How Perceptions of Obstacles, Stress, and Different Mindsets May Impact a Student’s Self-Beliefs

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ABSTRACT. The current study explored how the mediational model of perceived task complexity, academic stress, and self-efficacy is moderated by cognitive mindset. College students (N = 140; \( M_{\text{age}} = 19.2, SD = 1.5 \)) completed self-report measures of task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset. Results demonstrated that academic stress is a mediator between task difficulty and self-efficacy for students with a fixed mindset, but not for students with a growth mindset. There was a significant indirect effect at the mean of the moderator (indirect effect = −.09, \( p = .022, 95\% \text{ CI} [−0.20, −0.03] \)), a significant indirect effect at 1 standard deviation below the mean of the moderator (more fixed mindset; indirect effect = −.17, \( p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI} [−0.30, −0.06] \)), but no significant effect at 1 standard deviation above the mean (more growth mindset; indirect effect = 0.00, \( p = .95, 95\% \text{ CI} [−0.09, 0.08] \)). An implication is that college students may still benefit from growth mindset interventions even at a later state in their academic careers. It can be helpful to make students aware of their cognitive mindset disposition so they can better handle their perceptions of difficulty and in times of stress. Mindset interventions should be explored in future research and implemented in school and university settings.

Keywords: college students, mindset, stress, self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the extent to which one believes in their abilities to accomplish a task (Ye et al., 2018). Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1989) provided a deeper look into self-efficacy and the ways in which it influences individuals’ behavior and outcomes. According to Bandura (1989), self-efficacy is influenced by several factors, such as feedback from teachers, observations of others, and a person’s own performance. Bandura highlighted the importance of the environment because he believed that much of the learning that one does is through the environment (i.e., through observing and interacting with others). To illustrate, research has concluded that a person’s self-efficacy is related to events in the environment that can affect their lives (Dzewaltowski, 1994). Therefore, it is logical to assume that external factors could shape a person’s self-efficacy, such as variables like task complexity and academic stress.

The Relationships Between Task Complexity and Self-Efficacy

Perceived task complexity can be summarized as how difficult an individual perceives a task; it was important to analyze how this may be related to students’ other subjective qualities (Sides et al., 2017). Past literature has shown perceived task complexity to be negatively correlated with feelings of self-efficacy. Thus, when people think of a task as being difficult, they are also likely to experience a decrease in their belief of success. For example, using tasks involving imaginary scenarios in which participants were asked to rate the perceived complexity of and their perceived ability to accomplish a task, it was demonstrated that greater levels of perceived task complexity related to a consistent decrease in self-efficacy (Hu et al., 2007). This negative relationship likely exists because, in a more difficult task, people have less information on how
to approach it, thus their belief in their ability to be successful decreases. Consequently, when individuals are more familiar with a task and perceive it to be less difficult, they are able to create a plan of action and feel more confident in their abilities. Similar results have been found using hypothetical class schedules; the results concluded that there was a significant negative relationship between perceived task complexity and self-efficacy, thus further emphasizing how the subjectivity of a task’s complexity can be influential in how one perceives their ability to be successful when completing such task (Mangos & Steele-Johnson, 2001). The negative effect of perceived task complexity on self-efficacy has been found with motor tasks as well (e.g., golf task; Sides et al., 2017), which demonstrated how this negative relationship between the two variables extended further than the perception of imaginary scenarios. Therefore, past literature has illustrated a clear negative relationship between perceived task complexity and self-efficacy.

The Relationship Between Task Complexity and Academic Stress
Past literature has also explored the relationship between task complexity and academic stress. For example, life stress has been examined to see how it relates to errors made on a task (Klein & Barnes, 1994). Having an increased level of stress was shown to increase errors when completing a task, which then suggested that more errors are made when a task is perceived as more difficult. To further expand, it has been demonstrated that individuals who are very aware of their stress responses are more likely to show a decline in performance (Klein & Barnes, 1994). Additionally, it was found that people who perform difficult tasks with high anxiety tend to do worse on the task than people with low anxiety (Brown, 1996). However, the opposite has been found to be true with simple tasks. Therefore, a clear positive relationship between perceived task complexity and academic stress is evident in past literature.

