phenomena that the mindset is theorized as enabling or representing while neglecting scholarship that supports or explicates their conceptualization of a mindset. Further complicating the discussion, the fuzziness of mindset conceptualization and characterization muddies the varied and substantial overlaps of similar phenomena in other disciplines, namely, the humanities.

#### *Future research*

Clearly each stream has multiple opportunities for further study. The social psychology and organizational leadership stream would benefit, especially as it pertains to global mindset, from experimental studies and continued conceptual and theoretical refining. The positive psychology stream would likewise benefit from continued study, expanded conceptual and theoretical papers, and more robust discussions and analyses of experimental data. The cognitive psychology stream, as well as the other two streams, should, in the future, explore overlapping studies and theories from other disciplines as well as allocate increased attention to identifying and defining the mindset construct.

*Interdisciplinary study.* Signifying the most substantial opportunity, each stream must wrestle with and incorporate the many well-developed theories found in other disciplines. Interdisciplinary explorations hold immense promise, especially within the humanities, because significant overlaps are evidenced by a variety of scholars throughout multiple disciplines representing an extensive research record generally neglected in mindset research. As the following paragraph and subsequent attention to worldviews and epistemology suggest, the theoretical presuppositions supporting the conceptualization of mindset overlap with several broad, long-established fields in the humanities, namely, epistemology within the discipline of Philosophy, cross-cultural interactions and cultural studies within the disciplines of Anthropology and Religious Studies, and worldview studies within the disciplines of Anthropology, Christian Theology, Missiology and Religious Studies.

Mindsets, as the aggregated cognitive processes used for successful completion of a specific task (cognitive psychology stream), suggest multiple overlaps and similarities to the philosophic study of epistemic mechanisms (Evers *et al.*, 2009; Greco and Sosa, 1999; Moser, 2002b). Mindsets, as cognitive filters (social psychology and organizational leadership stream), appear largely synonymous with the general processes and variations represented by individual and collective epistemologies (Foucault, 2010; Greco, 1999; Moser, 2002a; Sørensen, 2007). Mindsets, as beliefs (positive psychology stream), appear indistinguishable from, although considerably less developed than, anthropological examinations of worldview (Hiebert, 2008; Sire, 2004). Simply, the differences between the sum total of cognitive processes for completion of a particular task, a cognitive filter and common beliefs are not only immense but also likely irreconcilable. Each represents fundamentally different phenomena, which are often mischaracterized as a result of insufficient incorporation of academic literature, theoretical attention and care in explicating the theoretical underpinnings of a mindset.

*Increased theoretical attention and care in defining mindsets.* Irrespective of the stream of mindset research, each requires more careful attention in defining and explicating the theories undergirding mindsets. This is unmistakable even in a cursory review of the variant conceptualizations and characterizations of implemental and

deliberative, global and growth and fixed mindsets. Further, within specific mindsets significantly more attentiveness is needed, not only in defining mindsets and explicating mindset theory but also in explicitly interacting with the theoretical support and definitions for the specified mindset. Such attentiveness should incorporate and interact with research that conflicts with or supports one's work on a specified mindset. Ideally, evaluation and integration of theoretical models require substantially more than simple attentiveness; and, methods, such as integrative propositional analysis may be an effective tool in which to analyze mindset conceptualizations (Wallis, 2014). At the very least, these streams must include an acknowledgement of mindset research via its long history in the cognitive psychology stream and delineate the ways in which this literature converges or diverges from a particular conceptualization of mindset. Unmistakably, care in defining and attention to theory will greatly benefit mindset research and may serve to make concrete the claims, by many mindset scholars, concerning the potential of mindset research to be especially applicable for individual and organizational success.

#### *Implications for praxis within organizations*

Mindset scholars from all streams identify the potential benefits of understanding mindsets and how to effectively influence individual or collective mindsets toward a desired end. Mindset research in the cognitive stream suggests that effective understanding of mindsets may improve an individual's abilities to complete goals, accurately assess abilities and skills, delay gratification when necessary, strengthen one's attitude and resolve, improve relationships, increase advertising success and many others. Key to the cognitive psychology stream's assertions concerning mindset applicability is the individual and the ability of the individual to use the most effective cognitive process(es) to complete a specific task or series of tasks. Such claims would indeed be highly desirable to individuals and the organizations in which they are members.

Mindset research in the social psychology and organizational leadership stream suggests that effective understanding of mindsets has potentially substantial benefits for individual and organizational processing of information and decision-making. Identifying, developing and using the most effective cognitive filter is heralded as the way to organizational and individual success in the midst of the multifarious changes often attributed to globalization. Mindset research in the social psychology and organizational leadership stream suggests that effective understanding of mindsets may improve an individual's or organization's ability toward novel research methodologies, successful decision-making, accurate estimations of ability via social comparison, success in the midst of global complexity and cultural diversity and many others. Key to the social psychology and organizational leadership stream's various assertions concerning mindset applicability is an individual or collective cognitive filter that enables accurate and effective interpretation of all available stimuli toward a general outcome (i.e. global mindedness to accurately and effectively interpret global complexity and cultural diversity for individual or organizational success). Surely, using an effective cognitive filter (i.e. mindset) would be extremely valuable for individuals and organizations.

