

Distinguishing Hope from Optimism and Related Affective States

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Three studies examined the conceptual and psychological differences between hope and related mental states. In Study 1, participants provided definitions of hope as well as optimism, want, desire, wish, and the non-anticipatory state of joy; in Study 2, participants wrote about a time when they had experienced each of these states. These definitions and stories were coded for a number of psychological features that were then used to distinguish the different states. Study 3 mapped the differences among the six mental states into a multidimensional conceptual space. Overall, hope is most closely related to wishing but distinct from it. Most important, hope is distinct from optimism by being an emotion, representing more important but less likely outcomes, and by affording less personal control. The importance of combining a folk-conceptual perspective with a more traditional analysis of appraisal for understanding differences among psychological constructs is discussed.

KEY WORDS: hope; optimism; positive psychology; emotion; multi-dimensional scaling; future-oriented thinking; appraisal; folk psychology.

One of the remarkable human capacities is the ability to flexibly represent future events, imagine diverse possible outcomes, and act in light of those representations. Even considerations of far distant or highly unlikely events can affect current action. Key mediators of the impact that these future representations have on action include the appraisals of the event as more or less attractive, more or less likely, and more or less controllable—and their concomitant affect. Particular combinations of these appraisals constitute basic affective states, such as fear, worry, excitement, and hope.

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Among future-directed affective states, hope is of particular interest, because it is considered a powerful psychological asset in the face of a challenging environment (Snyder, 2000). A second motivation of the present studies is our conviction that hope is a psychological state distinct from optimism, counter to these states' treatment as near-synonyms in the literature. For example, Maier, Peterson, and Schwartz (2000) discussed research on optimism but titled their chapter *From Helplessness to Hope*. Similarly, in a paper on the classification of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2001), hope and optimism, along with future-mindedness and future orientation, were grouped together as one trait. While the authors acknowledged that grouping these states together may mask the heterogeneity of the trait, they referred only to the benefits of combining these states (e.g., de-emphasizing the Christian connotation of hope and the socioeconomic connotation of future orientation). It is our argument that by discovering the psychological distinctions among hope, optimism, and other positive anticipatory states, we may better understand the nature of hope and related psychological phenomena.

Previous Research on Hope

Research on the psychology of hope has been minimal compared to research on other positive states such as happiness and joy. It also pales in comparison with the related state of optimism, which has been featured in over twice as many articles as has hope. Yet hope is a fundamental emotion for understanding basic human responses such as goal setting, investment, coping, and change. Although hope is not usually classified as a basic emotion (Averill, 1994), it can be considered one if the principle for classification is importance for human survival. It is difficult to imagine the survival of a society without hope, especially in light of destruction brought about by wars and natural disasters.

Recent research conducted on hope falls into two distinct camps. One line of research (Snyder et al., 1991) defines hope as a two-dimensional construct that involves a person's determination to pursue goal-directed behavior (i.e., agency) and one's ability to find ways to meet those goals (i.e., pathways). According to this theory, hope is described as the motivation to attach oneself to positive outcomes or goals. This theory was developed through individuals' self-reports about their goal thinking, and the definition is based on these descriptions of goal-directed thought. Thus, hope is viewed in a goal-setting framework where hopeful individuals are determined to get what they want and can figure out how to do so (Snyder, 2000).

The goal-setting theory of hope does not account for the experience of hope when an individual has little perceived control over an outcome, or at least it does not suggest that an individual will be hopeful in these types of situations. According to the theory, hope exists only when an individual has the motivation

to remain engaged with a future outcome and can anticipate a way to reach that outcome.

Thus, the goal-setting theory focuses on hope as a cognitive set and not as an emotion. The emotions that are associated with hope are seen as resulting from goal-directed thought, with positive emotions reflecting perceived success in the pursuit of goals and negative emotions reflecting perceived failures (Snyder et al., 1991; Snyder, 2000, 2002). Thus, even though hope is recognized as having affective qualities, those qualities are not considered primary in keeping a person engaged with a future outcome.

A second line of research (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990) investigated hope by exploring its relation to social systems and individual behavior. The focus here is on the social norms or rules that help constitute hope, at least for Americans. Like Snyder and colleagues, the researchers began by asking individuals about their experiences of hope. However, instead of focusing on participants' goal pursuits, Averill and colleagues asked participants directly about experiences of what the participants themselves considered to be hope. Through their research, Averill and colleagues established four "rules" of hope based on the appraisals of future situations. First, hope is appropriate only when one appraises the probability of attainment as realistic (prudential rule). Second, people hope only for what they appraise as personally or socially acceptable (moralistic rule). Third, only outcomes and events that are appraised as important are hoped for (priority rule). In fact, if the object of hope is of sufficient importance, the prudential and moralistic rules may be set aside. And finally, people who hope should be willing to take appropriate action to achieve their goals, if action is possible (action rule).

Averill et al. (1990) found that the types of outcomes one hopes for extend beyond those that fit into a goal-setting framework. The majority of participants described hoping for success in achievement-related contexts (e.g., success in some endeavor) and in interpersonal relationships, but also for the well-being of another person. Such altruistic hopes are often completely beyond one's control, and they would not be captured by a goal-setting framework.

Averill et al. (1990) also established hope as an emotion by comparing it to the more prototypical emotions of anger and love. The researchers established that hope conforms to the major parameters of an emotional model of behavior. First, they found that hope is difficult to control, hence more like a passion than an action (e.g., "I couldn't help but hope"). Second, hope is nonrational in that people who hope for something important enough may convince themselves that chances of the outcome occurring are better than they actually are. Finally, the researchers found that like other emotions, hope motivates behavior. Thus, according to these findings, the emotion of hope appears to play a primary role in keeping a person engaged with a future outcome.

Roseman, Spindel, and Jose (1990) investigated hope as part of their comprehensive appraisal theory of emotion by asking participants to recall 16 discrete

emotions and rate the event that caused each emotion on measures of different appraisals. Hope was frequently experienced in a negative situational context, in contrast to other positive emotions (joy, affection, and pride), which were experienced when the situation was congruent with one's motives and thus more positive. Participants also rated themselves as having little power over hoped-for outcomes, distinguishing hope from other positive emotions, which were associated with higher power (or personal control). Finally, participants rated the likelihood of hoped-for outcomes as lower than those that elicited joy, affection, or pride. Thus, the appraisals associated with hope appear to be different from those associated with other positive emotions.