The Relationship Between Academic Stress and Self-Efficacy
Oftentimes, academic stress comes about due to a demanding workload, pressure to perform well, and the amount of material that an individual is required to learn (Ye et al., 2018). For example, it has been found that individuals with a greater perception of stress had a decreased sense of self-efficacy; therefore, this indicated a negative relationship between these two variables (Rovira et al., 2010). Further empirical research focusing on stress and self-efficacy found similar results. A study which utilized middle school teachers found that nearly all teachers were experiencing high stress and also that the majority of them were also characterized as having low self-efficacy (Herman et al., 2020). As shown, research like this supports the claim that individuals with greater stress will report less self-efficacy.

The Current Study
For the present study, we aimed to investigate whether academic stress mediated the relationship between perceived task complexity and self-efficacy. Additionally, we aimed to explore how this mediational model is moderated by cognitive mindset. These four variables are thought to be important aspects of a student’s academic career. Thus, we intended to gain a better understanding of how perceived task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset are related in a student’s life.

Cognitive mindset involves the malleability of traits—how much one believes they can improve their abilities (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). There are two different types of cognitive mindsets: fixed and growth. For example, a student with a fixed mindset may be more avoidant of some academic tasks in the fear of appearing unintelligent, as they interpret a lack of success as a reflection of their own, unchangeable ability (Dweck, 2006). These types of students display a fixed mindset because they believe that their intelligence cannot be altered, and their hesitation to participate in difficult tasks grows. On the other hand, a growth mindset is displayed when a student believes that their intelligence can be improved upon and developed. These students may shape their goals around ways to improve their learning and might display more effort in academic tasks (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Thus, how a student interprets their own intelligence can be paramount for their academic success.

In school, students face numerous academic tasks every day with varying difficulty. In referencing cognitive mindset, whether a student displays more of a fixed or growth mindset could be influential in how they handle their everyday stress (Dweck, 2006). When students demonstrate more of a growth mindset, they are less negatively affected by academic challenges and are likely to have a greater work ethic when compared to students of a fixed mindset, leading to a significant improvement in
classroom motivation and prevention of decreasing grades (Blackwell et al., 2007). This demonstrates how a growth mindset can act as a buffer between task difficulty and academic stress, as those with a stronger growth mindset understand that a challenging assignment can be an opportunity to grow and thus feel motivation to perform well rather than feeling stressed and hindered by the potential to fail (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). This could explain why students with a fixed mindset may experience a negative correlation between perceived task difficulty and academic stress. This relationship may be weaker or nonexistent for students with a growth mindset.

Additionally, students have a greater potential to be more successful in their academics if they perceive a challenging task as a means to gain academic value. It is then possible for students with a growth mindset to report greater self-efficacy when faced with a complex task, consequently influencing behaviors and corresponding environments (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). We therefore proposed that, as perceived task complexity increases, self-efficacy also increases for those with a growth mindset. For example, students with a growth mindset, who perceived an academic challenge as valuable, performed better than those who perceived it as a roadblock (Oyserman et al., 2018). Thus, rather than succumbing to the fear of failure during an academic challenge, students with a growth mindset find themselves rising to the occasion and executing required tasks more confidently than those with a fixed mindset.

We hypothesized that cognitive mindset would moderate the mediational model between task complexity, academic stress, and self-efficacy. For fixed mindset, academic stress would mediate the relationship between task complexity and self-efficacy; that is, as perceived task difficulty increases, academic stress will increase, reducing self-efficacy. However, for a growth mindset, we predicted that academic stress would not mediate the relationship between task complexity and self-efficacy. The proposed moderated mediation model is displayed in Figure 1.

**Method**

**Participants**
A total of 140 participants ($M_{age} = 19.2, SD = 1.5$) were recruited through the Quinnipiac University Psychology participant pool website. The current study was among other studies or research alternatives in which the student could choose, and they received course credit for participation. Of the participants, 106 were women, 33 were men, and one identified as nonbinary. The participants’ class level was also recorded: 95 were first-year students, 18 were sophomores, 14 were juniors, and 13 were seniors. Additionally, the race of participants was recorded: 119 White/European American participants, 10 Hispanic/Latino/Latina participants, 7 Black/African American participants, 3 Asian or Pacific Islander participants, and 1 Black/White participant.

