



A glance at children's family drawings: Associations with children's and parents' hope and attributional style



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ABSTRACT

The current study examined differences in children's and parents' hope and negative attributional style as a function of children's attachment categorizations derived from children's family drawings in 77 triads of young elementary school age children (mean age 6.70, range 6–7.5; $SD = 53$), mothers, and fathers in Israel. In addition, associations between scales in children's family drawings and children's and parents' hope and negative attributional style were examined. Drawings were coded using Main and Kaplan's (1986) coding system. Both children's and parents' hopes and attributional style were reflected in the children's drawings. Specifically, the scales reflecting attachment security, such as vitality and pride, were positively correlated with children's hopes and negatively correlated with children's and parents' negative attributional style. By contrast, the scales reflecting attachment insecurity, such as emotional distance, anger, and pathology, were negatively correlated with participants' positive attributional style and hope and positively correlated with negative attributional style. Surprisingly, role reversal was positively correlated with mothers' hope and negatively with fathers' negative attributional style. Finally, differences in children's hope and negative attributional style, in addition to mothers' negative attributional style, were found as a function of children's attachment categorizations. The implications for theory and clinical interventions are discussed.

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Introduction

Hope and attributional style are two cognitive constructs that represent two dimensions of thinking style. Hopes represent individuals' perceptions of their ability to fulfill future goals, whereas attributional or exploratory style represents a person's perception of the reasons for past, current, and future events in life. Studies have examined the implications of these constructs for children's, adolescents' and adults' adaptation (Kim-Spoon, Ollendick, & Seligman, 2012; Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003) and have underscored the need to identify specific factors that promote these constructs (Conley, Haines, Hilt, & Metalsky, 2001; Haines, Metalsky, Cardamone, & Joiner, 1999). In this respect, attachment security was proposed as a central focus for future studies to better understand the development of hope and attributional style among young children and adolescents (Lopez, 2003; Simmons, Gooty, Nelson, & Little, 2009). Thus, the current study used children's family drawings to explore the associations between children's attachment security and their own hope and attributional style. Additionally, the relationship between children's attachment security and their parents' hopes and attributional style were examined.

Hope

According to hope theory, hope is a cognitive motivational construct that reflects individuals' perception of their capacity to (1) clearly conceptualize goals, (2) develop specific strategies to reach these goals (pathways thinking), and (3) initiate and sustain the motivation for using these strategies (agency thinking) (Snyder, 2002; Snyder et al., 2003). A goal can be anything that an individual desires to experience, create, get, do, or become. Goals can also differ in terms of scope (i.e., a goal may be a significant, lifelong pursuit or be ordinary and brief) or in the perceived probabilities of accomplishment. High-hope individuals prefer "stretch goals" that are slightly more difficult than previously attained goals. Moreover, they are more likely to develop alternative pathways, especially when the goals are important and when impediments appear (Snyder et al., 1991, 1996). However, no matter how good the cognitive pathways, these thoughts are useless without the related agency-inducing cognitions (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999; Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). These agency thoughts, which represent individuals' beliefs that they can begin and maintain movement toward their goals, are reflected in positive self-talk,

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which expresses their ability to confront and cope with challenging situations (Snyder, 1994, 1999).

An accumulated body of research over the last two decades has resulted in a clearer picture of the importance of hope among children and adolescents (Snyder et al., 2003). In elementary school-age children, for example, high hope scores correlated positively with self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism (Merkaš & Brajša-Žganec, 2011; Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997; Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997), academic achievements, pleasure in getting to know others, enjoyment in frequent interpersonal interactions (Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997), and negatively with symptoms of depression (Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997). Furthermore, children with high hope tend to focus on success, rather than failure when pursuing goals. They develop many life goals and perceive themselves as being more capable of solving problems that may arise (Snyder, Hoza, et al. 1997). Higher hope has also correlated positively with social competence (Barnum, Snyder, Rapoff, Mani, & Thompson, 1998), global life satisfaction (Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2011; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2004; Wong & Lim, 2009) and academic achievements (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Marques et al., 2011; Valle et al., 2004; Wong & Lim, 2009) and inversely with internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Valle et al., 2004; Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006), as well as depression (Wong & Lim, 2009) among adolescents.

