INTERROGATING HOPE THEORY

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Abstract: After reviewing foundational literature by Snyder, I will demonstrate how hope theory has been used in psychological interventions and psychiatry, how hope influences learning and medical outcomes, and how hope can be applied to difficult life circumstances. Using this literature review, hope theory will be interrogated. I will argue that hope theory has developed its way through the years to garner many strengths, however a few weaknesses do exist and will be described. I will conclude with recommendations for using hope theory in practice, including the medical field, psychological interventions and counseling, and student development.

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Interrogating Hope Theory

The movement of positive psychology has shifted the way many scholars and practitioners approach theoretical perspectives and frameworks and apply their constructs to student development. Understanding how positive emotions and traits influence people's behavior, actions, and outcomes has become a burgeoning field (Strayhorn, 2015). Hope is one such emotion that has been extensively studied through the lenses of psychology, psychiatry, counseling, nursing, medicine, education, and communication to name a few. Hope has been defined in many ways, but for the purpose of this paper, we will look at hope through this distinctive lens: Hope describes a belief that something will happen or will be true, and can be operationally defined as "a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful agency (goal-directed determination) and pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 571).

I believe interrogating this theory, along with other theories used in practice, is critically important for the scholar and practitioner. Theories can be used to inform and guide practice, however one must be aware of the limitations and narrowness of certain theories, as well as their practical shortcomings. Professionals should approach their work with the mindfulness of relevant theories in their fields coupled with a clear understanding of how these theories can provide scaffolding opportunities that empower students, rather than manipulate their behaviors or actions (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Finally, critical interrogation leads the professional to understand that one theory cannot explain all conduct and beliefs. Therefore, using an approach that integrates multiple theories allows for practitioners and scholars to apply theory in a comprehensive, responsible manner.

This paper will review ten relevant scholarly manuscripts on hope theory, starting with seminal works by Snyder et al. (1991) and the way he developed, conceptualized, and

measured hope. From here we will visit how hope has been used in psychological interventions and psychiatry, how hope influences learning and medical outcomes, and how hope can be applied to difficult life circumstances. These 10 manuscripts were selected to show how hope theory has been developed and built upon following the initial works of Snyder and to provide a variety of disciplines in which hope theory is applied. Although there are hundreds of articles on hope theory, these specific articles are prime examples that specifically address gaps in the seminal works. After reviewing foundational literature, hope theory will be interrogated to identify strengths and weaknesses. I will argue that hope theory has developed its way through the years to garner many strengths, however a few weaknesses do exist and will be described. I will conclude with recommendations for using hope theory in practice, including the medical field, psychological interventions and counseling, and student development.

Literature Review

In review of the literature, I chose to begin by focusing on the foundational work of Snyder et al. (1991) which made clear the cognitive concept of hope through a positivist assumption. Hope was generally defined as the belief that something will happen or will be true. The authors drew on the goal-setting framework to further operationalize hope, detailing the means by which goals are pursued with the assumption that people are goal-directed. Hypotheses included hope is fueled by the perception of successful agency related to goals and hope is influenced by the perceived ability of one to find successful pathways related to goals. The author's then formally defined hope as "a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful agency (goal-directed determination) and pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 571). The authors developed The Hope Scale, a concise self-report scale that was psychometrically valid with

internal consistency. Next, the scale was delivered to introductory psychology students at the University of Kansas and people in psychological treatment. The scale was found to have acceptable internal consistency and temporal stability. There were no sex differences found and college students had higher levels of hope than people receiving psychological treatment. There was supporting evidence that hope can be separated into two components: agency and pathways. These were related, but not synonymous. Furthermore, the study supported the idea that The Hope Scale may predict goal setting and academic achievement.

Following this seminal work, Snyder (1995) shifted the lens to which hope is viewed to the role of hope in counseling. The author re-affirmed that humans are goal-directed, and this underpinned the two necessary components of hope: the willpower or energy needed to move towards a goal (agency) and the ability to generate tracks to reach the goal (pathway). Emotions were emphasized as an important component and that positive emotional states correlated with higher hope persons who focused on success. A distinction was made in that high hope people often can be assured of success in reaching goals, whereas high intelligence offered less of an assurance. In his third foundational work on hope theory, Snyder et al. (1997) validated a modified Hope Scale, named the Children's Hope Scale. The authors deviated from past scholarly activity in the field which focused on negative beliefs, and instead chose to conceptualize children's hope in terms of positive beliefs. The first sample consisted of an initial 372 children, ages 9-14, in an Oklahoma public school. No race or ethnicity was noted. Using this sample, the final version of the Children's Hope Scale was derived and then administered to an additional 5 samples of children, totaling 800 participants. These samples varied widely in age, sex, health status, and some samples varying in race. No differences were noted with regard to gender, race,

