

The Causes and Effects of Mindsets: with special relevance to slave descendants in the Caribbean

By Nigel Pocock

In this article, I want to propose that the notion of 'mindsets' as developed by Dr. Carol Dweck (Professor of Psychology, Stanford University) has a particular and helpful relevance to understanding and helping the legacy of victims of the slave trade. Dr. Dweck's very thorough researches have the twin virtues of simplicity (supported by detailed empirical and scientific research) and practical utility. I therefore want to both acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Dweck, and to recommend that interested readers access her work, perhaps initially through her more popular work, *Mindset: How you can fulfil your potential* (2006), New York, Random House.

What are 'mindsets'? They are the core beliefs and attitudes that influence actions, and therefore shape the future attitudes of those that hold them, and their descendants, through powerful socialising influences in the home and wider society. As already referred, this work has been pioneered by Carol Dweck at Stanford, and her team of researchers. This last point is important, because a key pillar of the 'growth mindset' is that it is based on teamwork and openness as facilitators of the true release of a person's potential. The 'genius' macho lone ranger actually inhibits the release of potential, even as they show off to the world what they have achieved. Thus, humility is a crucial component of the development of personal character of a sort that is marked by openness and cooperation. The opposite, the 'fixed mindset', is marked by closedness to innovation, sensitivity to criticism, dysfunctional self-esteem, fragility, excessive individualism, and authoritarianism. These two poles of fixed and growth mindsets are on a continuum, with extremes, with some people showing inhibited creativity in some areas of their lives (the fixed mindset) while in others there is openness and innovation (the growth mindset).

In this article I want to see if this apparently deceptively simple theory helps to explain the characteristics of present day Caribbean societies in both the UK and in the Caribbean itself, with their high breakdown of family life and high levels of mental and physical illness. I believe that mindset theory has much to commend it as an explanation of such a legacy, and that it suggests a way forward that is constructive and helpful.

The planters and slavers of the eighteenth century were, by anyone's standard, 'fixed', despotic, tyrannical, cruel, and hypersensitive to criticism. It is true that some were more psychotic than others, but a violent society not only socialises people into violent reflexes, but also encourages violent and ruthless people to rise to the top. It thus perpetuates itself, and silences all critical voices, sometimes quite literally.

One of the characteristics of the ‘fixed mindset’ is to see people as inheriting a ‘natural’ gift or ability. This may be true to an extent, but it is now increasingly being recognised that ‘genius’ is, in fact, made, not born. It is the result of hard work, effort, and resilience. These are learnt, probably in most cases, quite literally, from the moment of birth, and encouraged by a loving and secure family environment.

The planters were not, of course, ‘loving’, although they saw themselves as ‘paternalistic’. By this, they believed that Africans were a ‘degenerated’ and ‘regressed’ form of *homo sapiens*, a natural order quite different from themselves, thus providing a perfect legitimization of both the ‘respectable trade’ and the ‘peculiar institution’.

In the 1830s there was a new social change in the air. The American Revolution had abolished the aristocracy, and had started to create a society based on meritocracy. Europe was following suit: the British civil service realised that its employees (worthless and incompetent sons of privileged families) were simply not up to the job. So the Civil service Examination was instituted, and this was a model for the new social order waiting in the wings. Under aristocratic rule, the ‘lower orders’ had little chance of upward mobility, and peasants passed their humble status on to their descendants for generation after generation. The new, emerging society, with its examination of supposed ‘talent’, had two effects: it created the assumption of ‘natural ability’ and its parallel, those without ability—the ‘losers’.





What then of the Caribbean? The planters were legendary for their ignorance and disregard for education. But their arrogance sat on a fragile 'macho' self-esteem.



The only way this could be protected, was by acts of violence, cruelty, and absolute ruthlessness. Any advice about humanitarian changes were seen as criticism—something that the fixed mindset cannot tolerate. Indeed, by a process known as ‘pluralistic ignorance’, all doubts were suppressed, because all members of the planter class were afraid to share these doubts with each other. Thus, even with doubts, their mutual fears and insecurities led to supporting a system even they were not completely sure of, as least at times.

