Developing Hope in the Social Context: Alternative Perspectives of Motive, Meaning, and Identity

Timothy R. Elliott
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Elisabeth D. Sherwin
Georgia Southern University

C. R. Snyder, J. Cheavens, and S. C. Sympson (1997) presented a developmental model of hope embedded within a social-cognitive framework. This is a feature common to most contemporary theories of reality negotiation processes. However, in this comment on the Snyder et al. piece, the authors believe that there are alternative accounts of the goal-directed behavior associated with hope that warrant consideration. They briefly describe these competing accounts available in Kohutian self psychology and in multicultural models of behavior. They note points of convergence and divergence, along with implications for clinical practice and theory-driven research.

Snyder, Cheavens, and Sympson (1997) have attempted to satisfy a glaring need in our understanding of reality negotiation processes. Specifically, they have delineated basic familial and social dynamics that play an instrumental role in the development of hope in the individual. Furthermore, they have thoughtfully considered ways in which hope affects interpersonal interactions and group behavior. Clinicians have recognized for some time that hope is a critical element of effective group therapy (Yalom, 1985). Yet, a theoretical framework is needed to help clinicians understand how hope develops to appreciate deficiencies and then to design theoretically driven interventions that may augment, instill, refurbish, or build hope in persons who seek psychological services.

The dynamics described by Snyder et al. (1997) are grounded in a social-cognitive framework, consonant with most contemporary views of reality negotiation (e.g., Snyder, 1989; Taylor & Brown, 1988). This model stipulates that goal-oriented beliefs and behaviors are modeled by significant others in the individual's early interpersonal environment. These beliefs are then internalized, and the behaviors are emulated. This process is described in a Piagetian stepwise fashion, implying that children acquire certain hopelike behaviors as cognitive ability develops. We wonder if hope may not be inculcated in other ways, perhaps in earlier cognitive stages, taking into consideration important familial and cultural dynamics. In this article, we discuss two alternative perspectives of the dynamics in the hope model that merit comment because these perspectives may offer competing explanations for hope-related behaviors. We briefly describe these alternative accounts and compare certain principle tenets with the hope model. We conclude with some integrative comments that might have implications for research on the hope variable, particularly in respect to group dynamics and interventions.

The Self and Goal-Oriented Behavior

As Snyder et al. (1997) astutely observed, psychologists have been historically intrigued with the development and expression of self-centered motives that walk the proverbial tightrope between personal ambition and the collective good. On the basis of modern translations of classic psychoanalytic theory, the self harbors a natural narcissistic tendency, which can evolve into a healthy, consolidated, and cohesive fashion that is manifested in the pursuit of meaningful and socially appropriate goals and ambitions, realistic life plans, and adaptive relationships with others (Kohut, 1971, 1977). Snyder et al. emphasized the effect of
modeling in the development of hope in a child. Similarly, in the Kohutian account, goal-oriented behavior is reflective of a cohesive self that develops during effective parenting, in which appropriate mirroring occurs for the child to have a rudimentary sense of self and then idealizing when the child has a safe, trusting, and empathic interpersonal relationship with a parenting figure. Effective relations throughout personal development are essential to maintain this sense of self-cohesion (Robbins & Patton, 1985).

There are remarkable parallels between the social-cognitive explanation of hope and the Kohutian accounts of goal-oriented behavior. A programmatic line of research shows theoretically consistent correlates between indices of adjustment and of competency and goal instability. This variable is a person's "difficulty in setting goals and keeping direction, maintaining drive to get work done, and initiating action" (Robbins, Payne, & Chartrand, 1990, p. 447), which is inherent in the Kohutian concept of the cohesive self; this is measured with the 10-item Goal Instability Scale (GIS; Robbins & Patton, 1985).

Consistent with theoretical properties and the study of hope, greater goal stability is associated with more optimal adjustment under times of duress and major life change (Robbins, Lee, & Wan, 1994; Robbins et al., 1990), self-reported competencies and outcomes (Lese & Robbins, 1994), and greater satisfaction with social and interpersonal relationships (Robbins, Lese, & Herrick, 1993). Furthermore, both goal stability and hope are believed to be healthy, socially appropriate manifestations of self-strivings in contrast to more self-centered, narcissistic mannerisms.

