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Mindset Theory Relates to Attitudes about Prison and Parole Among College Students

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Abstract

The maintenance of prosocial relationships has been strongly connected to criminal desistance among past offenders. The opinions held by the community shape the prejudice often encountered by those with a criminal record. To promote desistance, we must understand how criminals and their abilities are considered by the public. In this study, 69 college students were surveyed about the United States prison and parole system in conjunction with Dweck’s mindset theory. Along with explicit questions, an Implicit Associations Test (IAT) was employed to measure unconscious associations between mentality and punishment preference. The IAT revealed that traits of a growth mindset were paired faster with parole than prison. Additionally, a significant positive correlation between traits of a fixed mindset and a preference for prison was observed. These findings suggest that a growth mindset may cultivate positive opinions on restorative justice. As we continue to improve the United States prison system, an effort to increase growth mindset ideology may lead to less discrimination and higher rates of criminal desistance.

Keywords: implicit associations, explicit attitudes, growth mindset, desistance, parole
Mindset Theory Relates to Attitudes about Prison and Parole Among College Students

The concept of restorative justice has increased in popularity during the past few decades (Greene, 2013). Restorative justice, in contrast to retributive justice, seeks to move away from previous approaches to punishment which are now considered to be “inhumane, ineffective, overly punitive, too expensive, or unjust” (Greene, 2013, p. 360). Instead of relying on previous convictions to deter offenders from continuing to commit crime, restorative justice asserts that criminals require intervention and rehabilitation (Greene, 2013). It stands to reason an individual who has violated the law may benefit from being guided away from crime and provided with the resources necessary to desist instead of being spit out of prison with little to no means of changing. Alternative means of traditional punishment, such as parole, prioritize rehabilitation with this in mind. The parole system is merit-based, granting early release to criminals who have demonstrated a low risk of reoffending by allowing them to serve the remainder of their sentence outside of prison under surveillance (Bucken & Zajac, 2009). While years of research shown parole to be far more effective at promoting desistance than conventional prison sentencing, there is indisputably room for improvement. Parole may encourage higher rates of criminal desistance, but what then are the factors that facilitate desistance? Emerging research highlights that the way ex-offenders are treated by the community greatly impacts the desistance process (Nolet et al., 2022). Therefore, shunning criminals from common society increases the likelihood of recidivism. To create an effective model of criminal rehabilitation, we must identify not only how the community feels about criminals, but the mechanisms that facilitate those opinions, as well.

Prosocial Relationships
The primary mechanism of criminal desistance is the presence of prosocial relationships (Bucklen & Zajac, 2009; Nolet et al., 2022). Although job, home, and financial security are also important components, the impact of social well-being has been grossly underestimated by traditional prison systems (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022; Bucklen & Zajac, 2009). The significance of prosocial behavior, external or internal, is consistent with the popular theory antisocial behavior is the main predictor of criminal behavior (Nolet et al., 2022). It stands to reason that a lack of prosocial exposure would promote criminal activity since breaking the law is inherently antisocial. Moreover, Bucklen and Zajac (2009) noted that parole violators exhibited issues with impulsivity, fiscal responsibility, and seeking help from others more than those who completed parole. Although parole provides more prosocial opportunities than serving a traditional prison sentence, this does not mean all support is good support. Of course, there is caution against allowing desisting offenders to communicate with lawbreaking peers because this can jeopardize the rehabilitation process (Nolet et al., 2022).

**Prison Versus Parole**

Fundamentally, parole implies the individual requires a social support system to prevent recidivism as it involves the offender being supervised by an assigned parole officer or social worker. With this model, parole is rehabilitative as opposed to retributive. Prisons intend to produce the same effect, but rehabilitation and desistance efforts have been a “catastrophic failure” (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022, p. 140). In fact, Bloom and Bradshaw (2022) report, “68% of released prisoners are arrested within 3 years of reentry, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years” (p. 140). These are unacceptable statistics considering more than 80 billion dollars is put into the United States prison system per year. The argument can be made that recidivism is complex and not entirely the result of poor prison management, but there is no denying that
prisons were conceptualized to decrease the rate of crime. Parole produces higher rates of desistance in comparison to prison, but not by much. The severity of the parole violation is typically irrelevant and results in a re-arrest whether it is a technical offense (e.g., absconding, curfew violation, etc.) or criminal offense (e.g., novel criminal charge, possession of drugs, etc.) (Hardling et al., 2017). It is suspected the high proportion of re-arrests is due to the non-discriminatory treatment of parole violations as 30% of re-arrests are due to a technical violation. Perhaps substance abuse or absconding should be reprimanded differently to decrease re-arrest rates, as they are low-level offenses in comparison to violent and/or sexual crimes. Caplan and Kinney (2010) note another major flaw in the United States parole system as the lack of national consistency. Eligibility for parole, risk assessment, and intensity of supervision vary between jurisdictions as there is no national policy. Parole is statistically more effective at promoting desistance, but it remains a flawed system.