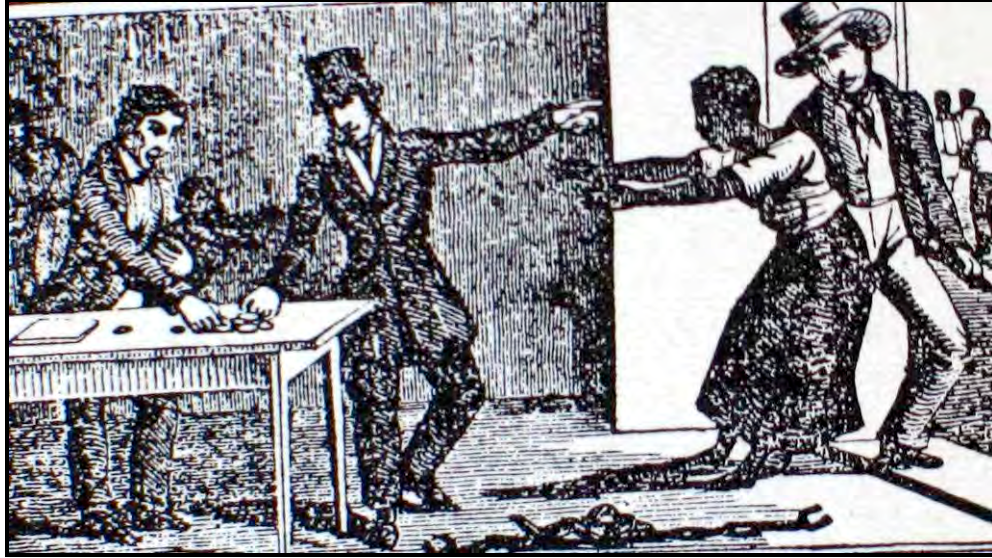
What is the effect on modern Caribbean populations? This is essentially a conjecture, and needs thorough research, but it is unlikely to be a complete coincidence that much of the planter mindset has now passed on to people of African-Caribbean origin, as deeply ironic as this might seem. I refer to a ‘fixed mindset’. Slavery was brutal, ignorant, authoritarian, and allowed no space for reflective thought. People of African origin were labelled ignorant and stupid. They were uneducated. It may be that this alleged ‘stupidity’ was not so stupid, and was used subversively against the planters and their overseers. But ‘status anxiety’, and labelling as ‘losers’ seems to me to be a fundamental consequence of slavery (and working people generally) unless they are provided with the psychological and neurological structures (themselves facilitated by the social structure and its values)—in order to overcome this huge hurdle.

In Antigua (for example) over 70% of all the births are outside of a married relationship. This is in spite of figures that give religious commitment as 83% (nominal?) Christian. Previous research on Caribbean gender relationships indicates that men have sexual relationships in parallel, and women in series. Status anxiety as a part of a fixed mindset has created the ‘macho male personality’, in which sexual prowess is all, and progeny are held up as evidence of this. Where people hold onto a talent for sexual prowess, they become afraid to work on real communication within a relationship, or admit any weakness or fears. The consequence is that the women caught in up these men’s lives can never work together with their men in order to help them through their status anxiety and fixed attitudes. The ‘Christianity’ is placed in one cerebral box, and sexual morality in another, and n’er the twain shall meet. The classic authoritarian fixed mindset.



The women, indeed, often being better communicators and team-workers, are learning a growth mindset, as appears evident in the 70 : 30 ratio of women to men leaving further education college in (say) Antigua. 'Successful' men are fleeing the island, making it even more difficult for the women to find a mate of equal education and outlook. Fixed mindsets cannot cope with growth mindsets. A growth mindset woman with superior social and intellectual skills, together with an insecure, macho male, with poor communication skills, and a fixed mindset, is bound to feel threatened, and to want to 'move on'.

So we have the problem of absent fathering, and the rolling stone of poor psychoneurological development. Behind this technical term, I refer to the seemingly simple act of loving and being there for the developing baby. Every word, touch, and gesture plays a part in the child's developing brain. This is the beginning of a life-long brain development journey. It is also part of an inseparable culture that stretches back into history, and on into the future. The parents' response to their culture will determine to what extent the developing child will reach a high level of released potential, or fall at the first hurdle. Slavery, and the culture it engendered, has much to answer for, particularly as regards male self-image. But being macho brings only short-term lifts in self-esteem. Sex, drugs and crime are not a long-term answer. Something more is needed to repair the damage.



It is all about the brain! This is where the cure lies. But cure cannot be separated from the over-arching culture. Nonetheless, we can all attempt to plant mustard seeds, and who knows how big they will grow? I believe that Carol Dweck and her researchers are right. It is never too late to reject the label that you have either applied to yourself, and which others have applied to you. You may have received a truly damaging childhood with fixed mindset parents, but a growth mindset is always possible. Even in people with dementia, new brain cells are being generated (a process called 'neurogenesis'). So it is not too late. But the path may not be easy. Developing a growth mindset means to re-write the strength of character that we might have (or not have), and this is hard work. But the brain, and its skillsets, can be transformed.