and age. The six-item self-report was found to have internal consistency and test/re-test

reliability. In the final foundational work discussed here, Snyder (2002) refined the

definition of hope, revisited the scales derived from the theory, and compared hope theory

to other related theories. Pathway thinking was refined to show how humans think about

linking the present with imagined futures and most interestingly, how the concept of

journeying through the continuum of time is crucial and beneficial to thought processes.

Agency thinking was honed to be the motivational thought processes one uses to begin and

continue along a pathway to goal-attainment, and especially important when blockades to

goal accomplishment occurs. Looking at research using the Hope Scale since it was

developed showed that people with high hope consistently had higher performance in

physical health and sports, education, and psychotherapy outcomes. The author reviewed

the "false hope" literature, and found that there was no empirical evidence that supported

false hope, defined as having a goal and the motivation to accomplish that goal, but no

plans to reach said goal. High hope was related to better adjustment and better pathway

selection compared to low hope people.

Moving from the foundational work to varied uses of hope theory, Chang and

DeSimone (2001) examined hope theory and hope's ability to predict psychological

outcomes for people experiencing dysphoria. The authors aimed to measure hope's

influence on appraisals and coping and outlined the relationship between them. A

predominantly Caucasian, freshman college student population was sampled from a

Midwestern university. A total of 356 students participated in completing take-home

surveys including the Hope Scale, appraisals from recent psychology exams, the Coping

Strategies Inventory, and the Beck Depression Inventory. Findings were consistent with

previous results; hope is significantly related to dysphoria in that higher hope individuals

were less likely to experience dysphoria. In fact, merely being hopeful had a significant

direct influence on dysphoria. Also, hope was related to secondary appraisal but not

primary appraisal, which translates to hope being associated with student's success in

obtaining future goals. Feldman and Dreher (2012) addressed whether hope was malleable

in a short duration of intervention. The authors rooted their experiment in the positive

psychology movement where they sought to promote strengths of individuals rather than

correcting problems such as anxiety. The trial was designed as a randomized controlled trial

where 96 college students from Northern California were randomly assigned to hope-based

intervention, progressive muscle relaxation intervention, or no intervention. Pre/post-test

measurements and 1-month follow-up was conducted and data was collected using the

Goal-Specific Hope Scale, Purpose in Life Test, and Vocation Identity Questionnaire. The 1-

month follow-up occurred via online survey. Results supported the idea that hope can be

increased in the short term with a single session intervention and can lead to greater levels

of goal progress at 1-month follow-up.

In the realms of learning and education, hope theory has been extensively studied. I

will highlight a couple of salient examples. Rosenstreich, Feldman, Davidson, Maza, and

Margalit (2015) designed a study to assess hope, optimism, and loneliness in undergraduate

students with learning disabilities (LD) as compared to their non-LD peers after a single-

session hope intervention. The sample consisted of 85 LD students and 250 non-LD students

from a small college in Israel where no significant differences were found in relation to

gender, age, or mean grades. Multiple questionnaires were employed to collect data in

regard to hope (a Hebrew adaptation of the State Hope Scale), dispositional optimism, and

loneliness. Focusing on hope, the authors found that non-LD students showed significant

increases in hope immediately and 1-month after intervention. However, LD students

showed increased hope immediately after intervention but significantly decreased hope 1-month post the single intervention. Findings were similar for loneliness. Dixson, Worrell, and Mello (2017) moved beyond the relationship of hope and academic achievement in the school environment towards creating interpretable clusters of hope, establishing hope and its relationship with socioeconomic status (SES), and the examination of hope clusters across perceived stress, self-esteem, academic self-concept, life changes, school belonging, and academic expectation. Results showed that four clusters consistent with hope theory emerged; low hopers, high agency thinkers, high pathway thinkers, and high hopers. Members of the clusters did not differ significantly by gender and interestingly did not differ by SES. The largest effect sizes between low and high hopers was for academic achievement, academic self-concept (how students think about their academic abilities), and school belonging. High hopers also had higher self-esteem and lower stress when compared to their counterparts. Findings of this study deviate from past findings in that high agency thinkers reported more adaptive outcomes than high pathway thinkers, showing that high-agency thinkers are more comparable to high hopers.

