



Climbing Out of Poverty:

The Roles of Implicit Theories of Opportunity

Paul A. O’Keefe^{1, 2}

E. J. Horberg¹

Fiona Lee³

Carol S. Dweck³

¹Yale-NUS College, ²NUS Business School, ³Stanford University

Implicit Theories of Opportunity: When Opportunity Fails to Knock, Keep Waiting, or Start Cultivating?

Paul A. O’Keefe^{1, 2}, E. J. Horberg¹, Fiona Lee³, and Carol S. Dweck³

¹ Division of Social Sciences, Yale-NUS College

² NUS Business School, National University of Singapore

³ Department of Psychology, Stanford University

We live in a time of disappearing professions, pandemic-related upheaval, and growing social inequality. While recognizing that good opportunities are unequally distributed in society (an injustice that requires rectification), can *beliefs* about the nature and workings of opportunities help people see the door to their goals as more open than closed, and can these beliefs influence the likelihood of goal attainment? Seven studies ($N = 1,031$) examined people’s beliefs about whether or not opportunities can be changed (growth vs. fixed theory of opportunity). In Studies 1a–4, participants responded to scenarios about competent people (or themselves) with challenging, long-term aspirations. When opportunities were available, both theories predicted high expectations for success and a preference for active strategies to pursue the goal, like being persistent. By contrast, when opportunities seemed unavailable, a stronger fixed theory predicted lower expectations for success and a preference for passive strategies, like simply waiting. We also established the implicit theories’ causal role and demonstrated processes explaining how a growth theory leads to higher anticipated success. The final two studies examined unemployed people. In Study 5, those with a stronger growth theory chose to engage more in a task about cultivating new opportunities for employment. Study 6 showed that those with a stronger growth theory were more likely to report securing employment 5 months later, even when controlling for motivation-relevant variables, education, and socioeconomic status. They also engaged in more active job-search strategies. These studies offer a novel perspective on when, how, and why people initiate and maintain goal pursuit.



Lund et al., 2021; Manyika et al., 2017

Implicit Theories of Opportunity

- **Fixed Theory:** Belief that opportunities are relatively unchangeable
- **Growth Theory:** Belief that opportunities are changeable

Implicit Theories

Implicit theories

- Belief systems about the nature of ourselves, other people, and the world that influence how they interpret and respond to situations.

Implicit theories about *internal* attributes (fixed vs. growth):

Intelligence (e.g., Dweck, 2006; O’Keefe, 2013; Yeager et al., 2019)

Personality (e.g., Erdley & Dweck, 1993; Yeager et al., 2013)

Leadership (e.g., Wood & Bandura, 1989)

Willpower (e.g., Job et al., 2010; 2015)

Interest (e.g., O’Keefe et al., 2018, 2021, 2023)

Implicit theories about *external* prerequisites for goal pursuit; goal initiation

Beliefs about the nature and workings of *opportunities*

Implications

- Expectancies for success
- Goal strategies (e.g., persistence, planning)
- Cultivation of opportunities
- Goal attainment

Study 1

Do theories of opportunity predict anticipated goal attainment depending on one's financial resources?