**Procedure**
Before conducting the study, approval was granted by Quinnipiac University’s Institutional Review Board (#11519). Participants completed four measures concerning task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset online through Google Forms. All participants completed the measures in the same order. Completion of the measures took place during the beginning to middle of the second academic semester of the school year. After signing an informed consent form, participants completed the measures below. After completion of the measures, participants were given a debriefing form, which contained more information about the study, and they were thanked for their participation.

**Measures**

**Perceived Task Complexity**
The level of difficulty participants perceived their academic tasks to be was assessed using a modified and shortened version of the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; $\alpha = .74$; 15 items; e.g., “My courses require me to analyze a lot of information” and “The job...
required me to keep track of more than one thing at a time”). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate and scored such that greater positive values reflected greater perceived task complexity.

**Academic Stress**
Anxious-like feelings participants reported because of their academics were assessed using a shortened version of the Perceptions of Academic Stress Scale (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; α = .71; 11 items; e.g., “I have enough time to relax after class” and “The size of the curriculum (workload) is excessive”). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate and scored such that greater positive values reflected greater academic stress.

**Self-Efficacy**
How much the participants believed in their abilities in relation to academics was assessed using the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; α = .82; 10 items; e.g., “I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort” and “I remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities”). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 4 (exactly true). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate and scored such that greater positive values reflected greater self-efficacy.

**Cognitive Mindset**
How much participants believed in their ability to change their intelligence was assessed using the Theories of Intelligence Scale (Dweck, 2000; α = .71; 8 items; e.g., “You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can’t really do much to change it” and “No matter who you are you can significantly change your intelligence level”). Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Items were reverse-scored when appropriate and scored such that greater positive values reflected greater growth mindset.

**Results**

**Correlations**
A series of bivariate correlations were conducted to explore the relationship between perceived task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset among all participants. Descriptive statistics and all bivariate correlations are displayed in Table 1.

A statistically significant positive correlation was found between perceived task complexity and academic stress, such that as perceived task complexity increased, academic stress increased. In addition, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between academic stress and self-efficacy, such that, as academic stress increased, self-efficacy decreased. However, for the entire sample, no statistically significant relationship was found between perceived task complexity and self-efficacy. Finally, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between cognitive mindset and perceived task complexity demonstrating that participants with more of a growth, compared to a fixed, mindset reported greater perceived task complexity.

**Moderated Mediation Model**
To test whether cognitive mindset moderates the proposed mediational model, we used conditional process modeling to test for moderated mediation as outlined by Hayes (2018) using the PROCESS macro. Specifically, we tested to see whether cognitive mindset moderated the relationships among task difficulty, academic stress, and self-efficacy. We expected that moderated mediation would occur in that path (from task difficulty to academic stress) as it would be statistically significant for those with a fixed mindset, but not for those with a growth mindset. Therefore, only among participants with a fixed mindset would academic stress mediate the relationship between task difficulty and self-efficacy.

There was evidence for moderated mediation. We found a significant interaction between the moderator cognitive mindset and task difficulty on the
mediator academic stress \((b = -0.38, p = .011)\), thus supporting a moderating (i.e., conditional) effect on path a. The effect from academic stress to the outcome self-efficacy (path b) was significant \((b = -0.03, p < .001)\), whereas the direct effect from task difficulty to self-efficacy (path c) was not significant \((b = 0.01, p = .06)\). The test for mediation at various levels of the moderator resulted in a significant indirect effect at the mean of the moderator (indirect effect \(= -0.09, p = .022\), 95% CI: \([-0.20, -0.03]\)), a significant indirect effect at one standard deviation below the mean of the moderator (more fixed mindset; indirect effect \(= -0.17, p = .005\), 95% CI: \([-0.30, -0.06]\)), but no significant effect at one standard deviation above the mean (more growth mindset; indirect effect \(= -0.00, p = .95\), 95% CI: \([-0.09, 0.08]\)). Hence, the analysis supported the notion that academic stress is a mediator between task difficulty and self-efficacy for students with more of a fixed mindset but not for students with more of a growth mindset.