Among other scholars who have diversified the populations studied using hope theory, Chang et al. (2018) sought to improve the diversity of ethnoracial groups studied under the lens of hope theory in relation to the importance of hope in accounting for positive and negative psychological adjustment in African Americans in addition to racial discrimination and social support. Hundreds of studies have shown association between racial discrimination and psychological adjustment along with the role of social support in adjustment models of African Americans, but very few incorporated hope and its predictive abilities. The authors sampled 249 African Americans in an undergraduate introductory psychology course using a battery of self-report surveys in a group setting. Looking

specifically at outcomes for hope, there was clear supportive evidence that hope agency

had a central role in accounting for positive and negative psychological adjustment,

independent of SES factors, racial discrimination, and social support. Specifically,

participants that had strong hope agentic thinking, believing that African Americans had the

mental energy/ability to achieve goals, showed lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Finally, Merolla and Harman (2018) sought to take hope theory from the context of

psychology/psychiatry, medical healthcare, and academic achievement, and apply it to

communication, specifically relational communication processes. Using an accommodation

framework, the authors examined if relationship-specific hope would predict constructive

conflict behavior and if this hope would modify communications. Relationship-specific hope

was defined as the motivation to form relational goals along with the agency to pursue

these goals in an enduring relationship despite stressors and impediments. 367 adults, half

of which were in dating relationships, were given a conflict scenario, and then asked to

respond to surveys, including the Hope Scale among other measures. It was found that

relationship-specific hope positively predicted post conflict evaluations and had a stronger

relationship with accommodation then commitment has with accommodation. In other

words, a high hope outlook may enable couples to focus more on the relationship and less

on the individual-level goals and could make them less likely to give up when hard relational

situations arise.

Interrogating Hope Theory

The previous review of hope theory literature provides a solid foundation for the

following evaluations. Hope theory is heuristic, in that it lends itself well to generating

research ideas. It has already been discussed in this paper the many fields in which hope

theory has found a research basis and the wide variety of behaviors and actions hope can

influence. I would like to offer the following research ideas. In the area of student development, scholars could reveal how hope influences first-generation college students and their sense of belonging and academic success in college. Future research could also elucidate how giving medical patients false hope could possibly impede positive outcomes. Finally, researchers could look at how positive psychology could be used in either academic or business settings to match jobs to people's strengths, instead of trying to fix their weaknesses.

In its early years, hope theory was based on homogenous populations of white college students, which was an early downfall, however many scholars have since applied the theory to many ages (including children and the elderly), races (including but not limited to African Americans, Asian, African, and Latino cultures), and other social identity constructs such as students with learning disabilities, low SES students, and those with mental health issues just to name a few (Chang et al., 2018; Chang & DeSimone, 2001; Dixson et al., 2017; Li, Mao, He, Zhang, & Yin, 2018; Rosenstreich et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 1997). Hope theory was shown to be consistent across ethnic, gender, and SES populations. However, one shortcoming in the literature is the lack of LGBTQ+ populations and military personnel in studies of hope theory, and hopefully these populations along with other emerging social identities will be addressed in future studies.

A further strength of hope theory is the use of validated measurements such as The Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) and its variants (Rosenstreich et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 1997) to assess and bolster the theory. The scales have been shown to have internal validity and consistency, re-test reliability, and temporal stability. Scholars have continued to show its usefulness and utility (Chang & DeSimone, 2001; Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wrobleski, 2009; Li et al., 2018; Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003). Hope theory lends

itself well to the prediction of outcomes which can be observed and evaluated using The Hope Scale, its variants, and other measures. Examples include predicting improvements from medical treatments (Snyder et al., 1997), reducing dysphoria (Chang & DeSimone, 2001), mitigating anxiety and depression (Chang et al., 2018), predicting educational performance (Dixson et al., 2017; Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Rosenstreich et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 2003), predicting student's perceived ability to persist and succeed in college (D'Amico Guthrie & Fruiht, 2018), and predicting conflict resolution outcomes (Merolla & Harman, 2018). One shortcoming however is the necessity to rely on self-reports to obtain this data (Sellbom, Lilienfeld, Fowler, & McCrary, 2018). Self-reporting has the ability to introduce bias, such as social desirability bias. Furthermore, respondents may over-exaggerate answers leading to potentially unreliable results. However, Snyder et al. (1997) found that parents ratings of their child's hope correlated with the child's self-report, showing that the children's behaviors were consistent with their thinking.