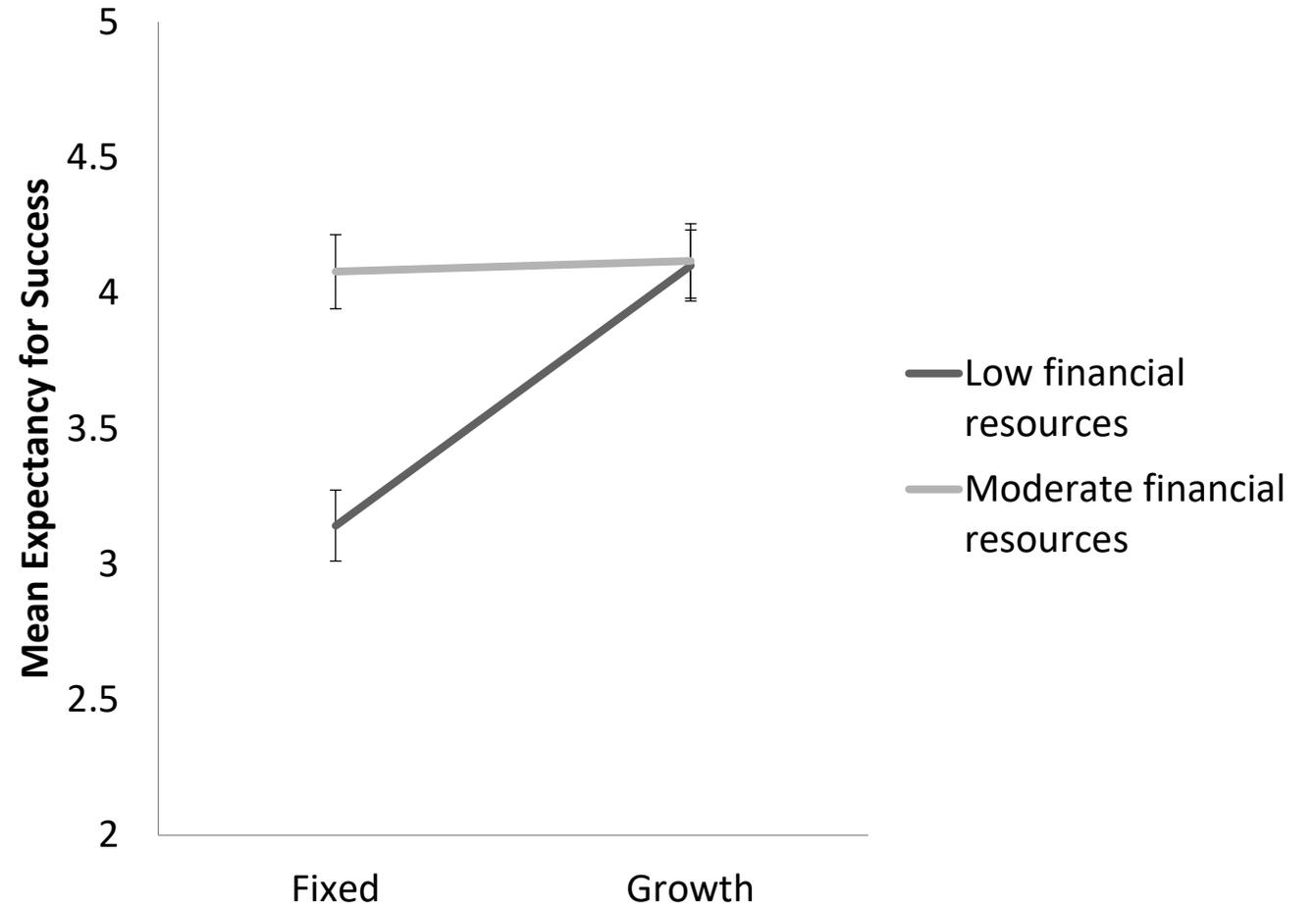
- 104 participants (52% female) from MTurk
- Measured Theory of Opportunity ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.07$)
 - “You may be a person with many good opportunities; you may be a person with few. You can't do much to change that.”
 - 3 items; 1=*strongly disagree*, 6=*strongly agree*
- low vs. moderate financial resources
 - Four scenarios
- Rated their expectancies for success
 - 1=*Extremely unlikely*, 6=*Extremely likely*

Study 1

Imagine you were the youngest of five children. Your parents owned and operated a laundromat, **but they struggled to make ends meet / and did well for themselves**. Your siblings all worked at the laundromat to help the family, and when you turned sixteen, you started working there as well. After working there for several years, you decide that you want to expand the business and open several more laundromats in the state, and perhaps someday make it a national chain.

Q: In this scenario, how likely do you think it is that you will someday successfully expand your family's business into a state-wide chain?
(1=*Extremely unlikely*, 6=*Extremely likely*)

Study 1



Effect holds controlling for business experience and subjective SES (Alder et al., 2000)

Study 2

Through what cultivation-related strategies does a growth theory predict anticipated goal attainment?

Do theories of opportunity have a causal effect?

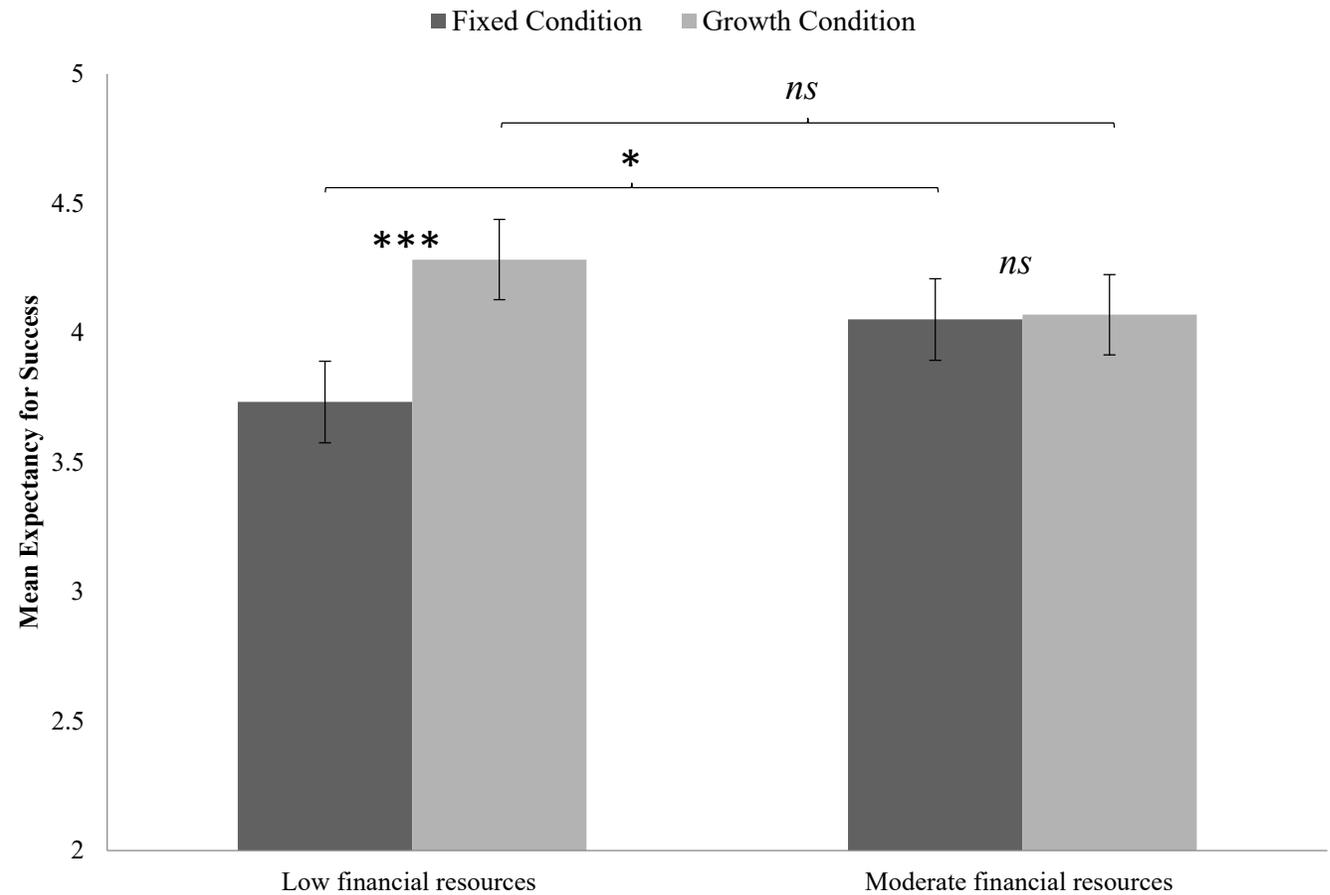
Study 2

- 283 participants (55% female) from MTurk
- Similar procedure, same scenarios
- Induced theories of opportunity with biased questionnaire (8 items; 1=*Strongly disagree*, 6=*Strongly agree*)
 - **Fixed:** e.g., “To be honest, you can’t always determine which good opportunities you get.”
 - **Growth:** e.g., “Sometimes it really is possible to determine which good opportunities you get.”
- Rated their expectancies for success
- Participants also wrote about how they could achieve each goal, if possible