Attributional style

Attributional or explanatory style refers to individuals' habitual way of explaining the causes of positive and negative events in their lives (Peterson & Steen, 2002). Researchers report that some individuals tend to exhibit more optimistic/positive explanations, while others have a more depressogenic and negative reasoning style when confronted with negative life events. A negative attributional style is characterized by interpreting the causes of negative events as internal (the locus of control is within the person), stable (not likely to change over time), and global (affecting more than one domain of life); it creates a vulnerability to helplessness and depression in the face of negative life events. By contrast, the positive style is characterized by external, unstable, and specific explanations for bad events (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Buchanan & Seligman, 1995).

Empirically, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have indicated a strong association between children's and adolescents' negative explanatory style and a wide range of negative social and emotional outcomes, including depression (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Hankin, Abramson, & Siler, 2001; Joiner, 2000; Prinstein & Aikins, 2004; Rueger & Malecki, 2007; Southall & Roberts, 2002; Stevens & Prinstein, 2005). Similar associations were reported for loneliness, social anxiety (Crick & Ladd, 1993; Toner & Heaven, 2005), as well as low acceptance by peers and peer-rejection (Ames, Ames, & Garrison, 1977; Toner & Munro, 1996).

Hope, negative attributional style, and attachment security

Childhood is a critical time during which the foundations of hope and attributional style are established. By age two, the level of hope remains relatively stable as the child transitions through the preschool, middle, and adolescent years (Snyder, 1994, 2003). Because early interactions between caregivers and infants provide the blueprint for subsequent social interactions, early relationships with parents are predictive of the extent to which infants' internalized social scripts are aligned with healthy, hope-nurturing social interactions (Snyder, 2002). Moreover, Child developmental theorists (Erikson, 1982; Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995) have underscored parents' prime role in nurturing a child's hope, while

also serving as role models for hope by guiding and facilitating goal-achievement and shaping their inner representations of the world as a dependable, stable, and safely trusted place (Snyder, 1994).

Recently, researchers have suggested that attachment theory could serve as a key construct to learn about hope or helplessness (Blake & Norton, 2014; Lopez, 2003; Simmons et al., 2009). According to this theory, an individual's mental health is intimately tied to relationships with attachment figures that provide emotional support and protection (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Children who experience sensitive and responsive care develop trust in themselves and their ability to influence the environment; they gradually develop a model of the self as lovable and a model of others as dependable and trustworthy. Well-treated children incorporate the protecting, soothing, approving, encouraging and coaching functions originally enacted by a security-enhancing attachment figure into their own self-system, such that these functions become autonomous (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). Incorporation of these functions promotes the sense of agency, which permits the child to explore and master the environment with confidence and to receive care when in need; it also enables the development of self-regulation, autonomy and a flexible balance between self-reliance and other-reliance (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004), and the ability to muster goal-directed thoughts and pathways (Simmons et al., 2009).

In contrast, children who experience rejection, unresponsive, or inconsistent care will not receive the support necessary to develop a sense of the self as worthy, will not develop trust in their environment or in themselves, and will perceive the attachment figure as rejecting (avoidant attachment) or unpredictable (ambivalent attachment) (Weinfeld, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008). These insecure attachment experiences may lead to profound disturbances in the self-system processes, including an impaired sense of agency, volition and control over one's actions, as well as a sense of inner "badness" (Kim & Cicchetti, 2006), and helplessness (Alloy et al., 2001; Blake & Norton, 2014). Children with disorganized attachment are characterized by an apparent lack or collapse of a consistent and organized strategy for dealing with stress. The particular forms and mixtures of disorganized behaviors tend to be idiosyncratic from child to child, but include anxious or depressed behaviors, unexpected fluctuations of approach and avoidance toward the attachment figure, and other conflicted and unpredictable behaviors (Main & Solomon, 1990).

A recent meta-analysis of eight studies on adolescents and adults pointed to interesting associations between hope and attachment security. The relationship between secure attachment scores and hope scores was the most robust ($r = .39$), whereas the relationships between hope and anxious or avoidant attachment were smaller, with a similar statistical size effect ($r_s = -.22$ and $-.23$, respectively) (Blake & Norton, 2014). As for attributional style, the researchers reported positive associations between attachment anxiety and negative attributional style among young adults (Collins, 1996; Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Kennedy, 1999; Rekart, Mineka, Zinbarg, & Griffith, 2007) and adolescents (Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990).

Classification of attachment representations through family drawings

Kaplan and Main's (1986) sign-based coding system for analyzing children's family drawings contains a set of indicators that classifies children's family drawings according to their attachment security. These researchers used family drawings by kindergarten children as predictors of assignment to the secure or insecure attachment categories and developed a classification system for

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