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Hope – a driving force of optimal human development

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Abstract

In psychology, hope can be understood as hopeful thinking, emotional experience, character strength, or a transcendental phenomenon. In our research we distinguish between two main perspectives of hope: dispositional hope (an individualistic, cognitive perspective) and perceived hope (a transcendental, spiritual perspective).

The common aim of a number of our research studies on hope was to explore the role of dispositional and perceived hope in life satisfaction, depression, quality of interpersonal relationships, and physical health. We investigated how hopeful thinking gets reflected in different kinds of life experience in children, students, adults, old people, but also homeless shelter workers and clients.

Recently, we studied the role of hope in subjective well-being on a large sample of 1,400 respondents from the Czech Republic, aged between 15 and 80 years. We found that more hopeful people were more satisfied with life, maintained high-quality interpersonal relationships, and were also healthier. Perceived hope and meaningfulness turned out to be the two main independent (negative) predictors of depression. The results also show that people who participate in volunteering and charity activities can be significantly happier than other people. They tend to have more optimistic expectations for the future and experience greater meaningfulness and spirituality in their lives.

Our findings suggest that the paths to happier life include hopeful and others-oriented mindset, genuine concern for the welfare of others, and altruism. Hope seems to be a driving force of optimal human development and a valuable key to the flourishing of both the individual and the whole society.

Hope, in general, can be understood as the key to a happier future. If one loses the key, the door remains closed. If a person loses hope, he or she remains locked in adversity and helplessness.

In psychology, hope has been understood as a multidimensional concept. Dufault and Martocchio (1985) identified six dimensions of hope: affective, cognitive, behavioural (psychological, physical, social, and spiritual), affiliative (hope in relationships), temporal (drawn from the past, the present, and the future), and contextual (activated within a given context).

Recently, hope has been contextualised as an aspect of positive psychology. Hope has been conceptualized and described as hopeful thinking (Snyder, 2000), positive emotional experience (Fredrickson, 2009), a character strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), or a transcendental phenomenon (Vaillant, 2009). Research in positive psychology has also clarified the distinction between hope and other related constructs, such as optimism, self-efficacy, self-determination, resilience, and others.

Hope as a positive expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen in future also plays an important role in philosophy, theology, religious studies, anthropology, behavioural sciences and other social sciences.

Positive psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively new field of psychology. It has been established as the scientific study of

positive functioning and flourishing on individual, social, cultural and universal levels of life. Positive psychology was introduced by Seligman and Csikszentmihályi (2000) as “a science on best qualities of life”. Since its establishment, it proved successful in making a change in psychology and drawing attention of psychologists from sufferings and other negative aspects of life to striving towards better understanding of well-being and building on the best human qualities that make our life worth living (Slezackova, 2013).

One interesting thing to notice is that the objectives of western positive psychology are similar to some extent to Indian psychology, which has its roots in Indian philosophical and spiritual literature. Positive psychology and Indian psychology share similar concerns regarding ultimate goals of human life. Recently, Rao (2014) proposed a promising idea that Indian psychology could offer a meaningful and valuable meta-theoretical framework to sustain the goals of positive psychology.

Studies on hope

In our research, we distinguish between two main concepts of hope: dispositional hope (individualistic, cognitive perspective) and perceived hope (transcendental, spiritual perspective).

Snyder (2000), the author of the cognitive theory of hope, identified three components of hope: goals, pathways (plans to achieve the goals), and agency (goal-directed energy). He defined dispositional hope as ‘the sum of perceived capacities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes’ (Snyder, 2000, p. 8).

Perceived hope (Krafft, 2014), on the other hand, is a rather broader concept, i.e. feeling hopeful in a deeper sense, having a fundamental trust in positive outcomes,

particularly in difficult life situations which cannot be directly controlled.

In a number of research studies conducted in the Czech Republic, we explored the role of dispositional and perceived hope in life satisfaction, academic achievement, quality of interpersonal relationships, and physical health. We investigated how hopeful thinking gets reflected in different kinds of life experience in children, students, adults, old people, but also homeless shelter workers and their clients.

We found, for example, that hopeful adolescents ($N = 150$, 46% male and 54% female, Mean age = 14.3) achieved better grades at high school than their less hopeful peers.

In a sample of Czech college students ($N = 317$, 38 % male and 62 % female, Mean age = 21.8), hope was closely connected with subjective well-being. More hopeful students were also more grateful for the good things in their life and were more forgiving when they got into conflict with others.

Hope plays an important role in old age as well: In elderly people of around 80 years of age ($N = 53$, 39 % male and 61 % female, Mean age = 78.2), hope appeared to be one of the key factors of 'healthy aging', closely related to better health and satisfaction with life.

Apart from these general samples, we studied hope and flourishing in homeless people ($N = 65$, 83 % male and 17 % female, Mean age = 51.5) and their caregivers ($N = 54$, 53% male and 47 % female, Mean age = 43.4) in homeless shelters. Interestingly, it turned out that the homeless did not differ too much in their level of hope from their caregivers; yet, their self-reported quality of life was significantly worse. Most homeless people named their families, especially children, as the main source of their hope. However, they

often added that, in the end, people primarily had to find hope in themselves. Those homeless people who were able to maintain their hope at high levels and be thankful even for the few good things they possessed in their lives showed higher levels of well-being. A detailed analysis showed that it was especially their religious faith that helped them remain hopeful and grateful in difficult times. Homeless shelter employees also drew hope from their families, but their faith and beliefs served as an additional source of hope. In fact, the ability to maintain hope proved to be the strongest predictor of the caregivers' flourishing.

Hope Barometer

More recently, we studied hope and several other positive attributes in the annual international 'Hope Barometer' research survey. The survey was launched in 2009 in Switzerland by the University of St. Gallen and the Swissfuture company. In 2012, the survey expanded to Germany, and in 2013, the Czech Republic and France joined in. Nowadays, there are several other countries involved in the survey (Malta, Norway, India and others).

The goal of the international 'Hope Barometer' project is not only to measure the level of hope and other variables of interest, but also to look into people's actual objects of hope and into their personal wishes, to reveal what they do to have their hopes fulfilled and whom they expect to provide them with hope.

As it turned out, most Czechs expressed personal wishes that regarded relationships with other people. The most important ones included happy family relationships, good health, harmonious life, high-quality relationships with other people, and personal autonomy.

Regarding the research question of who was the one people expected would provide them with hope, most

Czechs responded that they viewed hope as something for which everyone was responsible by themselves – thus, they saw themselves as their own major hope providers. The runner-up source of hope cited by the respondents was their husband or wife; the third place was taken by friends. Another valuable source could be the example of other people who can find solutions in difficult life situations. These findings show that people primarily try to find hope in themselves, but partners and friends might help, as well as other people who find solutions in difficult situations.

We also inquired into what Czechs did to fulfil their hopes. We found that in most cases, they pondered and analyzed circumstances, did plenty of reading and gathered information, and took responsibility for their actions. Thus, in accordance with the cognitive theory of hope, Czech respondents showed rather rational, active and individualistic approach in pursuit of their hope.

In the quantitative part of the Czech 'Hope Barometer 2013' survey, we focused on exploring the role of hope and meaningfulness in life satisfaction and perceived positive / negative posttraumatic changes in a Czech sample ($N = 1,409$, 20% male and 80% female, aged between 15 and 80). Apart from demographic questions, our measures included the Adult Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991), the Perceived Hope Scale (Krafft, 2014), the Meaningfulness Scale (Schnell, 2009), the Trait Well-Being Inventory (Dalbert, 1992), the Positive Relations Scale (Ryff, 1989), and the Changes in Outlook Questionnaire (Joseph et al., 2006). Data were collected anonymously in November 2013. We used IBM SPSS software for data analysis.

The correlation analysis revealed significant correlations ($p < 0.01$) between all variables of interest, i.e. hope, life satisfaction, meaningfulness, positive relationships, subjective health and posttraumatic changes. (Tab.1).

Tab. 1: *Pearson correlations between Hope, Life satisfaction, Meaningfulness, Positive relationships, Subjective health and positive and negative Posttraumatic changes (N=1,409)*

	Dispos. Hope	Perc. Hope	Life Satisf.	Mean- ing	Posit. relat ions	PTG posit.	PTG negat.	Subject. Health
Dispositional Hope	1							
Perceived Hope	0.592	1						
Life Satisfaction	0.646	0.695	1					
Meaning	0.578	0.641	0.694	1				
Positive relations	0.419	0.478	0.507	0.499	1			
PTG positive	0.203	0.279	0.187	0.321	0.239	1		
PTG negative	-0.516	-0.575	-0.661	-0.512	-0.502	-0.077	1	
Subjective Health	0.164	0.206	0.227	0.144	0.134	-0.01	-0.257	1

($p < 0.01$)