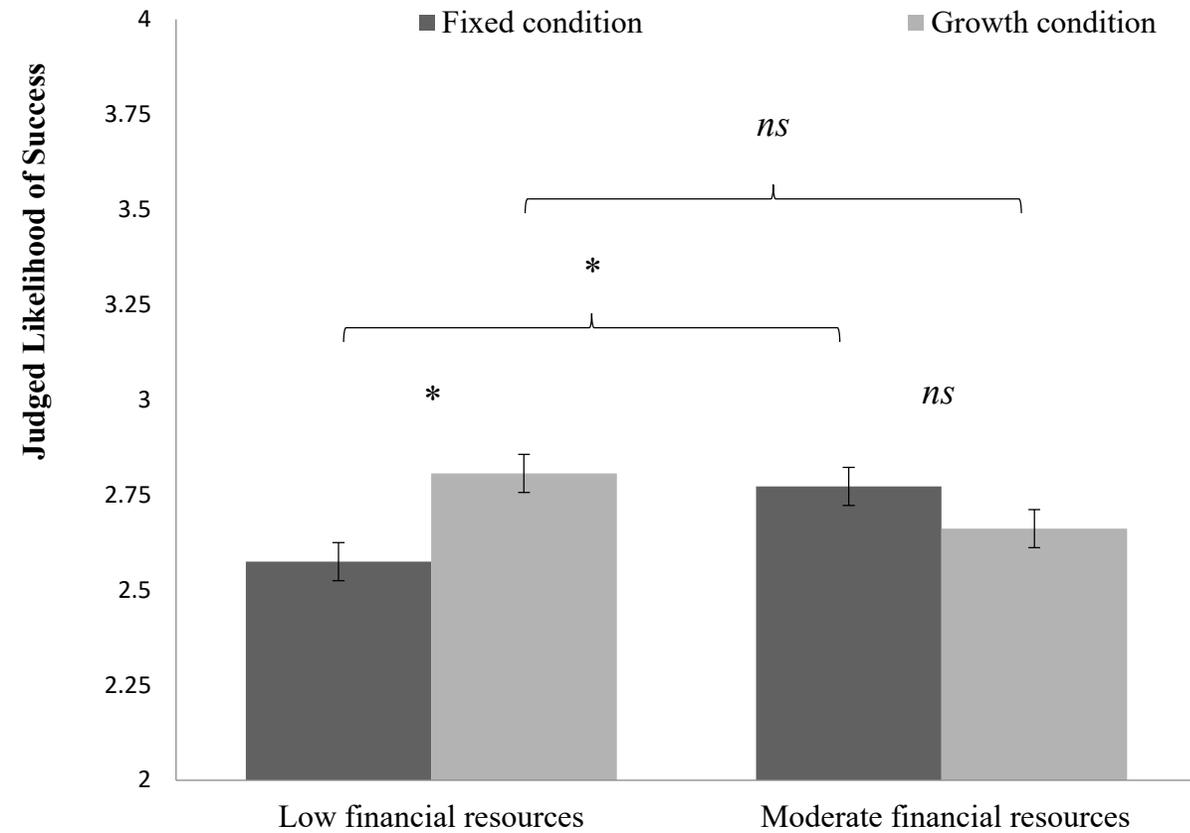
Study 2

- Judges coded written responses
 - a) likelihood of success** (1=*Very unlikely to succeed*, 5=*Very likely to succeed*; ICC=0.84)
 - b) number of ideas** (ICC=0.99)
 - c) relevance of the ideas to the goal** (0=*indirect*, 1=*direct*; ICC=0.91)