It is impossible in an article like this to effect the kind of growth mindset changes that Carol Dweck describes in her work. For this, a complete immersion in the thinking and training required is necessary. Dr. Dweck has produced one popular book towards this end, as well as a computer course, called Brainology™.

The theory of 'fixed' and 'growth' mindsets provides a simple and yet powerful explanation for why people both succeed and fail in life. It has been validated in many studies. In the context of this article, it is an excellent tool for explaining both the social and psychological dynamics of the descendants of slavery, both in the Caribbean and in the UK. As such, it provides a platform for a programme of practical action in order to address why some people are 'losers', and stay that way, while others succeed. It provides a total social outlook, applicable to teachers, politicians, business people, church leaders, and therapists—all who are involved in creating society—and who may—however successful—have a fixed mindset themselves.

Professor Dweck suggests taping this useful figure to one's mirror, for constant reference

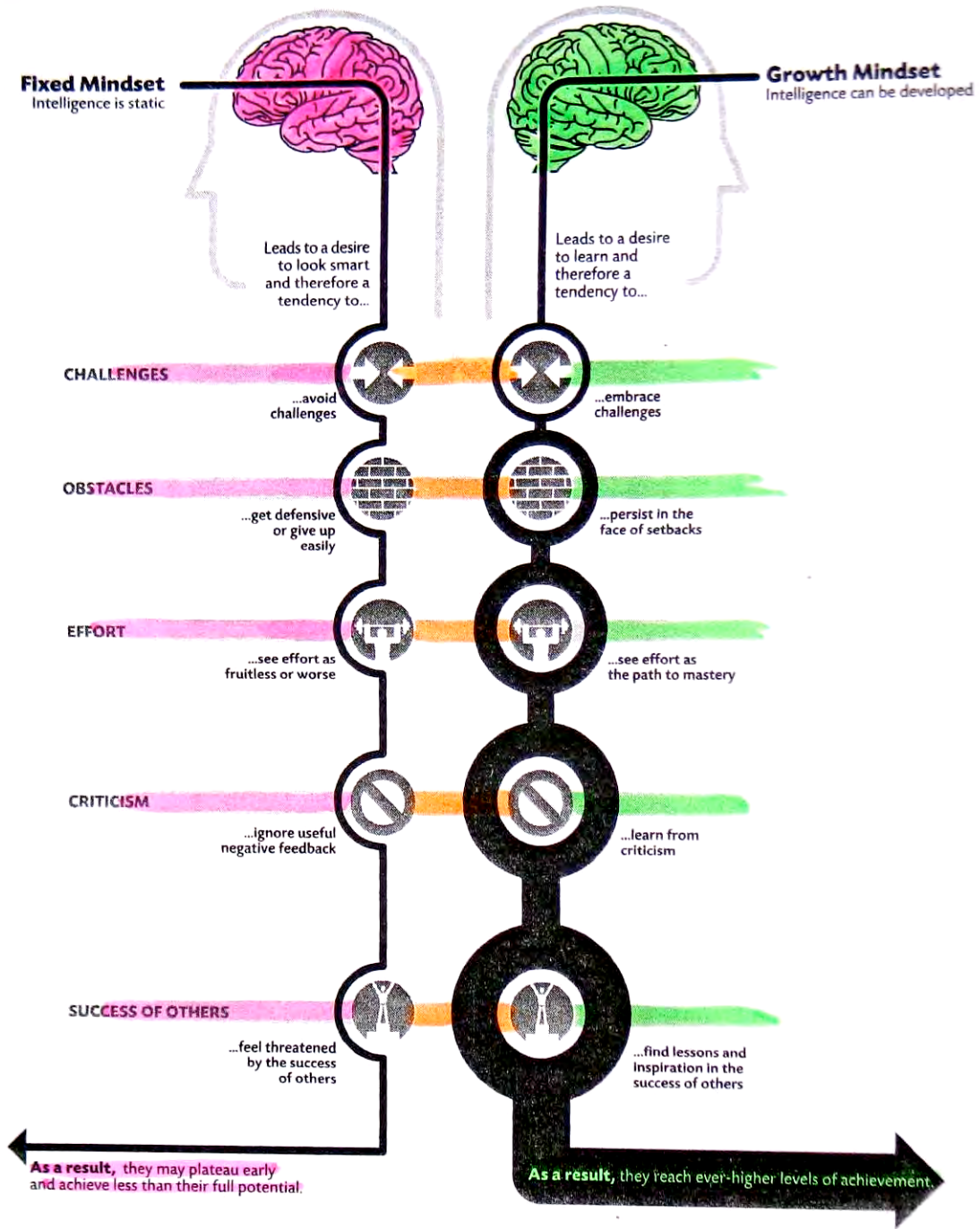


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