



Hope as a resource for career exploration: Examining incremental and cross-lagged effects



Andreas Hirschi ^{a,*}, Marc Abessolo ^b, Ariane Froidevaux ^b

^a Institute of Psychology, University of Bern, Fabrikstrasse 8, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland

^b Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, Quartier UNIL-Mouline, Bâtiment Géopolis, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Hope is believed to be beneficial for vocational pursuits, but the question of how and why hope is related to pivotal career development variables remains largely unaddressed. In a series of three studies, we investigated the relationship between hope and career exploration. Study 1 examined at-risk adolescents ($N = 228$) in Switzerland and showed that hope explains variance in career exploration beyond the significant effects of generalized self-efficacy beliefs and perceived social support. Study 2 found the same result among a group ($N = 223$) of first-year students at a Swiss university with a measure of state hope. Study 3 applied a one-year cross-lagged design with a diverse group of students ($N = 266$) at a German university to investigate the mutual effects of dispositional hope and career exploration over time. Although both variables were found to be related within and over time, we could not confirm lagged effects in either direction. The results suggest that hope is significantly correlated with career exploration because both are related to personality and social-contextual variables.

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Hope as a primal virtue has a long history in western philosophical and religious thought and has been introduced in the psychology literature in the 1950s as an important factor for human adaptation and mental health (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). The empirical exploration of hope, defined herein as the perceived ability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways (Snyder, 2002), is more recent. Research has established that hope helps individuals cope with various life demands and is positively related to academic achievement and persistence, psychological well-being, and physical health (Snyder, 2002). Over the last few years, scholars in the fields of management (Luthans & Jensen, 2002) and vocational psychology (Brown, Lamp, Telander, & Hacker, 2013; Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006; Niles, 2011) have emphasized that hope may also be critical for all vocational pursuits, especially in the current career environment that is frequently characterized as dynamic and uncertain, with a high demand for adaptability, resilience, and self-directedness (Sullivan, 1999).

However, the empirical literature that links hope with career development remains sparse. One area in which hope may be especially important is in relation to career exploration, which is a pivotal construct in vocational psychology because of its importance for career decision-making and self-directed career management across the life span (Zikic & Hall, 2009). Because hope entails the envisioning of pathways to desired goals and a sense of agency to undertake and succeed in taking those pathways to one's goals, a close connection to career exploration might be assumed. However, the current state of empirical research leaves several important questions unaddressed. First, to the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated the empirical relationship between hope and career exploration. Such research is important to increase our knowledge of the functions of hope in career development. Second, existing research in the career domain has not sufficiently addressed the question regarding the incremental utility of hope, an important issue when introducing new constructs (e.g., hope) to the literature to avoid dispersion in the literature or creating unnecessary

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: andreas.hirschi@psy.unibe.ch (A. Hirschi), Marc.Abessolo@unil.ch (M. Abessolo), Ariane.Froidevaux@unil.ch (A. Froidevaux).

redundancies among constructs. Third, another critical issue is the question of temporal precedence linking hope to career development. It is reasonable to assume that hope predicts enhanced career development, such as greater career exploration. However, it is also possible that career exploration can foster a sense of hope because it allows people to see new pathways and build confidence to achieve career goals. Existing research, however, has not examined issues of temporal precedence linking hope with career development variables.

In the present paper, we report the findings of three distinct studies among at-risk adolescents and university students that (a) investigated whether hope is related to increased career exploration across different samples and measures of hope; (b) examined the incremental predictive utility of hope regarding career exploration beyond personality (i.e., generalized self-efficacy) and social (i.e., perceived social support) variables; and (c) explored the potential causal links between hope and career exploration by addressing the question of their temporal precedence.

1. Hope and career exploration

The career literature has proposed different conceptualizations and measures of vocational hope, or work hope, referring to hope specific for the career or work context (Brown et al., 2013; Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006). However, the applied definitions and measures vary. For example, Diemer and Blustein (2007) conceptualized it as career commitment while Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) built upon Snyder's (2002) hope theory and measured hope as three components (goals, pathways, and agency) pertaining to work and work-related issues. Unfortunately, this divergence in hope constructs makes it difficult to directly compare respective findings. Conversely, in our studies, we adopted the definition and measures based on Snyder's hope theory, arguably the most well-researched and established notion of hope in the scientific literature. In contrast to vocational or work hope, this notion of hope is not restricted to a particular life domain. Our studies thus make a contribution to our understanding of how more context-general traits and states are related to career outcomes. As such, our studies also allow us to explore whether the established positive effects of context-general hope for outcomes in the educational, health, and psychological well-being domains (Snyder, 2002) generalize to positive outcomes in the career domain.

According to hope theory (Snyder, 2002), hope consists of pathways thinking in which multiple plausible routes to achieve personally valued goals are envisioned. Individuals with high levels of hope should also possess stronger agency thinking and feel more confident in achieving their goals and successfully undertaking the envisioned pathways that lead them there (Snyder, 2002). Similarly, career exploration entails reflection on personally valued goals and the collection of information about career goals and ways to attain them (Super, 1990). Hence, hope and career exploration are conceptually closely related and it is reasonable to assume a positive relationship between the two. Theoretically, because of their more readily available pathways and agency thinking, individuals with high levels of hope should find it easier to envision and explore multiple career options and pathways (environment exploration) and to reflect on personal preferences and strengths that facilitate achieving and envisioning career goals (self-exploration). Existing empirical research has not directly investigated this assumption but has shown that different measures of hope (including context-general, vocational, and work hope) are positively related to various vocational constructs, such as vocational identity (Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Jackson & Neville, 1998; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006), career decidedness (Hirschi, 2014), career planning (Hirschi, 2014; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010), career self-efficacy beliefs (Hirschi, 2014; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006), and proactive career behaviors (Hirschi, 2014) among adolescents, college students, and working adults. We build on those findings and propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. There is a positive correlation between hope and career exploration.

2. Incremental utility of hope

Although it is important to establish whether hope is related to career exploration, it is also critical to examine whether hope can explain variance in career exploration beyond theoretically related constructs with established predictive utility. We evaluated whether hope explains variance in career exploration beyond the two constructs of (a) generalized self-efficacy beliefs and (b) perceived social support. We chose these two variables because they represent social-cognitive variables that tap into both the personality and social domain. Moreover, both variables have established predictive utility with respect to career exploration. Research has repeatedly found that career self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to career exploration (e.g., Rogers & Creed, 2011; Rogers, Creed, & Ian Glendon, 2008) because having a sense of competence in the mastery of challenging tasks is useful in exploring career options. Likewise, social support has been shown to facilitate career exploration (Hirschi, Niles, & Akos, 2011; