RESEARCH BRIEF: Students' theories about prejudice influence their friendships and behavior towards other racial groups

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do students' theories about prejudice relate to their friendships and behavior towards other racial groups? Stanford Professors of Psychology Carol Dweck and Jennifer Eberhardt and Research Fellow Kristin Pauker studied this question in an initial study by talking to students at five schools in the bay area, including one school in San Francisco. One of the schools had a primarily Latino student body, two were less diverse with a majority White student body, and two had a diverse student population where 50-60% of the students belonged to minority groups. They talked to students in both third grade (ages 8-9) and fourth & fifth grade (ages 10-12).

They tested their hypothesis that *children's theories about prejudice*, rather than solely their prejudicial attitudes may guide their friendships and behavior toward other racial groups. Their hypothesis is based on the framework that children hold intuitive theories about whether prejudice can change or not—ranging from a more malleable (i.e., prejudice is something that changes with new experiences) to a more fixed (i.e., prejudice is set in stone and cannot be changed) theory. See Figure 1 for a more thorough explanation of this theoretical framework.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Malleable theory: Belief that prejudice *can* change. A child with this belief will be more focused on learning from interracial interactions. Thus, will engage in and show interest in such interactions.

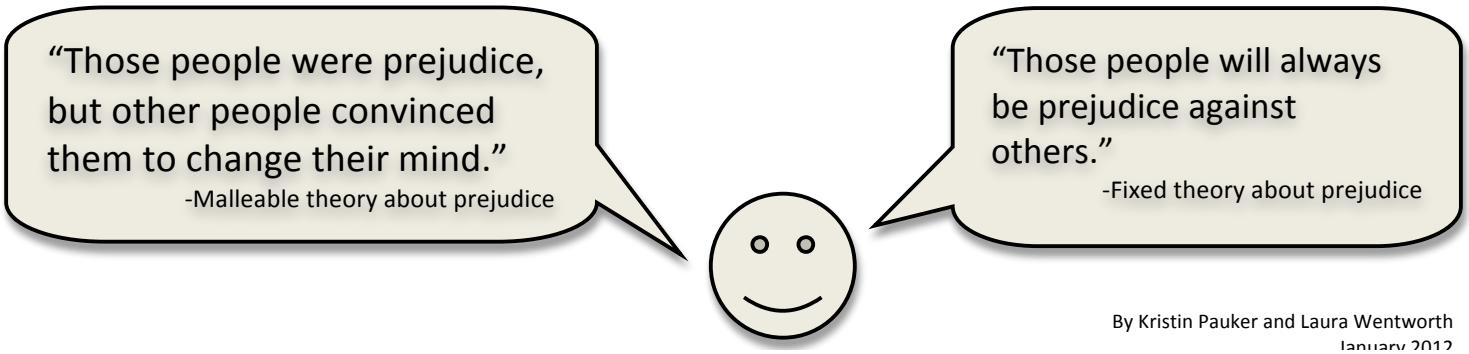
VS.

Fixed theory: Belief that prejudice *cannot* change. A child with this belief will be more focused on the possibility that they could be seen as racist in interracial interactions. Thus, will avoid children of other racial groups and display anxiety in such interactions

FINDINGS: Fixed theories about prejudice were related to less diverse friendships and more interracial anxiety. The study found that, overall, students with more fixed theories about prejudice reported less diverse friendships and more interracial anxiety. They also found that younger students' (ages 8-9) behavior towards a different-race partner was not as affected by whether their mindset was fixed or malleable. However, older students' (ages 10-12) behavior towards a different-race partner was affected, suggesting that children's theories about prejudice may not motivate behavior until children have a concrete understanding of the implications of prejudice, which typically happens around 10 years.

NEXT RESEARCH QUESTION: Can students' theories about prejudice relate to how a teacher presents diversity lessons (with either a fixed or malleable mindset)? In this second phase of the study, Dweck, Eberhardt and Pauker will examine whether teacher's instruction can influence students' theories of prejudice as either fixed or malleable. They will have students (10 to 11-year-olds) read a story about a teacher who is teaching her class about the civil rights movement. One version of the story presents characters with fixed theories about prejudice ("Those people will always be prejudice against others") and another version of the story presents characters with malleable theories about prejudice ("Those people were prejudice, but other people convinced them to change their mind"). See Figure 2 for a visual of these two theories.

Figure 2: Statements representative of fixed theories and malleable theories about prejudice.



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