Linear regression analyses revealed detailed interrelationships between the variables: The key independent predictors of life satisfaction were perceived hope, meaningfulness and less negative outcomes of traumatic life event (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2: *Linear regression analysis model predicting Life satisfaction (N=1,409)*

Model	Unstandard. Coef.		Standard. Coef.	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	0.997	0.121		8.249	0.000
Percieved hope	0.257	0.024	0.244**	10.620	0.000
Dispositional hope	0.216	0.023	0.191**	9.269	0.000
Meaning	0.300	0.024	0.281**	12.553	0.000
PTG positive	-0.48	0.019	-0.041*	-2.459	0.014
PTG negative	-0.242	0.019	-0.261**	-12.530	0.000
Positive relations	0.052	0.022	0.045*	2.340	0.019

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, $R=0.824$, $R^2=0.679$

In other words, hopeful people, as compared with the less hopeful ones, appeared to be more satisfied with life, maintained high-quality interpersonal relationships, perceived their lives as more meaningful, and were also healthier. As we also asked about the types and intensity of stressful or traumatic events in life, we were able to observe that hope not only helped promote positive aspects of life, but served as an important factor in coping with difficult life situations. Out of the people who went through a traumatic experience, those who had more hope reported significantly less negative outcomes following the adversity.

Apart from being perceived by the individual, hope can be also transmitted to others. For this reason, we also explored the level of hope and happiness in relation to the respondent's involvement in volunteering or charity activities. The effect of volunteering was remarkable: Those respondents who were engaged in volunteering – altruistic and selfless activity of any kind – were significantly more hopeful and had more optimistic expectations for the future than those who were only pursuing their own happiness and looking after their own personal needs. They also considered their life more meaningful, experienced greater spirituality and were generally happier.

In 2015, the analysis of data from 'Hope Barometer 2014', a new round of data collection involving a slightly adjusted battery of questionnaires, yielded new interesting findings. The results of comparative analyses revealed that out of the selected countries involved in the survey (Czech Republic, Switzerland and Germany), Czech respondents showed the highest levels of perceived hope and gratitude, Swiss sample scored highest in life satisfaction, optimism, dispositional hope and quality of relationships, and German respondents showed the highest level of pessimism.

As regards the relationship between hope and depression in the Czech sample, a multiple linear regression analysis ($p < 0.01$) revealed perceived hope, life satisfaction, and meaningfulness as the main independent (negative) predictors of depression (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3: *Hierarchical linear regression model predicting Depression in Czech sample (N=751)*

Model 3	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
	B	Std. error	Beta
(Constant)	1.661	.248	
Gender 0=male)	.152	.050	.90
Age	-.045	.016	-.87
Education	.003	.013	.006
Life satisfaction	-.137	.023	-.254***
Relationships	-.003	.030	-.004
Optimism	-.027	.038	-.032
Pessimism	.078	.031	.097*
Self-efficacy	.068	.072	.042
Gratitude	.084	.026	.118***
Meaning	-.073	.021	-.140***
Perceived hope	-.180	.035	-.254***
Dispositional hope	-.054	.042	-.067

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$, $R=0.646$; $R^2=0.408$

Conclusion

To sum up, results of many studies show that hope is a significant predictor of mental health and psychological well-being. Our findings suggest that the paths to happier life include hopeful and others-oriented mindset, genuine concern for the welfare of others, and altruism.

How can we maintain or develop a more hopeful attitude? Finally, here are some of our specific recommendations for boosting hope (Slezackova, 2015):

1. Seeing the positive things in life. Let's try to worry less about what we do not have or cannot change; instead, let's value and be thankful for all the good that comes to us.
2. Setting up the priorities. Let's ask ourselves what it is we truly want to achieve in life, identify the true values, priorities and things we find meaningful, and let's try to live our lives in congruence with them.
3. Determination of the goals. Setting progressive, adequate and attainable goals and considering different ways and paths to achieve them.
4. Being flexible. Let's keep in mind that the path to our goal does not have to be the shortest, most straightforward or only one.
5. Being connected. Maintaining social relationships and not rejecting support from other people.
6. Giving hope to others. From time to time, let's move our eyes away from our own wishes and desires and let's take a look around us. Can we bring a little hope for someone else?

To sum up, hope is what builds a meaningful bridge to a better future in times of adversity, uncertainty, and personal, social, or economic crises. By showing a direction, suggesting a way and strengthening one's belief in attaining meaningful goals, hope can become a vital buffer protecting people against negativity, resignation and despair.

Hope is a driving force of optimal human development and a valuable key to the flourishing of both the individual and the whole society.

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