**Impact of External Attitudes**

Unsurprisingly, the poor treatment of prisoners by authority figures is a major risk factor for recidivism (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022). The skepticism aimed at prisoners by correctional officers and treatment staff is understandable but facilitates an ironic conundrum. To rehabilitate, criminals require social support and exceptional treatment, but the current state of the United States prison system makes them “unable to shed the scarlet letter of ‘felon.’ Ex-prisoners are caught in an endless loop of retraumatization and threat” (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022, p. 142). It is ridiculous to expect punishment to exclusively correct criminal behavior. There are no miraculous recoveries, only meaningful applications of rehabilitative tools. If awarded the privilege to serve the remainder of their sentence outside prison, there must be a sanctioned support system waiting to help them. It is likely how a parolee feels about their parole officer
will affect their accessibility to resources and the overall effectiveness of the program (Springer et al., 2009). If prosocial relationships are necessary to desist, the importance of a competent, respectable parole officer is vital. Indeed, while there are certainly other factors at play, Springer et al. (2009) mention those with a poor relationship with their probation officer are more likely to re-offend. While probation is not the same as parole, the comparison is reasonable. Criminals cannot be expected to abstain from criminal behavior if they are not given the tools, support, and opportunities to do so.

There are several contributing factors to the distrustful dynamic witnessed between criminals and authority figures besides being intrinsically oppositional. Concerning hostility, a study by Zajenkowska et al. (2020) suggests that prisoners do not understand why they are being blamed for an altercation and subsequently punished. However, when provided with an explanation and training against fundamental attribution error, altercations and hostility decreased. Violent behavior is innately prohibited, but it is up to the prison system to provide resources to inmates that correct maladaptive coping mechanisms like anger and physical aggression. Without being told why their behavior is inappropriate and how to regulate their emotions in a healthy manner, prisoners will be forced into an endless loop of meaningless punishment that only fosters resentment against the justice system. Unfortunately, there is little motivation among professionals to be empathetic toward criminals (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022; Craig, 2005). Even specialists who are trained to specifically treat criminals contribute to the cycle of punishment by misusing cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), as reported in an 8-year-long observation study by Bloom and Bradshaw (2022). Instead of rewarding any effort to correct or improve thinking errors and maladaptive schemas, prisoners are ridiculed for any wrong move, despite the fact psychologists have known about the ineffectiveness of positive
punishment for decades. In summary, “conflict between prisoners and staff exacerbates prisoners’ distrust of authority, increases a sense of alienation, and undermines any prosocial behavior” (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022, p. 142). Until attitudes toward criminals improve, high rates of recidivism will persist.

As the interpersonal experiences between prisoners, other inmates, and authority figures have meaningful implications, how the community regards criminals is also critical. Although labeling theory has dipped in and out of popularity, LeBel (2012) suggests that the internalization of said label is somewhat more influential than whether or not other people have branded the offender as a criminal for life. Many released prisoners feel they can never escape their criminal past because of the stigmas they experience from society (Feingold, 2021; LeBel, 2012). Indeed, intolerance of criminals is found in housing opportunities, job availability, and community participation (Holloway & Wiener, 2020). Sex offenders are particularly disliked, even among other criminal groups, and are “often portrayed as unredeemable, with themes of inevitable recidivism” (Willis et al., 2010, p. 553). Paradoxically, the rules and regulations created to protect society from dangerous offenders increase the likelihood of recidivism (Nolet et al., 2022). Ergo, an investigation into what facilitates prosocial attitudes towards prisoners and offenders becomes necessary for desistance research.

There is evidence to support the notion citizens of the United States are intolerant of criminals beyond legislative policies. Media has facilitated the spread of misinformation and fearmongering (Vaes et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2010). A study by Vaes et al. (2019) notes the power behind word choice, warning new outlets against using biased language to describe criminals. While it is easier to condition society to be hateful towards offenders, it cultivates the very crimes that are abhorred. With a plethora of research compiled to support the idea criminals
need social support from professionals (Bloom & Bradshaw, 2022; Springer et al., 2009; Zajenkowska et al., 2020) and society at large (Nolet et al., 2022; Vaes et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2010) to desist, our research question is realized. What mechanisms have a direct influence on how the community regards criminals?