**Discussion**

For the current study, we intended to investigate whether academic stress mediates the relationship between perceived task complexity and self-efficacy. Additionally, we aimed to examine how this mediational model is moderated by cognitive mindset. Perceived task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset are crucial components to a student’s academic career. This suggests that each variable is codependent, as negative relationships have shown to impact the connection among one another. Therefore, the goal of our study was to gain a better understanding of how perceived task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset influence a student’s life. Ideally, the results of our study will be used by educational institutions to improve a student’s academic success. Our results concluded that academic stress is a mediator between task difficulty and self-efficacy for students with a fixed mindset but not for students with a growth mindset.

For students who had more of a fixed mindset, our results suggested that academic stress is a mediator between task difficulty and self-efficacy. It is necessary to consider how the relationship between these variables is addressed in previous research and if it aligns with our findings. Therefore, past literature focused on academic stress, task difficulty, and self-efficacy had been reviewed, finding similar relationships to our study. For example, the negative relationship between task complexity and self-efficacy has been well documented, focusing additionally on the cognitive demand of the task (Hu et al., 2007). Meaning that as task complexity increases, the perceived ability to succeed decreases. This also connects to the past research between academic stress and self-efficacy, which additionally demonstrates a negative relationship. Students who experience anxious-like feelings also have reported lower levels of self-efficacy (Ringeisen et al., 2019). Finally, as previously mentioned, individuals who have higher stress levels during a task tend to perceive tasks as more difficult and result in more errors being made, indicating a positive relationship between these variables (Klein & Barnes, 1994). Thus, this mediational model between task complexity, academic stress, and self-efficacy has been supported by past researchers.

With the support of this mediational model, it is also crucial to consider the recognition of cognitive mindset in previous research. We believe that past literature is aligned with our results demonstrating that the mediational model presents itself in those with a fixed, not growth, mindset. This can be supported by the research, which found that a growth mindset in students positively related to classroom motivation and prevented grades from decreasing during times of school transitions. This finding is meaningful because it demonstrates how students with a fixed mindset might not have the luxury of feeling motivated by difficult tasks and are more likely to suffer academically when going through times of stress, such as school transitions. Therefore, it is evident that students with a fixed mindset may suffer academically due to how they perceive their intelligence to be unmalleable, and as our results show, are likely to feel more academic stress, because of perceived task complexity, which will result in lower levels of self-efficacy.

Comparing our results to previous literature, we now can show a link between all four variables of perceived task complexity, academic stress, self-efficacy, and cognitive mindset. Prior to this study, we could only make assumptions of how all four variables would be related, but we now know that, for those with a fixed mindset, the mediational model is supported. This also illustrates that, for students who have a growth mindset, their self-efficacy may be affected differently by the variables of perceived task complexity and academic stress or not altered to a significant effect. In sum, we now have evidence of moderated mediation.

**Implications**

Because our results are consistent with past studies, it is important to consider how they extend the
findings of the surrounding literature. For example, much of the past literature on cognitive mindset and the other variables of interest predominately utilized samples of students in middle and high school (i.e., Ye et al., 2018; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Oppositely, our study extended the findings of how cognitive mindset relates to perceived task complexity, academic stress, and self-efficacy in a higher education setting as our sample only included college students. By analyzing the makeup of our sample, we can then consider how the disparities between those with a growth and fixed mindset still persist no matter the age. This consideration may lead to some implications related to cognitive mindset and interventions to change a student’s mindset. For example, because our results demonstrate that cognitive mindset can be related to academic factors such as stress and self-efficacy in college students, it may be beneficial to have growth mindset interventions even at a later stage in a student’s academic career. Past literature has shown that these interventions can be successful in middle school and early high school samples because the students who have participated in an intervention have been found to choose more difficult academic tasks and improve their performance (Yeager et al., 2016). Therefore, it is possible that a similar intervention could be beneficial even for college students.