 - d) degree of personal agency** (0=*external*, 1=*internal*; ICC=0.98)
 - e) degree to which the ideas resembled a plan** (1=*very much like a wish*, 5=*very much like a plan*; ICC=0.88)

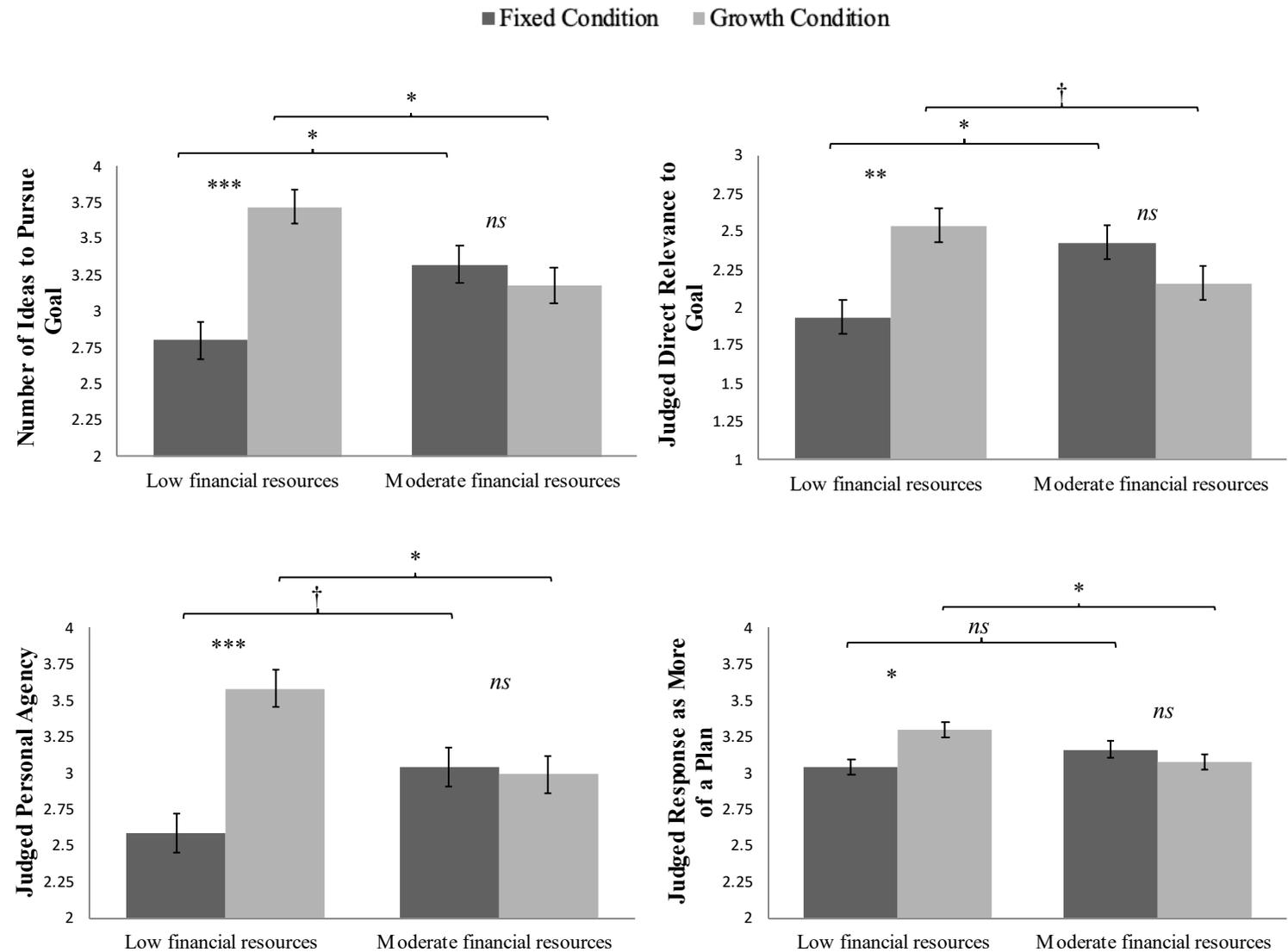
Study 2: Participants' expectancies for success