Hope and Other Positive Anticipatory States

Optimism

Optimism, as conceptualized by Scheier and Carver (1985), is the generalized expectancy that the future will be positive. Like hope, it is a positive anticipatory state; thus, it is not surprising that hope and optimism have been portrayed as similar constructs in the psychological literature (Gottschalk, 1974; Sethi & Seligman, 1994; Maier, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2000). However, distinctions between the two states have also been reported. In Snyder's theory on hope, optimism is viewed as a focus on outcome expectancies determining goal-directed behavior, whereas hope involves a reciprocal action between efficacy expectancies (i.e., agency) and outcome expectancies (i.e., pathways; Snyder et al., 1991). Averill et al. (1990) suggested that the difference between the two states resides in hope being an emotion. Thus, people will hope for things that are important to them despite a low likelihood of realizing that outcome, whereas optimism is more closely attuned to the probability of an outcome occurring. People will also hope for things that are more personally relevant, whereas they will be optimistic for a broader range of outcomes. However, these comparisons are tentative because optimism was not directly studied in this line of research.

Wanting and Desire

In a study of appraisal patterns hypothesized to elicit particular emotions, Arnold (1960) found that a person's perceived degree of difficulty in attaining an outcome influenced which future-directed state was elicited. Wanting and desire were elicited when conditions were judged as favorable for realizing the outcome, whereas hope was elicited when conditions were judged as difficult but the outcome was still attainable (as cited in Roseman et al., 1990). Averill et al. (1990) found differences between wanting/desire and hope on the feature of likelihood, with hoped-for outcomes perceived as sometimes more and sometimes less likely

than wants or desires. They also found differences on the importance of the outcome, with hoped-for outcomes rated as more important than those desired or wanted. Finally, differences emerged in the types of outcomes, with hoped-for outcomes described as less materialistic, socially more acceptable, more enduring and/or in the future, and more abstract and/or intangible than the objects of wants or desire.

Wishing

Whereas one might grant that wanting and desiring are distinct from hope, the state of wishing may be more difficult to discriminate because both hoping and wishing allow for low event probabilities and are fueled by the subjective valence of the represented future event. However, we should find systematic differences between these two states as well. Indeed, natural language data collected as part of a larger project (Malle & Knobe, 2001) suggest that hope is directed at somewhat more controllable events ($M = 0.36$ on a scale from -2 to $+2$) than is wishing ($M = -0.46$), $t(73) = 2.3$, $p < .05$. This effect was driven by the fact that 45% of instances of wishing in this data sample referred to counterfactuals (e.g., I wish I liked the play), whereas none of the hope expressions did.

Overview

The present studies attempt to delineate the conceptual and psychological parameters of hope in comparison with optimism, wanting, desiring, wishing, and the non-anticipatory state of joy. Study 1 examined folk definitions of these six states, Study 2 explored their appraisal parameters, and Study 3 mapped the differences between the six states into a multidimensional conceptual space.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants

Fifty-two undergraduate students participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The sample consisted of 9 males and 43 females. Ages ranged from 17 to 33, with a median age of 19. Participants were required to be fluent in English; one participant was a non-native speaker but had been speaking English for 12 years.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were run in groups of no more than 10. Upon entering the lab, they were asked to read and sign the consent form, which introduced them to the topic of the study. Then they inspected the top page of the questionnaire, which introduced the nine mental states that they would later encounter. Participants were asked to take a moment to think about how these states were related to each other before they proceeded with the study.

The first question of the study asked, “How would you describe hope?” Participants were then asked the same question for the following states: desire, despair, fear, joy, optimism, wanting, wishing, and worry (despair, fear, and worry were filler items). The order of asking about these eight comparison states was counterbalanced using a Latin square design. The experimenter emphasized that she did not want the participants to respond with what they thought was the dictionary definition but rather with how they would use the word in everyday conversation. After describing each of the eight comparison states, participants were asked in what way hope and that particular state were the same and in what way they were different, with the order of the two questions counterbalanced. (For brevity, these data are not reported here, but they yielded comparable results to the direct definitions.)

Participants were allowed and even encouraged to go back and forth between states. This was done so that if they thought of a better or additional way to describe one of the states while describing another, they would feel free to do so. Also, if they got stuck on one description, they were free to skip that one and come back to it later.

Feature Coding

To capture specific features of the folk definitions, a coding scheme was developed using pre-testing data, findings by other hope researchers (Averill et al., 1990; Snyder et al., 1991), and the researchers’ own hypotheses. Words and phrases from participants’ descriptions were coded for one or more of the features listed below. Coders read a description and then made a yes/no judgment as to whether the description included each of the features. If a participant either distinctly stated or implied a particular feature, it was coded for that description.

1. *Cognition*: Examples of words coded for this feature were *belief, know, conscious of, think, imagine, consider, and remember*. These were cognitions one would experience concurrent with a particular state.
2. *Emotion*: Phrases including the words *feel* or *feeling of* were coded for this feature, as well as words such as *sentiment, mood, passion, longing, and yearning*. Also, other emotions used to describe that state were included (e.g., “joy is happiness”). However, the other states included in the study

were not coded for this feature; rather they were coded separately for the *relations among states* category (see below).

3. *Temporal*: Phrases referring to when the outcome will or did occur were coded for this feature (e.g., “future”; “down the line”). This feature was divided into the categories of *in the future* and *in the past*.
4. *Personal control*: This feature was divided into *high* and *low personal control*. It included phrases expressing the amount of perceived personal control an individual has over the outcome of a situation in which the state is experienced, not over the state itself (e.g., “can’t control situation, but at one point could”).
5. *Likelihood*: Words related to the probability of the outcome occurring were coded for this feature (e.g., *chance, possibility, probability, likelihood, odds, certainty/uncertainty*). This feature was divided into *likely* and *unlikely*.
6. *Function*: Phrases that expressed the function of the state were coded for this feature (e.g., “hope keeps a person focused on his/her goals”).
7. *Object of the emotion*: Phrases such as *hopeful for* or *joyous about* were coded for this feature. This included phrases followed by general terms such as *something* or *life*.
8. *Cause*: This feature consisted of circumstances that caused the emotion. For example, “receiving something unexpected causes joy.”
9. *Expectancy*: Words or phrases related to the expectancy of an outcome were coded for this feature (e.g., *expect, anticipate, look forward to*). This was divided into *expect* and *don’t expect*.
10. *Action*: Any action caused by experiencing a particular state was coded for this feature. These actions could either directly or indirectly bring about a positive outcome. This feature was divided into *take action* and *can’t take action*.
11. *Consequences*: Phrases that implied consequences of experiencing the state were coded for this feature (e.g., “joy causes a person to be a little irrational”).
12. *Physiology*: Any physiological symptoms mentioned in relation to experiencing the state were coded for this feature (e.g., *racing heart, can’t sleep, short of breath*).

Three undergraduate research assistants served as coders, and they were trained on the first 20 descriptions for each state. Each assistant coded 4 of the 6 states, so that each state was coded twice. Training reliability was computed for each feature across states and ranged from 60 to 96% for the first 20 descriptions. (Because of extreme and varying base rates, kappa values were not computed for reliability.) One of the researchers reconciled any discrepancies between coders. Agreement for the rest of the descriptions ranged from 76 to 97%. Thus, the agreement was satisfactory and improved after the training period.

Relations Among States

We separately coded instances in which a particular mental state was described by reference to one of the other eight mental states, tapping the states' mutual "confusability."

Results

Feature Coding

The number of participants who mentioned a particular feature was computed for each of the six mental states of interest. These totals were then analyzed using a binomial test to determine which of the states differed significantly from a given feature's base rate response (i.e., the average number of participants who mentioned that feature). For example, the base rate for the feature *cognition* was 30% (see Table I); the number of participants who described optimism as a cognition was 79%, differing significantly from the base rate. The reported characteristic features for each mental state represent significant base-rate deviations at $p < .01$, unless otherwise noted.

There were no gender differences for any of the distinguishing features, a finding that converges with the absence of gender differences in research conducted by Averill et al. (1990).

Hope

Seventy-seven percent of the participants mentioned a future outcome when describing hope (see Table I for frequencies). Thirty percent of participants described hope in terms of serving a function, whereas almost no one described other states in that way. In particular, participants referred to hope as keeping a person focused on one's goals, as keeping a person going, or as a way to control negative feelings. Fifty-eight percent of the participants described hope in terms of expecting a positive outcome to occur.

Just like all other states except for optimism, hope was described by most people as an emotion. In addition, like all other states except for joy, hope was described as being about or for a representational object. These objects were often events (not entities, as in the case of wanting), and participants typically described these events as important (a hypothesis we will test directly in Study 2). Moreover, the events can serve someone other than the self, such as a close other or the community (e.g., "a cure for AIDS").

Optimism

The great majority (79%) of participants described optimism as a cognitive process. Most of these descriptions referred to having a positive outlook, looking

Table I. Frequencies of Features to Describe Each Mental State (Study 1)

Feature	Mental state							Base rate (%)
	Hope	Optimism	Want	Desire	Wish	Joy		
Cognition	21	41(+)	5(-)	6(-)	20	0(-)	30	
Emotion	29	9(-)	32	47(+)	34	50(+)	65	
Future	40(+)	20	7(-)	15	23	2(-)	35	
Past	0	0	0	0	0	12(+)	4	
High control	0	1	0	2	2	3	3	
Low control	5	0	1	2	13(+)	1	7	
Likely	9	14(+)	1	3	2	1	10	
Unlikely	3	1	0(-)	2	22(+)	0(-)	9	
Function	16(+)	1	1	7	1	4	10	
Representational object	42	40	45	46	47(+)	21(-)	78	
Caused by	6	0(-)	3	3	2	16(+)	10	
Expect positive outcome	30(+)	18(+)	1(-)	0(-)	1(-)	0(-)	16	
Don't expect pos. outcome	1	0	1	0	17(+)	1	6	
Take action	6	9	2	5	10	0(-)	10	
Can't take action	2	0	0	0	3	1	2	
Consequences	0	0	2	6(+)	3	0	4	
Physiological	1	0	0	5(+)	0	4	3	

Note. (+) number is above the row base rate; (-) number is below the base rate (both $ps < .01$). $N = 52$ for each state.

on the bright side, or thinking positively. Some participants also described optimism as the belief that everything would work out or that things would get better. Only 17% of participants described optimism as an emotion, which discriminated it from the other states. More than with other mental states, 27% of participants described optimism in terms of an individual perceiving an outcome as likely to occur. Thirty-five percent of the participants (fewer than with hope but more than with other states) described optimism in terms of expecting a positive outcome to occur. Also, none of the participants described optimism as being caused by specific events. This may be because optimism was sometimes referred to as a personality trait (e.g., having a positive outlook or attitude); thus, it would exist independently from a particular situation.

Finally, like hope and all other states except joy, optimism was described by most participants (77%) as being about or for an object. However, participants often described optimism for objects that are temporally non-specific, such as for “life in general” or for “things to improve.”

Wanting

Only 10% of participants described wanting as a cognition, which was fewer than for other mental states. Also, fewer participants described wanting explicitly in terms of a future outcome (14%) or an expectation of a positive outcome (2%), and practically no one referred to the (un)likelihood of getting what they want. Interestingly, no feature was used *more* often in descriptions of wanting than in descriptions of other mental states. One possible interpretation is that *to want* is the preferred verbal reference to the generic folk concept of desire (see Malle & Knobe, 2001), and as a basic folk concept it serves to define and distinguish other mental states while itself being difficult to define with distinct features.

As with all other mental states except joy, most participants (87%) described wanting in terms of being about or for an object, primarily entities rather than events.

Desire

Ninety-three percent of participants described desire as an intense emotion, a yearning or longing for someone or something. Unlike most other states, desire was also described in terms of being accompanied by a physiological response (10%). Only 12% of participants described desire as a cognition, and no one described it explicitly in terms of expecting a positive outcome.

As with the previously mentioned states, most participants (91%) described desire in terms of an object. Desires were similar to wants in that they were sometimes described as objects that are materialistic in nature, that may be bad for the individual, or that are for oneself. However, they were more often described

in terms of intensity: A desire is something that one “really” wants. Thus, desires appear to be conceptualized as intense wants.

Wishing

Twenty-six percent of participants (more than for any other mental state) described wishing as occurring when a person experiences little personal control over attaining a positive outcome. Forty-three percent also described it as something one does when a positive outcome is unlikely or impossible. And 33% of the participants (far more than for other states) described wishing in terms of *not* expecting the wished for object or event.

Ninety-three percent of participants described wishing in terms of a representational object, which was more often an event than an entity, either something for the person, for someone else, or for the community (e.g., world peace).

Joy

Almost all participants (96%) described joy as a very positive emotion, often associated with happiness or contentment. None of the participants described it as a cognition. Beyond that, joy differed from the other mental states on three features. First, joy was described by almost no participants (2%) as being related to a future outcome but instead as the only state that occurs after the outcome has been realized (23%). Thirty percent of the participants also described joy in terms of being caused by something (which is not surprising given the past-oriented nature of joy). Finally, joy was described in terms of being about or for an object less frequently (40%) than the other states, perhaps because joy can also be a mood, which lacks a representational object.