**Growth Mindset and Fixed Mindset**

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory offers a unique application within the framework of criminal desistance. Dweck describes two distinct philosophies: growth mindset and fixed mindset. A growth mindset asserts change is possible with meaningful practice and intention whereas a fixed mindset emphasizes skills and qualities are static and cannot be overcome (Dweck). Although mindset theory has roots in education research, the parallel between growth mindset and the parole system, as well as fixed mindset and the prison system, is noticeable. Emerging research notes mindset is related to much more than educational strategy. The underlying beliefs in each ideology have an impact on personal ambition, social interactions, conspicuous consumption, personality, and intelligence (Dweck, 2006; King, 2019; Sun et al., 2020). Traits of a growth mindset could very well relate to prosocial associations with criminals.

Using an IAT, it was predicted that traits of a growth mindset would be associated with the parole system, as parole implies a capacity for significant change exists. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the strength of an individual’s growth mindset would predict a preference for parole over prison. Lastly, it was hypothesized that the strength of an individual's fixed mindset would predict preference for prison over parole.

**Methods**

**Participants**
In this correlation study, the implicit associations and explicit opinions of 69 college students were gathered using a Qualtrics survey. The final sample was 62% female ($n = 43$), 33% male ($n = 23$) and 4% non-binary ($n = 3$). Respondents were voluntarily recruited via announcement posts on Canvas or direct messaging on social media. Respondents were unaware they would be taking an IAT until they had already begun the survey. Only enrolled college students at least 19 years old or older were permitted to participate.

**Materials and Procedure**

The survey was open for a total of 14 days, from November 2nd, 2022 to November 16th, 2022 and was administered digitally with an anonymous link without researcher supervision. To accommodate the IAT software, a laptop or computer with a keyboard was required to participate. A message noting this stipulation preceded the consent form to alert respondents ahead of time. The consent form included information such as risks, benefits, survey requirements, and contact information of the primary investigator. Agreement with the terms of the consent form was necessary to proceed. Several demographic questions (e.g., age, gender identity, highest level of education, college year) preceded the explicit questions.

Mindset traits and punishment preference were measured using a self-reported ranking system (Likert 5-point, 1 indicating *strongly disagree*, 2 indicating *somewhat disagree*, 3 indicating *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 indicating *somewhat agree*, and 5 indicating *strongly agree*). The survey included ten total questions indicative of mindset, five each for growth mindset and fixed mindset respectively. Similarly, ten questions were indicative of punishment preference, five in favor of parole and five in favor of prison. To guarantee participants would understand the difference between growth mindset and fixed mindset, a screen with a short definition of each preceded the IAT instructions. Participants were told they would be given a set
of words to match together and to pair them as quickly as possible. This was necessary because many people did not anticipate the format change from Likert 5-point questions to the IAT.

**The Implicit Associations Test**

An IAT code generator, designed by Carpenter et al. (2019), was used to create the IAT employed in the Qualtrics survey. The IAT included four groups participants were instructed to match with written stimuli as quickly as possible. Reaction time indicated strength of unconscious association between categorical groups (Carpenter et al., 2019; Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT included two categories, parole (attributes: conditional, earned, privilege, contingent, merit-based, counseled, recovery, allowed) and prison (attributes: punishment, jail, lockup, confinement, incarceration, caged, restrained, impound), as well as two target groups, growth mindset (attributes: improve, grow, work, skill, strive, change, limitless, trained) and fixed mindset (attributes: static, unmoving, set, genetic, frozen, inherent, rigid, stagnant).

Displayed stimuli was chosen at random by the survey algorithm.

During the IAT, participants were instructed to match stimuli attributes with a specific category (e.g., parole, prison, growth mindset, and fixed mindset). The IAT consisted of seven distinct trials in which target words were presented alone or paired together. For each trial, stimuli appeared in the center of the screen while the target words remained steady in the upper right and left corners. Each word or photo related to a specific target, meaning if the respondent did not pair them correctly they could not move on until doing so. Stimuli was chosen based on synonymous phrasing by the primary investigator.

**Data Analysis**

Excel and SPSS were employed for statistical analysis. Figures were generated on SPSS. Table 1 was created using Word. A QSV file of the Qualtrics data was imported into the IAT
analyzer hosted by Carpenter et al. (2019) which generated an independent t-test to analyze the difference of bias via reaction time (d-score) for data interpretation. Any responses with an abnormal duration were automatically dropped by the program. Additionally, any incomplete responses were excluded from data analysis. An Excel file was exported from Qualtrics and imported into SPSS. SPSS was used to transform data, analyze demographic frequencies, create composite variables, and identify correlations. Composite scores were computed by adding transformed variables together and dividing by the total amount (e.g., \((\text{growth1} + \text{growth2} + \text{growth3} + \text{growth4} + \text{growth5}) \div 5\)). Pearson’s correlation was used to generate a correlation table of IAT results and composite scores (Table 1).