Unlike the Kohutian self psychology school, the working models of hope have yet to clarify ways in which hope can be enhanced in clinical interventions. Although hope is believed to be important to the early stages of group therapy (Yalom, 1985), there is some evidence that this is more of a concern to those lacking hope (Leszcz, Yalom, & Norden, 1985). There is some indication in the self psychology literature that participants with greater goal instability benefitted more from interactional than from self-directed groups (Robbins & Tucker, 1986), and they also responded favorably to relationships in which discussion of personal problems was welcomed (Robbins et al., 1993). In contrast, participants with greater goal-stability seemed more responsive to relationships based on shared activities and may have had negative reactions to relationships that emphasized problem discussion. Following this line of reasoning, then, it would appear that group interventions that focus on problem discussion and solutions in an interactional format may have an optimal effect on low-hope persons; however, high-hope persons may prefer groups that are predicated on shared activities of mutual interest and value. Those with low hope or greater goal instability may seek different things from groups than high-hope/greater goal-stability persons. In fact, those with high hope and greater goal orientation may experience a type of "ceiling effect" in group interventions, which may incidentally thwart or impede their goal-directed behaviors. There is a possibility that a mismatch between group format and hope could result in a negative experience for the high-hope person. These are issues that need to be considered in future intervention research.

Finally, psychoanalytic thought in general has traditionally held a dim view of denial and other such processes; critics of the reality negotiation literature have argued that differences can still be found between "normal" individuals who are able to effectively monitor reality without distorting it and those who engage in "pathological denial" while operating behind a facade of normalcy. Based on this argument, persons who have self-enhancing biases—those with higher levels of hope, presumably—still appear distressed on indirect, objective measures of behavior and are prone to health problems because they misrepresent their true physiologically experiences of distress (Shedler, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). The evidence linking hope with objective outcome measures is not robust; some researchers have not found relations between hope and objective indicators of outcome (e.g., grade point averages; Marmarosh, 1993). Others have found that specific, overly optimistic beliefs about one's health status can be associated with greater distress over time (Elliott & Richards, 1997). More recently, Jackson, Taylor, Palmatier, Elliott, and Elliott (1997) found a strong association between hope and gregarious

1 To reveal further striking parallels between these distinct research programs, readers are encouraged to compare the items on the GIS and the Hope Scale.
coping styles—and in their maladaptive forms, these styles may reflect histrionic tendencies (Millon, Green, & Meagher, 1982). We are concerned that researchers have yet to establish that “optimal margin of illusion” (Baumeister, 1989, p. 176) that might delineate points at which hope might become problematic for an individual. Further work is needed to clarify the relation among hope, aggrandizing views of the self, and objective and indirect measures of behavior and outcome.

Hope and Culture

In stark contrast to the individualism inherent in any derivative of psychoanalytic thinking, multicultural models of behavior offer a radically different perspective of hope in the social context. Hope may be embedded in social-cognitive processes, as Snyder et al. (1997) described, but culture substantially “influences the way humans select, interpret, process, and use information” (Kluckhohn, 1954, cited in Triandis, 1994, p. 15).

Ethnic groups are collections of individuals who identify themselves as sharing a common cultural heritage that imparts goals, values, beliefs and activities deemed essential to or characteristic of the group (Dashefsky & Shapiro, 1976). Collectivistic societies emphasize the importance of the group and of the shared group values, activities, and roles more so than individual pursuits and achievements, which are characteristic of individualistic societies. A person in a collectivistic society is likely to define the self in terms of group membership, duties, and roles in the community (Landrine, 1992). Thus, research shows that self-esteem—a concept valued in individualistic societies—evinces a low correlation with life satisfaction among persons in collectivistic nations (Diener & Diener, 1995). Furthermore, individuals from collectivistic societies are in general more attuned to external, circumstantial, and situational effects on personal behavior, with corresponding differences in beliefs concerning personal health, adjustment, and responsibility, than are persons from individualistic societies (Landrine, 1992; Landrine & Klonoff, 1992). Reality negotiation processes may then have less functional utility among persons from collectivistic societies; recent data suggest that self-enhancing biases are more pronounced among persons in Western cultures than among those from a collectivistic one (Chang, 1996; Heine & Lehman, 1995).