Relations Among States

Table II illustrates the relationships among the defined mental states by tabulating how often a given target state was described using one of the other mental

Table II. Mental States Mentioned in Definitions of Target States

Target state	Related mental states mentioned in definition of target state						Total
	Hope	Optimism	Want	Desire	Wish	Joy	
Hope	—	4	21	7	12	0	44
Optimism	5	—	0	0	0	0	5
Want	5	0	—	23	4	0	32
Desire	4	0	33	—	1	0	38
Wish	16	0	20	4	—	0	40
Joy	2	1	0	0	0	—	3

Note. The total number of definitions per target state was 52.

state concepts. These findings have to be interpreted with caution, because each participant was first asked to describe hope and descriptions of the remaining states followed in counterbalanced order; thus, the concept of hope was always primed when participants defined the other states. Nevertheless, hope was frequently mentioned only for wishing (40%), and this relationship appears to be fairly symmetric as wishing was also mentioned in descriptions of hope (27%). More significantly, wanting appears to be a constituting state of hope (mentioned in 48% of the descriptions), as well as of desire (87%) and of wishing (50%). Desire comes closest to symmetry with wanting in that it is also used to describe it (72%). Optimism and joy appear to be unrelated to the other four states.

Discussion

These findings portray hope as an emotion that occurs when an individual is focused on an important positive future outcome. Often the individual perceives little personal control over the situation. The individual may see a positive outcome as somewhat unlikely and yet still expect it to occur. Thus, being hopeful enables people to maintain an approach-related state despite their present inability to reach the desired outcome.

Hope is a type of wanting that is most closely associated with wishing. Both states are experienced when one is looking for a positive outcome to occur. This outcome is more likely to be an event than an object, and it can benefit oneself or others. Hoping and wishing are experienced when one perceives having little personal control over an outcome.

However, there are some distinct qualities that differentiate the two states. While both hoping and wishing involve a relatively low likelihood of the outcome occurring, individuals tend to wish for outcomes that have little or no possibility of occurring. That is, wishing entails not expecting the wished-for outcome, whereas hoping entails having some expectation of it occurring despite the odds. Consequently, wishing appears to be an activity that people engage in as a way to generate positive affect and occasionally even to escape reality by fantasizing about the future. Thus, the benefits derived from fantasizing about how nice life would be if one looked like a supermodel or won the lottery may outweigh any negative affect caused by realizing that this is not the way things are and probably never will be.

Hoping, on the other hand, involves more of an investment rather than mere fancy. Because the individual has some expectation of reaching a positive outcome, that person may invest a significant amount of time thinking about the situation. Also, because people hope for outcomes that are important to them, hoping will not be as fleeting as wishing often is.

Hope vs. Optimism

Even though hope and optimism are often used interchangeably in the literature (Gottschalk, 1974; Maier, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2000), this study shows that the two states are distinct. One interesting finding is that optimism appears to be separate from the “wanting” states. Participants never used the concepts of want, wish, or desire to describe optimism and vice versa. Also, participants rarely used the concept of optimism to describe hope and vice versa. Thus, while optimism and hope both constitute positive affect towards the future, being optimistic differs qualitatively from hoping.

One way in which hope and optimism differ is in their represented outcomes. People were found to be optimistic more often about general outcomes (e.g., today will be a good day), whereas they hoped for specific outcomes (e.g., recovering from the flu). Since emotions are elicited by particular objects or events as opposed to more general outcomes (Averill, 1994), this finding is consistent with hope, and not optimism, being described as an emotion.

Hope and optimism also differ in how they are related to personal control. A student may be optimistic about doing well on a test because she knows that she can study for it beforehand. In the case of hoping to recover from the flu, however, the person probably does not have the ability to heal himself and so experiences hope that he will recover quickly.

Both hope and optimism involve some expectation that the positive outcome will occur; however, for optimism this expectancy appears to be dependent on a substantial likelihood of the outcome occurring. For example, if someone has planned a picnic and the forecast is for sunny and warm weather, then the person will be optimistic that the weather will cooperate. If, however, the forecast is for cloudy skies with a chance of rain, the person may resort to hoping that the weather will cooperate but may not necessarily be optimistic that it will.

Finally, optimism appears to be associated with outcomes that embody more positive affect than hoped-for outcomes. This may be due to the circumstances under which each of these states is experienced. In the picnic example mentioned above, optimism would occur when the person anticipated good weather. Thus, the individual would appraise the situation in a positive way. However, if one is merely hoping for good weather, then there must be some question as to whether or not the picnic will actually occur. Thus, while the person may make an effort to remain positive, there will be some negative affect associated with the situation.

In order to gain a better understanding of how each of these states actually operates psychologically within a situation, we conducted a second study in which participants wrote about a time when they experienced hope and other related psychological states. By examining the types of situations in which each of these states was experienced, we expected to highlight the specific psychological qualities of hope and optimism. In addition, we asked participants to rate the importance and

likelihood of each outcome as well as their perceived personal control over obtaining the outcome. Study 1 suggested that these three dimensions were critical for differentiating hope from other related states.

STUDY 2

Method

Participants

Eighty-eight undergraduate students participated in the study in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The sample consisted of 18 males and 70 females. One participant did not complete the questionnaire and was dropped from the analysis, leaving a sample size of 87. Ages ranged from 17 to 50, with a median age of 19. Participants were required to be fluent in English; four participants were non-native speakers, but all had been speaking English for at least 12 years.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were run in groups of no more than 10. Upon entering the lab, they were asked to read and sign the consent form, which introduced them to the topic of the study. They were then presented with a questionnaire in which they were asked to recall a time when they felt hope and to tell the story of what happened on that occasion. Participants then answered three questions using a 9-point scale: how important the outcome was that they hoped for (with 1 = *not very important* and 9 = *very important*); how much personal control they experienced in this situation (with 1 = *very little personal control* and 9 = *a lot of personal control*); and how likely they thought the outcome would turn out positively when they first started hoping for it (with 1 = *very unlikely* and 9 = *very likely*).

To keep the task manageable, this methodology was repeated for only four other states. After writing about hope, half of the participants (Group 1) wrote personal stories about optimism, desire, joy, and despair, and the other half (Group 2) wrote personal stories about wanting, wishing, fear, and worry (despair, fear, and worry are not analyzed here). Thus, there were twice as many hope stories as stories about other states.

Before writing, participants were asked to imagine themselves back in the place and time of the situation in which they experienced the particular state. This was done to enhance their memory of the event and to better capture the state experienced in that situation. They were also asked to try to think of a different situation for each mental state instead of using the same one for all of the states. This was done to avoid bending the meaning of the state to fit the situation rather

than finding a situation that adequately captured the true meaning of the particular state. However, participants were told that if they were having difficulty coming up with a different scenario for each state, or if they had a life event that they thought adequately captured more than one of the states, they could use the same scenario twice.

Finally, participants were reminded that all data would be treated confidentially. Since this study involved writing about one's thoughts and feelings as well as revealing personal information in the stories, the researcher feared participants might censor themselves. By verbally reminding them of confidentiality, it was hoped that they would be more likely to write about important and meaningful events than they might have otherwise.

Feature Coding

The coding scheme from Study 1 was used for this study as well, with two notable differences. First, the feature object was omitted. Since all of the stories involved a time when the participants experienced a particular state, they all included the object of each state. Thus, the presence or absence of this feature did not usefully discriminate the different states; only the specific types of objects were content-coded (see below). Second, coders in this study were able to use the context of the story in their judgments of some of the features. For example, whereas in Study 1 personal control was coded only if a participant directly stated that a given state is experienced when an individual has either a lot or little personal control over the outcome, in this study personal control was also coded if the story's context implied that the participant had a lot or a little personal control.

In addition, because of the qualitative nature of the analysis, we examined only reasonable prototypes of each state in order not to dilute the interpretation of the specific feature patterns. For example, the brief story "I hoped for a new puppy" could have just as well been about a time when one experienced wanting (e.g., "I wanted a new puppy") or wishing (e.g., "I wished for a new puppy"). Thus, we sought to analyze only those stories that were consensually seen as illustrating the particular mental state. We accomplished this task by having a separate sample of participants read these stories and identify the state each story represented. Stories for which the state was correctly identified at least half of the time were coded. (These correctly identified stories are also analyzed in Study 3, where more details regarding the procedure used for identification are provided.) As a result, there are differing numbers of stories for each state.

Two undergraduate research assistants served as coders, and they were trained on the first 10 stories for each state. Training reliability was computed for each feature across states and ranged from 68% to 100% for the first 10 stories. One author reconciled any discrepancies between coders. Agreement for the rest of

the stories ranged from 78% to 100%. Thus, the agreement was satisfactory and improved after the training period.

Object of States

The objects of the states fell into five categories: altruistic (outcome for another person); relationship (one person behaving in a way that benefits his or her relationship with another); achievement-related outcomes (reaching a goal or accomplishing a task); an object or event; and changes in oneself that one does not have a lot of control over (e.g., improved mental or physical well-being, personality changes).

Two undergraduate research assistants served as coders. Agreement was 80%, with most of the disagreement occurring for the state of joy. One author reconciled any discrepancies between coders.

Results

Feature Coding

As in Study 1, a binomial test was used to determine which of the states differed significantly from the base rate response for each feature (the alpha error was set to $p < .01$ unless otherwise noted). Base rates for the features in the stories tended to be higher than for the definitions in Study 1 with the exception of *unlikely*, *function*, *don't expect*, and *consequences* (see Table III). Thus, many of the features became more apparent when the states were described as experienced in concrete situations than when they were conceptually defined. Also, as in Study 1, there were no gender differences for the distinguishing features.

Hope

Thirty-two of the 87 hope stories (37%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and thus coded for this study. As with the definitions in Study 1, participants spoke of hope in terms of a future outcome (91%) and never in terms of something that happened in the past (see Table III for frequencies). Compared to the base rates, hope was more often characterized as associated with low personal control (53%) and with an inability to take action (13%). There was also a trend that hoped-for outcomes were more often described as unlikely (19%, $p < .05$). In line with base rates, hope was described both as a cognition (53%) and an emotion (78%).

Among the hope stories, 38% were categorized as altruistic hopes; that is, the participant was hoping for a positive outcome for another person, usually a close

Table III. Frequencies of Psychological Features Characterizing Each Mental State (Study 2)

Feature	Mental state							Base rate (%)
	Hope (N = 32)	Optimism (N = 18)	Want (N = 24)	Desire (N = 15)	Wish (N = 16)	Joy (N = 41)		
Cognition	17	18(+)	9	11	11	11(-)	11(-)	53
Emotion	25	11	10(-)	13	9	35(+)	35(+)	71
Future	29(+)	15	19	11	14(+)	2(-)	2(-)	62
Past	0(-)	0	0(-)	0	1	27(+)	27(+)	19
High control	0	11(+)	3	2	0	3	3	13
Low control	17(+)	0	3	4	4	3	3	21
Likely	2	16(+)	0	3	0	2	2	16
Unlikely	6	0	2	1	3	0	0	8
Function	3	5(+)	2	1	0	2	2	9
Caused by	25	13	7(-)	9	9	38(+)	38(+)	69
Expect positive outcome	4	14(+)	1	2	1	3	3	17
Don't expect pos. outcome	2	0	1	0	1	1	1	3
Take action	6	12(+)	11	5	5	4(-)	4(-)	29
Can't take action	4(+)	0	1	0	1	0	0	4
Consequences	1	0	0	2(+)	0	0	0	2
Physiological	1	0	0	2	0	4	4	5

Note. (+) number is above the row base rate; (-) number is below the base rate (both *ps* < .01).

other. Nineteen percent of the stories had to do with hoping for a particular object or hoping to participate in an enjoyable event (e.g., getting tickets to a sporting event); 16% were about relationships (e.g., “hoping that my parents would get back together”); 16% were about achievement-related outcomes (e.g., getting accepted by a particular university); and 13% of the stories involved hoping for one’s physical or mental well-being (e.g., overcoming an eating disorder). Thus, the majority of the situations in which participants experienced hope were ones in which they may not have had a high degree of personal control but in which the outcome was important to them.

Optimism

Eighteen of the 42 optimism stories (43%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and therefore coded here. Optimism was characterized as a cognition in all stories. More frequently than the base rates, it was experienced when a positive outcome was likely (89%) and when the participants expected a positive outcome (78%), mirroring the results of Study 1. In addition, optimism was characterized as having a high degree of personal control over the outcome (61%), never as having a low degree of personal control ($p < .05$), and often as affording the ability to take action towards reaching a positive outcome (67%). These results are diametrically opposed to the findings for hope.

One additional finding was that participants described optimism, more often than the base rates, as serving a function (28%), speaking of how keeping a positive attitude resulted in a positive outcome. Such a functional characterization was nearly absent in Study 1 (2%). The discrepancy between these two findings may be explained by the objects of participants’ optimism. In Study 1, they tended to describe optimism as occurring for more general outcomes (e.g., life in general), whereas in this study they followed the instruction to write about a specific time when they experienced optimism.

Among optimism stories, 67% were about achievement-related outcomes; 11% had to do with relationships; 11% were altruistic in nature; 6% were for a particular object or to participate in an enjoyable event; and 6% were for one’s well-being. Thus, the types of situations in which participants were optimistic were overwhelmingly ones in which they could perceive a high degree of personal control.

Wanting

Twenty-four of the 42 want stories (57%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and therefore coded. Compared to the base rates, fewer participants experienced wanting as an emotion (42%), fewer described wanting as being caused by something (29%), and, not surprisingly, no one described wanting

as occurring when the positive outcome had already occurred. Several stories characterized wanting as being directed toward a future outcome (79%). This value was slightly above base rates ($p < .05$), whereas in Study 1 participants rarely mentioned the future-directedness of wants (14%). It appears that a future direction is a natural feature of real experiences of wanting but not necessarily a salient defining attribute.

Among the want stories, 63% were directed at a particular object or involved experiencing an enjoyable event; 21% were for achievement related outcomes; 8% were for relationships; and 8% were for one's well-being. Thus the majority of wants were for things (e.g., a new camera) or to have fun (e.g., attend a football game). These results mirror those found in Study 1.

Desire

Fifteen of the 42 desire stories (36%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and therefore coded. Compared to the base rates, more participants referred to the consequences of desiring a particular outcome (13%), as they did in Study 1. Likewise, more participants referred to desire as having physiological (13%) qualities and also emotional (87%) qualities, but these two features were less significant than in Study 1 ($ps < .05$).

Among the desire stories, 47% had to do with relationships; 27% were directed at a particular object or enjoyable event; 13% were for achievement-related outcomes; and 13% were for one's well-being. That the majority of desires were directed at another person may explain why they are discriminated by the features of physiological reaction and emotion (e.g., "I was so wrapped up in thoughts of desire for my boyfriend that I was unable to concentrate in class").

Wishing

Sixteen of the 39 wish stories (41%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and coded. Exceeding the base rates, participants often spoke of wishing for something in the future (88%), but this was also the only state that had counterfactual objects such as wishing for the past to be different (e.g., "In high school, I was too afraid to try out for the basketball team; after high school was over, I wished I had tried out"). As in Study 1, participants wished for unlikely outcomes (19%, $p < .05$).

Among the wishing stories, 38% were for a particular object or enjoyable event; 31% had to do with relationships; 19% were for achievement-related outcomes; and 12% were for one's well-being.

Joy

Forty-one of the 45 joy stories (91%) were correctly identified at least half of the time and thus coded. (This high percentage, especially as compared to the other states, is not surprising given that joy is a reactionary and not an anticipatory state. Therefore, stories about the experience of joy were much different from the other stories, and thus more easily identifiable.) As in the state descriptions of Study 1, participants referred to joy significantly more often as an emotion (85%) and significantly less often as a cognition (27%). Joy was almost always characterized as being caused by a specific event (93%), and the outcomes were seen as taking place in the past (66%) and not in the future (5%). As a result, none of the participants saw the outcome as unlikely to occur. Also, very few participants considered joy as prompting them to take a particular action to reach the outcome (10%).

Among the joy stories, 44% involved relationships; 29% had to do with achievement-related outcomes; 12% involved a particular object or enjoyable activity; 10% were altruistic in nature; and 5% were for one's well-being.

Ratings of Importance, Likelihood, and Personal Control

Data analysis for this part of the study proceeded in two steps. First, the overall effects of the different states on ratings of importance, likelihood, and personal control were examined using within-subjects doubly multivariate analyses of variance. This analysis was conducted separately for the two groups of participants and hence for the two sets of mental states of interest—hope, optimism, desire, and joy as well as hope, wanting, and wishing. To make sure there were no significant differences between the two groups on the hope stories, independent *t* tests were performed on each of the three dependent variables, but none of the differences reached significance (see Table IV for means). Second, contrasts between hope and each of the other states were examined by running separate MANOVAs for hope and each of the other states, using discriminant function analysis to identify the arrangement of dependent variables that best discriminated between hope and each of the remaining states. (The degrees of freedom in the various tests differed slightly because of missing data.) Unlike with the feature coding, all stories—even those *not* consensually judged as representative of the state—were included in this set of analyses. This was necessary due to the repeated-measures design.

In the omnibus MANOVA for Group 1, the set of dependent variables was significantly affected by the type of mental state (hope, optimism, desire, or joy), multivariate $F(6, 35) = 6.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .65$ (see Table IV for means). Hope was then compared to each mental state, beginning with optimism. A significant difference emerged between hope and optimism, multivariate $F(3, 39) = 7.12, p < .005$. The discriminant function accounted for 35% of the variance, and all three

Table IV. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Importance, Likelihood, and Personal Control as a Function of Mental State (Study 2)

	Participants' ratings of outcomes					
	Importance		Likelihood		Personal control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group 1						
Hope	8.32	1.23	5.71	2.32	3.63	2.54
Optimism	7.66	1.46	6.68	2.02	5.49	2.61
Desire	6.61	2.54	4.93	2.80	4.95	2.96
Joy	7.66	1.74	7.73	1.94	5.17	2.85
Group 2						
Hope	7.98	1.48	5.83	2.37	4.10	2.85
Wanting	7.13	2.36	5.40	2.46	6.10	2.93
Wishing	7.10	2.17	5.18	2.52	4.35	3.02

variables loaded substantially on the function, with personal control contributing the most unique variance (discriminant function loadings and coefficients are presented in Table V). This pattern and the means in Table IV suggest that objects of hope are seen as more important, as allowing less personal control, and as being less likely than outcomes of optimism.

Hope was also shown to differ from desire, $F(3,40) = 8.16, p < .001$. The discriminant function accounted for 38% of the variance, and importance and personal control loaded heavily on the function, with importance contributing the most unique variance. The pattern of means suggests that objects of hope are seen as more important and as allowing less personal control than objects of desire.

Finally, hope differed significantly from joy, $F(3,39) = 12.61, p < .001$. The discriminant function accounted for 49% of the variance, and all three variables contributed substantial unique variance, with likelihood loading most strongly on the function. Not surprisingly, objects of hope were seen as less likely and as allowing less personal control than objects of joy, given the reactionary nature of joy. Objects of hope were also seen as more important.

Table V. Discriminant Function Loadings and Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients for Comparisons Between Hope and Each Other Mental State

Hope vs	Correlation with discr. function			Standardized discr. function coefficients		
	Importance	Likelihood	Control	Importance	Likelihood	Control
Optimism	.571	-.466	-.658	.640	-.362	-.708
Desire	.833	.284	-.411	.883	.166	-.529
Joy	.312	-.759	-.389	.554	-.781	-.604
Want	.561	.160	-.747	.622	.136	-.842
Wish	.865	.559	-.175	.755	.478	-.454

Turning now to the omnibus MANOVA for Group 2, the set of dependent variables was marginally affected by the type of mental state (hope, wanting, or wishing), multivariate $F(4,36) = 2.28, p = .06, \eta^2 = .29$. Hope was then compared to each mental state, beginning with wanting, where a significant difference was found between the two states, multivariate $F(3,40) = 4.96, p = .005$. The discriminant function accounted for 27% of the variance, with personal control and importance contributing and loading strongly. Objects of hope were perceived as allowing less personal control and as having greater importance than objects of wanting.

Then hope was compared to wishing, but no significant difference emerged between the two states on the set of dependent variables, multivariate $F(3,37) = 1.74, p > .1$.

Discussion

The results of this study converge with those of Study 1, but this time the story methodology embedded the mental states better in their natural contexts and thus captured the psychological features that naturally distinguish these states. As in Study 1, hope was portrayed as an emotion that occurs when an individual is focused on an important future outcome that allows little personal control, so the person is unable to take much action to realize the outcome. For example, even though an individual can be supportive of another person or give that person advice, there is often little the individual can do to directly help that person realize a particular outcome, especially when the outcome is beyond the other person's control. Also, when a person hopes in the context of a relationship, that individual is often hoping for the other person's acceptance or willingness to work out a problem. Again, the hoping individual has little personal control in these types of circumstances.

In addition, hope occurs not only when the context provides evidence that a positive outcome will be realized but also when the odds may not be in one's favor. Even when people realize that a hoped-for outcome may not occur, they often continue to hope for it anyway. What makes people willing to invest themselves in a situation that affords little personal control and whose outcome has a small chance of coming about? It may be the importance of the outcome, considering that objects of hope were rated as more important than the outcomes for all other mental states.

Of the contrasting mental states investigated, wishing and optimism in particular showed interesting relationships with hope. Wishing has clear similarities with hope in that both states are directed at outcomes that are "out of reach"—i.e., unlikely and affording little personal control. Nevertheless, what makes hope distinctive is the combination of the outcome's valued importance, the difficulty of effecting the outcome through one's own efforts, and the continuing investment

into it through cognitive and emotional energy in spite of the odds against it. People typically realize from the beginning that an outcome they are wishing for is unlikely to occur and that there is little they can do to bring it about, thus they soon stop thinking about the outcome. Hoping, however, entails a continued emotional and cognitive focus on the valued outcome. In a sense, then, hope involves a greater *commitment* to representing and seeking out the outcome than does wishing (see Malle & Knobe, 2001 for a discussion of commitment).

The present results establish a marked difference between hope and optimism. Hope is directed at outcomes considered less likely to occur, allowing less personal control, and having greater importance. The contexts and objects associated with hope are therefore distinct from those associated with optimism, quite aside from the fact that optimism is often seen as a more general trait or attitude (as suggested in Study 1). As a result, research on motivation, self-control, and positive psychology may benefit from distinguishing the constructs of hope and optimism, as they are clearly distinguished by people themselves.

STUDY 3

In this third study we attempted to map the differences among the six mental states into a conceptual space using multidimensional scaling. By doing so, we hoped to replicate the findings in the first two studies and lend clarity to the complex relations among these states.

Method

Participants

Eighty-one undergraduate students participated in the study in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The sample consisted of 32 males and 49 females. Ages ranged from 18 to 33, with a median age of 19. Participants were required to be fluent in English; one participant was a non-native speaker but had been speaking English for 14 years.

Materials

Three hundred two paragraph-length stories that earlier participants had written about hope, optimism, desire, want, wish, and joy (see Study 2) were used in this study.

The stories were transcribed as accurately as possible from the originals. Often the speaker labeled the target state in the story. Because we wanted to keep the structure of the stories as close as possible to the originals but not trivially give

away the target emotion, the word *represent* was used in place of the state label. Thus, the sentence “I hoped everything would turn out okay” was written as “I *represented* everything would turn out okay.”

Changes were made to correct grammar as well as to make the stories more accommodating for all word choice possibilities. That is, to reduce the likelihood of grammatical “give-aways,” sentences were reconstructed so that all word choices would fit well within the story. For example, if the state was followed by a preposition, the preposition was left out (e.g., “hoped for it to happen” became “*represented* it to happen”). Also, personally identifying information was altered whenever possible (e.g., “I went to France” was changed to “I went to Mexico”). This was done carefully so as not to alter the meaning of the story.

Originally, there were 302 completed stories; however, six were not used due to the sensitive and personally identifying nature of the stories. Thus, 296 stories were used in the study: 87 featuring hope, 42 optimism, 42 wanting, 42 desire, 39 wishing, and 44 joy. These stories were randomly ordered, and each questionnaire packet contained 30–60 stories. After each story, the six possible states depicted in the story were listed in a counterbalanced order using a Latin square design.

Procedure

Participants were run in groups of no more than 10. Upon entering the lab, they were asked to read and sign the consent form, which introduced them to the topic of the study. They then looked at the first page of the questionnaire, which consisted of three examples of the stories they would encounter in the study.

The instructions asked participants to read stories about a time when the author experienced a particular state and to check one of six terms (hope, optimism, desire, want, wish, and joy) that best represented what the speaker was feeling or thinking in the story. It was explained that sometimes a form of the word *represent* was used to refer to the target state instead of the original state label, and the experimenter guided the participants through three examples on the first page. In addition, participants were given a sheet that listed each of the states in its various verb forms to look at in order to help facilitate their responses. Finally, the experimenter recommended that participants not get distracted by the grammatical fit of the chosen state by explaining that this was not a grammar test. Instead they were told to choose the word that best embodied the emotional or cognitive state of the speaker, not the one that best fit grammatically.

Results and Discussion

As with the feature coding in Study 2, stories that were correctly identified at least 50% of the time were analyzed (although including the non-prototypical stories in our analysis gave nearly identical results). These identifications were

entered into a confusability matrix. The total for each state equaled the number of times that state was judged by participants. For example, 32 of the 87 hope stories were correctly identified at least 50% of the time. Between six and 14 participants judged each of these 32 stories, with a total of 404 judgments. Because there were unequal numbers of judgments provided for each state, the raw frequencies of identifications were converted into percentages to yield a similarity measure, which was then converted into a dissimilarity measure by subtracting it from 100.

The dissimilarity ratings were subjected to a multi-dimensional scaling analysis (SPSS ALSCAL), which recovers for each stimulus the spatial location that best fits the data. Solutions were obtained for one through three dimensions. The stress parameter decreased as the number of dimensions increased, with the stress lowest at three dimensions. However, there were not enough data values to precisely estimate the values of the parameters; thus, we could not count on the results being reliable. Therefore, we interpreted the two-dimensional solution (Kruskal's Stress 1 = .42), which accounted for 63% of the variance. As Fig. 1 shows, desire and wanting are similar (we suggested earlier that desires can be conceptualized as intense wants). Wish and hope were mapped in close proximity as well, which converges with the evidence from the "related states" portion of Study 1, with findings from the feature coding in both studies, and with the patterns of ratings on the importance, likelihood, and personal control variables. Finally, optimism

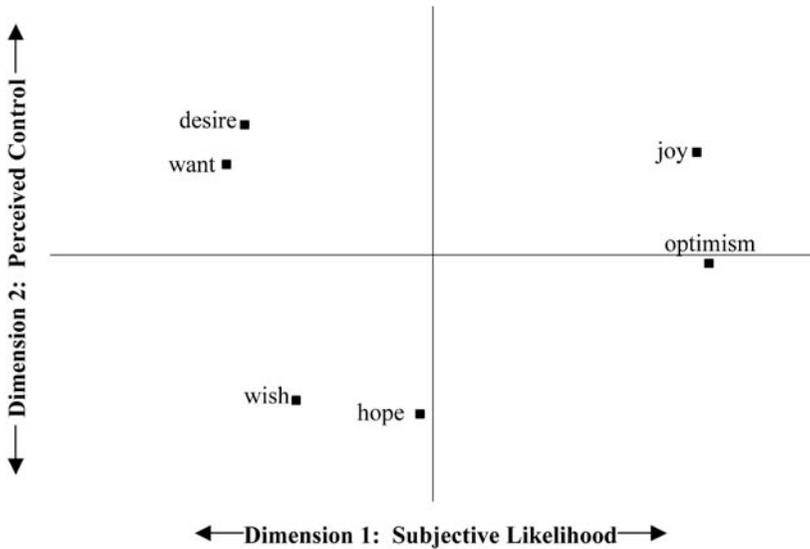


Fig. 1. Scatter plot showing locations of the mental states in 2-dimensional Euclidean distance model space (Study 3).

and joy were again separated from the “wanting” states and hence optimism was clearly distinct from hope.

In light of the discriminant function results from Study 2, Dimension 1 might be labeled “subjective likelihood” and Dimension 2 might be labeled “personal control.” The most concise way of characterizing the six mental states examined is therefore as follows: Desire and want have low subjective likelihood but high personal control; wishing has both low personal control and subjective likelihood; hope has low personal control and moderate subjective likelihood; optimism has moderate personal control and high subjective likelihood; and joy has both high personal control and subjective likelihood.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Previous lines of hope research have been driven by both cognitive-based (Snyder et al., 1991) and emotion-based (Averill et al., 1990) models. The present studies help to resolve some contradictory conceptualizations and findings resulting from these different perspectives, and they emphasize how hope is distinct from other closely related states.

According to the cognitive-based model, hope is defined in terms of a goal-setting framework, where a person has the motivation to remain engaged with a future outcome and can anticipate a way to reach that outcome. The emotion associated with hope depends on the perceived likelihood of achieving an outcome, with positive emotions resulting from perceived success and negative emotions resulting from perceived failure (Snyder et al., 1991; Snyder, 2002). However, Study 1 showed that people conceptualize hope as an emotion that serves the function of keeping a person focused on the desired outcome. Thus, the feeling of hope does not appear to be an after-effect of one’s perception of the likelihood of achieving an outcome; rather, hope appears to motivate behavior by keeping a person engaged with the outcome, a finding that more closely resonates with the emotion-based model (Averill et al., 1990).

Another implication of the goal-setting definition of hope is that people hope for outcomes that are relatively controllable. However, Study 2 demonstrated that people also hope for uncontrollable outcomes, a finding that mirrors that of Averill and colleagues (1990). These outcomes are also relatively important, which may explain why people continue to hope even when the outcome is not very likely. According to the affect-as-information hypothesis (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), feelings have a direct effect on judgments and decisions. If a person has deemed an uncertain but important outcome as worth hoping for, the person will continue to remain engaged with that outcome and take any action that is possible to reach it. Thus, the individual may cease to assess the probability of attaining the outcome and instead focus on the *possibility* of attaining the outcome (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001).

Conversely, when people do have a high degree of personal control, they no longer need to be just hopeful but can be optimistic because the outcome is now attainable. Instead, the person might now be optimistic that the outcome will occur, and the individual's engagement with the outcome may lessen. This was seen in both Studies 1 and 2 with subjects focused on when an outcome will occur more often for hoped-for outcomes than those for which they were optimistic. This aspect of engagement is also what distinguishes hope from wishing. Even though both states occur when outcomes are relatively unlikely and uncontrollable, hope is less fleeting than wishing. That is because when people hope, they are invested in the outcome; when they wish, they are more often fantasizing about the impossible. Thus, if a person is content with fantasizing about winning the lottery, that individual may not actually purchase a ticket and thus can only wish to obtain the fortune. However, one who buys a lottery ticket may hope to win the jackpot because though the outcome is not probable it is still possible (for a further discussion of fantasies vs. expectations and their implications for goal-directed behavior, see Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Positive Psychology and the Folk-Conceptual Approach

Our work fits well into the area of positive psychology with its focus on positive aspects of human life—that is, on strengths, abilities, and pleasant psychological states—rather than on weaknesses, disabilities, and unpleasant psychological states. Our studies of hope share this orientation toward the positive sides of human psychology, but they also highlight a particular approach to studying these phenomena that we see as fruitful.

Our approach to studying hope combines a folk-conceptual perspective with a more traditional functional analysis of antecedents and consequences. That is, we both explicate how people conceptualize hope and also identify psychological features with which hope is associated. This approach has two advantages over previous ones. First, we can be confident that our studies are really about the everyday phenomenon of hope and not about an artificially constructed phenomenon defined by researchers. Researchers sometimes take the freedom of redefining an everyday concept (such as hope or intentionality) in ways that significantly deviate from people's own understanding of the underlying phenomenon. This redefinition is usually not marked with a technical term and therefore leads to misunderstandings when research findings are translated into ordinary language. This is not problematic for such phenomena as implicit memory or cognitive dissonance, for which no folk concept exists. But when a phenomenon under study is captured by a well-developed folk concept, research must take this concept into account, because the psychological phenomenon—in this case, hope—is partly constituted by people's conception of what the phenomenon is (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Searle, 1995).

Of course, people's folk concept is not all there is to study about a phenomenon like hope. Here the second advantage of our approach comes into play. When we know what hope really is in people's minds, we can more precisely study its antecedents and consequences without concern that some of them might merely be antecedents or consequences of an experimentally constructed phenomenon. Moreover, some elements of the folk concept of hope have direct implications for the antecedents and consequences of hope as a psychological state—for example, its status as an emotion and its connection to important future outcomes.

Future Research

By developing a conceptual and psychological framework for hope, optimism, and related mental states, we have shown that people think about these states in distinct ways and that the states are distinguished by a small set of critical features, including importance, likelihood, and perceived personal control. A next step in refining this framework is to examine the relationships among these features such as the relation between importance and controllability. Another important step is to explore which of the features defining, say, hope and optimism, are most likely to affect cognitive and behavior patterns—for example, perseverance, investment, and irrational beliefs (for further discussion on the importance of discovering the unique aspects of positive anticipatory states, see Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002). Resulting findings would also have important consequences for individual differences research, because the dispositional tendencies toward hope and optimism, though correlated, are likely to predict distinct behaviors. Finally, the present approach of combining folk-conceptual and psychological data might also be extended to other mental states, such as belief or fear, which promise interesting applications in social and clinical work.

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