**Results**

**Demographics**

The sample \((n = 69)\) included 43 females (62%), 23 males (33%), and 3 non-binary (4%) respondents. Age was collected as a categorical variable and most participants (88%) were between the ages of 19 and 24 \((n = 61)\), followed by 9% in the 25 to 34 range \((n = 6)\), 1% in the 35 to 44 range \((n = 1)\), and 1% in the 45 to 54 range \((n = 1)\). The most frequent highest form of education was some college \((n = 46)\), succeeded by associate degree \((n = 12)\), high school graduate \((n = 8)\), bachelor’s degree \((n = 2)\), and master’s degree \((n = 1)\). In regard to grade, 55% of participants were seniors \((n = 38)\), 30% were juniors \((n = 21)\), 7% were sophomores \((n = 5)\), and 7% were freshmen \((n = 5)\).

During the IAT, respondents paired growth mindset stimuli with parole stimuli at a faster rate than prison stimuli \((M = .54, SD = .43)\), \(t(68) = 10.47, p < .001\). This statistic represents the strength of the d-score, which signifies the average reaction time during the IAT.

**Correlations**
There was a significant positive correlation between overall preference for prison \((M = 2.2, SD = 0.61)\) and composite scores for fixed mindset \((M = 1.90, SD = .50)\), \(r(68) = .40, p < .001\), such that those who demonstrated traits of a fixed mindset had an increased preference for prison (Figure 2). There was a significant negative relationship between \(d\)-scores \((M = 0.54, SD = 0.43)\) and composite scores for fixed mindset \((M = 1.9, SD = .50)\), \(r(68) = -.29, p = .016\), such that the stronger of a fixed mindset present, the slower participants were to pair growth mindset with parole during the IAT (Figure 1). Moreover, mean fixed mindset correlated negatively with preference for parole \((M = 4.15, SD = .56)\), \(r(68) = -.30, p = .011\), such that preference for parole decreased as traits of a fixed mindset increased (Figure 3). Lastly, preference for parole had a significant negative relationship with preference for prison, \(r(68) = -.65, p < .001\), such that as preference for parole increased, preference for prison decreased (Figure 4).

The remaining correlations were statistically insignificant. IAT scores \((M = 0.54, SD = 0.43)\) had an insignificant correlation with growth mindset, \((M = 4.43, SD = 0.29)\), \(r(68) = -.17, p = .157\). There was an insignificant correlation between IAT scores and prison preference, \(r(68) = -.09, p = .455\). There was an insignificant positive correlation between IAT results and parole preference, \(r(68) = .06, p = .638\). Composite scores for growth mindset and composite scores for fixed mindset produced an insignificant correlation, \(r(68) = -.15, p = .211\). Similarly, the negative correlation between composite scores for growth mindset and overall prison preference was insignificant, \(r(68) = -.09, p = .454\). Lastly, there was an insignificant relationship between composite scores for growth mindset and parole preference, \(r(68) = .11, p = .357\).

**Discussion**

As hypothesized, the results of the IAT imply a meaningful relationship between growth mindset and preference for parole. This is likely because a growth mindset affirms individuals
are fully capable of improvement, which largely mirrors the sentiments behind the parole system. Furthermore, several interactions between composite scores suggest mindset is related to punishment preference. As expected, participants who demonstrated traits of a fixed mindset were more likely to prefer prison over parole. Most likely, this correlation is consistent because a fixed mindset asserts personal growth is impossible even in the face of effort, which would make criminal rehabilitation an impossible feat. While mindset ideology is usually examined as an internal function, the present study suggests it similarly influences social opinions outside of the self. This is consistent with previous research which documents mindset as a contagious disposition (King, 2020).

The prevailing attitudes from this sample reflect a progressive majority within a community. As Dweck’s mindset concept is rooted in education theory, the disproportional amount of college students with a prevailing growth mindset is sound (Dweck, 2006). Considering the strong association between growth mindset and the parole system, it is clear mindset ideology is not exclusive to education research and should not be disregarded. However, future research would benefit from examining a larger sample size and comparing different subsets of the population (e.g., high school students, the working class, social workers, etc.).