In terms of adjustment and social commerce, a sense of hope among persons from a collectivistic background may reflect a relative sense of standing or identity within one’s particular culture. Literature that attests to the relationship between social identity—whether labeled racial identity (Parham & Helms, 1981, 1985a, 1985b), ethnic identity (Elizur, 1984; Phinney, 1990), ethnic self-identity (Driedger, 1976), or collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992)—and behavioral and psychological adjustment abounds. Moreover, recent research (Sherwin, 1994, 1997) suggests a strong positive relationship exists between collective self-esteem and hope. Specifically, high scores on a measure of “how good one’s social groups are” (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992, p. 305) were positively and significantly correlated with higher hope. Consistent with Parham and Helms’ (1981, 1985a, 1985b) theory of emerging nigrescence, high scores on subscales that assess a world view “dominated by a Euro-American frame of reference . . . and devaluation of Black Identity” (Parham & Helms, 1985a, p. 143) were inversely correlated with hope scores among African American students (Sherwin, 1997). It is possible that individuals who are making a transition from a collectivistic society to a more individualistic one may incur a blow to their “collective hope” as defined by their culture of origin. Furthermore, people may need a congruent cultural identity of some sort for their lives and their hope to have meaning because culture provides one with a past, present, and future. Without this bearing, one may be disenfranchised and “unhomed,” without any direction for hope.

Lewin (1948, cited in Driedger, 1976) observed that it is crucial for “individuals . . . to form a clear sense of identification with the heritage and culture of their in-group in order to find a secure basis for a sense of well-being” (p. 131). Ethnic groups, in essence, can be characterized by social processes that operate in therapeutic groups: For groups to be effective, they provide members with well-defined goals and the means in which these goals can be achieved (Higginbotham, West, & Forsyth, 1988). Forsyth (1991, pp. 674–675) noted that groups that meet and provide basic psychological and social
needs may in effect provide the two components of hope, as posited by Snyder et al. (1997), as goals and means for achievement are identified for members of a given culture.

Psychologists may learn new insights from collectivistic societies as to how hope may be transmitted or buttressed in group interventions. In earlier writings, Snyder (1992) has suggested that role models, real or fictional, may serve as guides in the mending of hope. Children may be taught hope through stories aimed at shoring the facet of hope (i.e., agency or pathways) that is weak. In Judaism, for example, this process is repeated annually when all gather to tell the tale of the Exodus from Egypt, reiterating the promises that God made to the people of Israel, foretelling the freedom from persecution, and establishing a homeland and prosperity. This tradition has been observed for thousands of years and was devoutly adhered to in the ghettos and extermination camps of Europe; it continues in homes and congregations throughout the world.

Not surprising, when asked to think of their Jewish identities, Jewish children exhibited high-hope scores as well as scores indicating that they felt good about their membership in the Jewish social group (Sherwin, 1994). More interesting, this study also shows a positive association between hope and the number of years these children had been attending Hebrew school. This could have possible therapeutic implications. In situations where hope is associated with group membership in a collectivistic manner, rather than an individual difference, an appropriate intervention may be to develop a structured, informative format that celebrates the particular culture and its strengths, heritage, heros, and heroines—similar to the activities that educate and observe the festivities and traditions of a given culture.

Concluding Comments

We believe that reality negotiation processes, generally, and the hope variable, specifically, are viable theoretical concepts that deserve closer scrutiny by researchers and clinicians interested in group dynamics. In the model provided by Snyder et al. (1997), we received another theoretical glimpse into the dynamics that might be instrumental in the making of productive citizens for any society: High-hope members respect and display prosocial, goal-oriented behaviors, thus contributing to the collective welfare. Snyder et al. have provided us with several ideas that can be tested and compared with alternative explanations that offer radically different accounts of the ways in which aspects of the self are defined, experienced, and expressed. Perhaps, in our remarks, we have examined issues more germane to the social part of the equation in contrast to the more cognitive aspects of the hope model that often typify social–cognitive perspectives. We hypothesize that familial and cultural dynamics play a major role in the development of hope, and these issues may have ramifications for clinical interventions. It is probable that clarity of the message from the family and from the culture is required for a child to develop hope; incongruence between the familial and the cultural messages of hope may cause disruptions at a cost to the person and the society. We hope that subsequent research can benefit from the contrasts and comparisons we have drawn in this article. This could then refine the understanding of these theoretical mechanisms and enrich their practical and scientific use.

References

COMMENT: DEVELOPING HOPE