Study 2: Judged likelihood of success



Study 2: Judged cultivation- related codes



Moderated mediation analyses showed a significant indirect effect for each cultivation-related code on expectancies for success

Study 3

Among unemployed people, can a stronger growth theory predict (a) active job-search strategies and (b) re-employment?

Study 3:

Prescreen

- To ensure participants were unemployed, and not by choice or the nature of their occupation, they completed a prescreen:
 - Unemployed
 - In need of income
 - No other source of income
 - No disability preventing employment
- 168 participants completed both surveys (52% female; $M_{age}=35.4$; low SES)
- Came from diverse industries (e.g., sales, business and finance, computer and mathematical operations, etc.)

Study 3:

Procedure, Time 1
Assessments

Theory of opportunity ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.22$)

Strategic Thinking and Behavior in the Employment Search

- Employment goal strategy endorsement
 - Active (e.g., “Keep working hard to find employment”)
 - Passive (e.g., “Just hope for a big break”)
- Job-search behaviors
 - e.g., submitted applications; used an online job board, attended a career fair; networking with friends, family, and previous employers (13 total)
 - Total different job-search behaviors used
 - Frequency of all used (z-score)
- Days until employment search began

Study 3:

Procedure, Time 1
Assessments

Covariates

- Days unemployed at Time 1
- Conscientiousness (Gosling et al., 2033)
- Grit (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009)
- Optimism (Scheier et al., 1994)
- General belief in a just world (Dalbert, 1999)
- Theory of intelligence (Dweck, 1999; Yeager et al., 2019)
- Age
- Gender
- Education level (college degree)

Study 3:

Procedure, Time 2
Employment
Assessment

Steady employment (5 months later)

- “Do you currently hold steady employment, or have an official offer for steady employment? (Steady employment refers to a job for which you receive a steady source of income.)” (yes/no)

Study 3: Results

Steady Employment

Model	Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	<i>p</i> -value	Odds Ratio
1.	Theory of opportunity					
	Days unemployed at Time 1					
2.	Theory of opportunity					
	Conscientiousness					
3.	Theory of opportunity					
	Optimism					
4.	Theory of opportunity					
	General belief in a just world					
5.	Theory of opportunity					
	Theory of intelligence					
6.	Theory of opportunity					
	Grit					
7.	Theory of opportunity					
	Subjective SES					
8.	Theory of opportunity					
	Age					
9.	Theory of opportunity					
	Gender (0=female, 1=male)					
10.	Theory of opportunity					
	Bachelor's degree (0=No, 1=Yes)					