**Policy Implications**

With “evidence for the social contagion of mindsets” (King, 2020, p. 349) established, the practical applications of growth mindset ideology are exciting for desistance research both on an individual level and a communal level. For those incarcerated or on parole, teaching methods established by Dweck (2006) can be employed as an essential component of rehabilitation programs to promote growth mindset among criminals. Possibly, promoting growth mindset may suppress the negative consequences of having a criminal record described by labeling theory
(LeBel, 2012). For other members of the community, the villainization of criminals must be eradicated. Willis et al. (2010) suggest that criminologists work alongside the media to stop widespread fearmongering and educate the public. Willis et al. (2010) caution, “public attitudes and responses to [offending] have profound impacts on the range and quality of opportunities for successful reintegration and desistance” (p. 554). With collaborative efforts between criminologists and journalists, promoting mindset ideology should be entirely doable and extremely effective.

To increase rates of criminal desistance, prosocial attitudes must be possible despite bias in the community (Nolet et al., 2022). The results of the present study are significant because with the knowledge that there is an association between parole and growth mindset, we can integrate growth mindset ideology into the parole system to produce increased rates of desistance. It is understood that the prison system and the parole system need to be improved. Bloom and Bradshaw (2022) recognize the failings of our current therapeutic services. If CBT has managed to be perverted by poor regulation of the prison system, the only place left to go is up, and adding dimensions of positive psychology should aid in rehabilitation.

Outside of incorporating growth mindset ideology into correctional facilities and the parole system, many changes need to be made to address the recidivism crisis. As described by Bucklen and Zajac (2009), “reentry services should be driven by the individual needs of the offender” (p. 261). While it would be easier if each case was cookie-cutter, this is simply incompatible with the demands of the desistance process. Social workers and parole officers must exercise empathy, patience, and grace when working with criminals in spite of personal feelings. To cultivate prosocial attitudes toward criminals within the community, growth mindset
ideology should be integrated into professional training programs as well as correctional facilities.
References

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Table 1

*Pearson Correlations between IAT, Growth Mindset, Fixed Mindset, Prison Preference, and Parole Preference*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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<td>1. IAT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fixed Comp.</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Growth Comp.</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prison Comp.</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Parole Comp.</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.65**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $N = 69$. IAT represents $d$-scores. Growth Comp. represents composite scores (mean) for growth mindset. Fixed Comp. represents composite scores (mean) for fixed mindset. Prison Comp. represents composite scores (mean) for prison preference. Parole Comp. represents composite scores (mean) for parole preference.

*p < .05, **p < .01
Figure 1

*IAT Scores versus Fixed Mindset*

*Note.* Scatterplot represents the significant correlation seen between IAT (d-scores) and fixed mindset (mean). $R^2$ Linear = 0.031. Linear trendline represents $y=2.08-0.33x$. 
Figure 2

*Fixed Mindset versus Preference for Prison*

*Note.* Scatterplot represents the significant correlation seen between preference for prison (mean) and fixed mindset (mean). $R^2$ Linear = 0.163. Linear trendline represents $y=1.17+0.33x$. 
Figure 3

*Fixed Mindset versus Preference for Parole*

*Note.* Scatterplot represents the significant correlation seen between preference for parole (mean) and fixed mindset (mean). $R^2$ Linear = 0.093. Linear trendline represents $y=3.03-0.27x$. 
Figure 4

Preference for Parole versus Preference for Prison

*Note.* Scatterplot represents the significant correlation seen between preference for parole (mean) and preference for prison (mean). $R^2$ Linear = 0.422. Linear trendline represents $y=5.46-0.59x$. 
Appendix A

IAT Stimuli

**Growth Mindset:** Improve, Grow, Work, Skill, Strive, Change, Limitless, Trained

**Fixed Mindset:** Static, Unmoving, Set, Genetic, Frozen, Inherent, Rigid, Stagnant

**Parole Preference:** Conditional, Earned, Privilege, Contingent, Merit-based, Counseled, Recovery, Allowed

**Prison Preference:** Punishment, Jail, Lockup, Confinement, Incarceration, Caged, Restrained, Impound

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Figure A1. Figure above represents an example of the screen during the IAT portion of the survey. Participants used the ‘E’ and ‘I’ keys to pair stimuli with the correct category.
Figure A2. Figure above represents an example of the screen during the IAT portion of the survey. Participants used the ‘E’ and ‘I’ keys to pair stimuli with the correct category.

Figure A3. Figure above represents an example of the screen during the IAT portion of the survey. Participants used the ‘E’ and ‘I’ keys to pair stimuli with the correct category.