Finally, mindset research in the positive psychology stream suggests that effective understanding of mindsets has potentially significant benefits for individuals and



organizations through the development and shaping of a belief or group of beliefs. Identifying, developing and shaping beliefs or a set of beliefs has been heralded as the way for individual and organizational success. Mindset research in the positive psychology stream suggests that effective understanding of mindsets may improve an individual's or organization's ability in education, ethics, efforts of peace and reconciliation, cross-race relations, business success, will-power and many others. Key to the positive psychology stream's various assertions concerning mindset applicability is that the beliefs or group of beliefs that an individual or organization hold about their identity or the nature of humanity will positively influence this group toward a general outcome or state of being (i.e. an ethical mindset within an organization will generally shape the organization into ethical action). Surely, identifying, developing and shaping a belief or set of beliefs (i.e. mindset) is beneficial to both individuals and organizations and identified as crucial within discussions of organizational culture (Den Hartog and Dickson, 2012; Kreitner and Kinicki, 2013).

Imperative for organizational praxis is the ability to correctly identify and influence an individual or collective mindset via efficient and effective development. For example, if the mindset component of a specified mindset is akin to a worldview, then creating and implementing educational and developmental programs that attempt to influence aspects of individual and collective worldview is imperative. Conversely, if the mindset component of a specified mindset is better described as an overarching epistemology or general cognitive filter, then creating and implementing educational and developmental programs that attempt to influence aspects of individual and collective epistemology is imperative. Further, the same general logic applies to specific epistemological processes and tasks. What is intriguing and essential for implementation of mindset theory at the organizational level is creating and implementing education and development programs that expediently and efficiently influence the respective processes, filters or beliefs of a targeted mindset. This totality requires more thoughtful incorporation of epistemology and worldviews by scholars studying mindsets.

#### *Epistemology and worldview*

As this work has argued, the social psychology and organizational leadership stream of mindset research would benefit from and is likely synonymous with the concepts and theories of epistemology. Kennedy *et al.*'s (2013) perceptive article surmises that mindsets are simply a call to shift epistemology as a result of the polycentric and multidirectional influences of globalization. This article lends credence to such a conclusion that the concept and characterization of mindsets within the social psychology and organizational leadership stream might be best understood as a call to alter epistemologies for greater effectiveness in the midst of the global complexities and cultural diversities characteristic of twenty-first century realities (French and Ehrman, 2016).

Similarly, the positive psychology stream of mindset research is likely synonymous with the concepts and theories of worldview. Dweck's (2012, p. 615) assertion that mindsets "(or implicit beliefs) [...] are people's lay beliefs about human attributes" demonstrates a similarity to, what scholars of worldview would label, human identity. Individual or collective responses to such questions reveal presuppositions or, in Dweck's verbage, implicit beliefs that are hypothesized as informing worldview (Hiebert, 2008; Sire, 2004). Interestingly, some scholars have identified the need to

challenge and engage knowledge structures, both among individuals and organizations, through worldview training (Chatterjee, 2005; Finn III, 2012; Lane *et al.*, 2009; Robinson and Harvey, 2008). Worldviews, epistemologies and epistemic processes all point to a reoccurring theme within the study of mindsets that knowledge, knowledge structures and knowledge processes are fundamental to the varied conceptualizations of mindset as a construct in academic research.

## Conclusion

Assumptions concerning knowledge, knowledge structures and knowledge processes are increasingly being recognized as dynamic, “fuzzy” and essential for individual and organizational success (Evers *et al.*, 2009; Moitra and Kumar, 2007; Musila, 2011; Newell *et al.*, 2001; Plehwe, 2007; Swan and Scarbrough, 2005; Walsh *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, the crux of mindset research will continue to hinge upon and be defined by the ways a mindset is conceptualized in relation to knowledge, knowledge structures and the presuppositions concerning knowledge mechanisms and human identity. Nevertheless, within scholarly treatments of mindsets, the mindset construct is conceptualized inconsistently across different disciplines, within disciplines, and even among scholars studying the same mindset. Scholars must attend to and explicate the ways in which they use the concept of mindset within their research while also locating their particular conceptualization within academic literature. Finally, attention and clarification concerning the conceptualization of a specified mindset has the potential to assist in the creation of more efficient training and, thereby, increased potential to effectively develop a mindset within an individual or organizational context.

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