In addition to considering the potential for growth mindset interventions for college students, our results add important implications for how this research can be applied to a real college setting. For instance, because our results demonstrate that students who have a fixed mindset may experience increased perceived task complexity and academic stress as well as lesser self-efficacy, it is critical that students are aware of their cognitive mindset disposition. Being cognizant of how one interprets the malleability of their traits, such as intelligence, could shape their college experience. This could mean that a student who is self-aware of their own fixed mindset might be more willing to undergo a growth mindset intervention or learn about healthier stress coping mechanisms if they know that their mindset when put under academic stress could lead to less belief in their success. Therefore, schools should be mindful of possible strategies. To make students see the importance of being familiar with their cognitive mindset, schools could utilize various methods of disseminating this information, such as discussions during first-year orientation, so they are better prepared as they enter their college career. The results of the present study can offer some key academic development opportunities for students, encouraging self-reflection, as well as mindset alteration, for a more positive experience in the pursuit of higher education.

Furthermore, pupils with a background that stunted their academic development, such as experiencing traumatic childhood events, external stressors, or specified socioeconomic status, may experience a difficult time focusing when it comes to academics (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Examples include living below the poverty line, abuse at home, or household dysfunction. The impact of these external variables leads to social development problems, such as aggression toward peers (Fraser, 2018). If not addressed by the school, students then have a higher probability of feeding into the stereotype their life outside of school suggests, and, thus, have a fixed mindset throughout the duration of their education and development. The impact that external variables have on childhood academic development may directly inhibit educational capability, making even a growth mindset induction later in their academic career all the more challenging (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). This then highlights the importance of applying a growth mindset into the elementary curriculum earlier and giving greater consideration to how this induction may contribute to their mindset later in life, such as when they attend college.

Limitations
It is crucial to consider the limitations to external validity and generalizability across a variety of populations. This study focused on a predominately white, female, middle-to upper-class collegiate population, yet cognitive mindset and academic stress exist no matter age, sex, or race (i.e., Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Ye et al., 2018). Past research has demonstrated female students perform better academically compared to male students, with a diverse sample, therefore the current study’s results from a majority female sample may not be applicable to all populations (Goldie & O’Connor, 2021). Research also indicates that college populations may not be representative of the general population. This is due to the isolated academic setting students find themselves in, as well as group norms (Sears, 1986). However, it important to note that exploring the experiences of college students does have value (Sears, 2008).

There may also be limitations to the internal validity of our study. First, the survey measures were not counterbalanced, and, thus, our results may have been influenced by order effects. Furthermore, the current study relied on the
participants’ perception of themselves, coinciding with their subjective biases, often leading to a possible distorted reality. Notwithstanding, past literature has indicated that a person’s appraisal of their subjective character is not significantly different from their objective personal estimates. For example, Wright and colleagues (2018) revealed that participants underestimated their body mass index (BMI) by only .51 units. In other words, an individual’s view of themselves may not be substantially different from reality.

The lack of assessing more individuals across a variety of cultural and developmental backgrounds are limitations that restrict generalizability within our study. Our findings fail to address a broader population of differing age groups as well as cultural backgrounds. With this awareness, future research should include a wide variety of participants from different demographics. This would add value to our study because it would provide more insight into our participant population. The hope would be that, from surveying the participants, we would have more awareness about personal experiences in crucial stages of their life, potentially making our findings more broadly applicable. Undoubtedly, childhood experiences could impact self-efficacy, one of the primary variables in our study. Consequently, when self-efficacy is impacted, this can have detrimental effects on a student’s academic career.

From these results, it can be gathered that academic stress can help explain the relationship between task difficulty and self-efficacy for students who have a fixed mindset, rather than a growth mindset. This research contributed to the extensive research demonstrating the importance of students developing a growth mindset. The hope is that the results and implications of this study are considered and are helpful for students, teachers, mentors, and other strong influences in students’ lives.

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This research was supported in part by a student research and experiential learning grant from the College of Arts and Sciences at Quinnipiac University. The authors would like to thank Richard Feinn for his assistance with data analysis.

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