Not only is hope theory prescriptive, it is also descriptive. Hope theory provides clear and concise descriptions of how hope is fueled by the perception of successful agency related to goals and how hope is influenced by the perceived ability of one to find successful pathways related to goals (Snyder et al., 1991). These descriptions of agentic and pathway thinking (Snyder, 2002) provides a clear outline as to how hope is developed, nurtured, and maintained in individuals. This distinct explanation, along with validation throughout the literature, shows how useful hope theory can be in practice.

Translating Hope Theory to Practice

In translating hope theory to the counseling process, nurturing hope is a means to increase agency and open pathways for positive growth and change. This can be measured using The Hope Scale and outcomes can be predicted (Snyder, 1995). Implications for

physical health exist where hope theory can be used to teach children to change their

thinking to high hope patterns, which in turn helps create positive health outcomes. The

Children's Hope Scale reflects stable goal-directed thinking and is sensitive for measuring

hope. The scale has predictive power in regards to medical outcomes and intellectual

accomplishments (Snyder et al., 1997).

Hope theory can also be applied to student development practice. Chang and

DeSimone (2001) found evidence to support modifying hope to reduce dysphoria before

modifying coping skills. Helping individuals to increase pathway could involve facilitating

students to choose more accomplishable goals, finding different routes to reach goals, and

encouraging students to increase a supportive network of people around them. Limitations

however involved the sample of this study; findings may not be generalizable to other

mental health disorders. Future researchers could look at other variables with hope besides

coping and appraisal and how hope may influence other negative emotions/disorders.

Another implication for student development is using single intervention strategies for

struggling students. Feldman and Dreher (2012) found that both agentic and pathway

thinking can be positively impacted to increase hope after one 90-minute intervention.

Most notably, it was found that a single session treatment using hope intervention can

allow people to make significantly more progress on goals at 1-month follow-up. In an

interesting contrast, Rosenstreich et al. (2015) found that short-term interventions to

increase hope and decrease loneliness is not enough for long term positive change in

students with LD. This highlights the importance of long-term intervention and the need for

increased hope and social support. Future research should look at long-term intervention

and its effect on LD student's hope and loneliness. Dixson et al. (2017) suggested that hope

is meaningful in the school context and could serve as an intervention point to increase

belongingness. Practically speaking, increasing positive agency thinking in students should have priority, yet not preclude enhancing adaptive pathway thinking. Future research should aim to replicate this hope clustering and should look for larger samples of racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse student populations to further elucidate if hope differs across these populations.

When dealing with trials, dangers, and hardships of life, Chang et al. (2018) suggests bolstering hope agency among those who are struggling to cope effectively. This could pragmatically play out in interventions that help to reframe people's problems as manageable and directly target hope therapy to low hope persons or those with psychological problems. In personal relationships and conflict management, Merolla and Harman (2018) concluded that high hope matters most when obstacles such as non-reconciliation block relationship goals. Hope theory-based interventions in relationship mediations should focus on increasing hope which could increase positive conflict-management. Limitations of this study arose from self-report and scenario-based data, therefor realistic conflict with real interventions directed at hope could provide stronger evidence for the current findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, hope theory is a useful tool for practitioners and scholars not only in student development, but also in psychology, psychiatry, counseling, nursing, medicine, education, and communication. Hope theory has been reinforced in recent literature to included varied populations in regard to gender, race, SES, social constructs, and mental health disease, however there is still much room to include emerging social identities and underrepresented populations along with developing other measurement tools aside from self-reports. Practical implications abound for using hope theory in the real world, and

particular attention should be given to single and long-term hope-increasing interventions

(dependent on the circumstances of the student or population of individuals). Finally,

interrogating this theory has shown that it can be used to inform and guide practice,

however one must be aware of the limitations and narrowness of this theory. Professionals

should approach the use of hope theory as a scaffolding opportunity that can empower

their students or patients. A critical interrogation of this theory has led to the understanding

that hope theory cannot explain all of a person's conduct or thoughts. Therefor

practitioners should use an integrated approach with other theories to allow for a

comprehensive, responsible interpretation of a student's entire story, embracing their

complexity in its fullness (Patton et al., 2016).

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