Study 3: Results

Steady Employment

Model	Variables	B	SE	Wald	p-value	Odds Ratio
1.	Theory of opportunity	0.286	0.136	4.451	0.035	1.331
	Days unemployed at Time 1	-0.001	0.000	6.480	0.011	0.999
2.	Theory of opportunity	0.304	0.134	5.124	0.024	1.355
	Conscientiousness	0.143	0.125	1.295	0.255	1.153
3.	Theory of opportunity	0.275	0.136	4.072	0.044	1.317
	Optimism	0.373	0.165	5.109	0.024	1.452
4.	Theory of opportunity	0.387	0.146	7.067	0.008	1.473
	General belief in a just world	0.719	0.172	17.541	<0.001	2.052
5.	Theory of opportunity	0.429	0.153	7.852	0.005	1.536
	Theory of intelligence	-0.183	0.132	1.934	0.164	0.833
6.	Theory of opportunity	0.292	0.137	4.551	0.033	1.339
	Grit	0.280	0.264	1.120	0.290	1.323
7.	Theory of opportunity	0.318	0.134	5.656	0.017	1.374
	Subjective SES	0.128	0.089	2.041	0.153	1.136
8.	Theory of opportunity	0.324	0.135	5.746	0.017	1.383
	Age	-0.027	0.015	3.017	0.082	0.974
9.	Theory of opportunity	0.328	0.133	6.097	0.014	1.388
	Gender (0=female, 1=male)	-0.017	0.315	0.003	0.958	0.983
10.	Theory of opportunity	0.314	0.135	5.432	0.020	1.369
	Bachelor's degree (0=No, 1=Yes)	-0.140	0.321	0.191	0.662	0.869

Study 3:

Results

Strategic Thinking and Behaviors

- Active goal strategy
 - $r(166)=0.20, p=0.009$
- Passive goal strategy
 - $r(166)=-0.19, p=0.016$

Study 3:

Results

Strategic Thinking and Behaviors

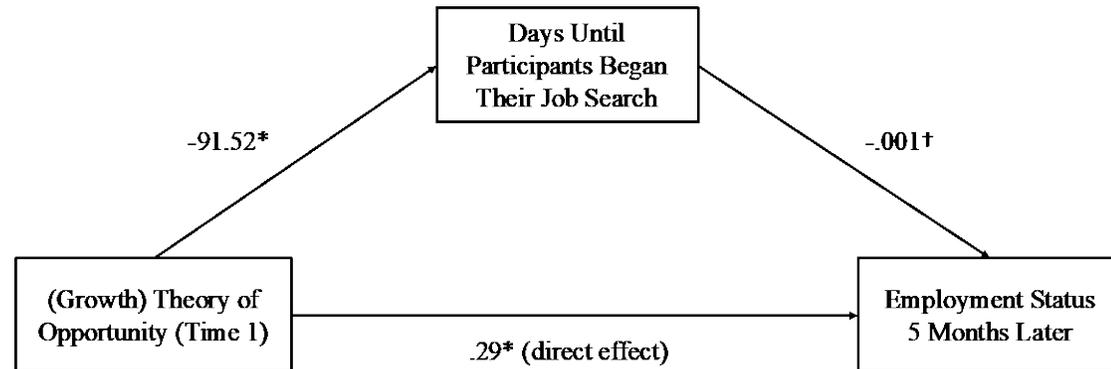
- Job-search behaviors
 - Total number: $B=0.18$, $t(166)=2.40$, $p=0.017$
 - Frequency (z-scored): $B=0.17$, $t(166)=2.27$, $p=0.025$
 - Both remain sig when controlling for time unemployed

Study 3:

Results

Strategic Thinking and Behaviors

- Days Until Employment Search Began
 - $r(166)=-0.18, p=0.017$



Summary

- A stronger growth (vs. fixed) theory of opportunity predicts
 - Higher expectancies for goal success
 - More active (vs. passive) strategies for pursuing a goal
 - Tendency to cultivate opportunities
 - Higher likelihood of actual success

Implications and Cautions

- Inhibiting effects of a fixed theory
- Complex goals: cultivating new opportunities when one goes only so far and chaining opportunities over time
- Opportunities are unjustly unavailable to many people
 - A growth theory cannot solve this problem
- Double edged sword (Hoyt & Burnette, 2020)

Thank you

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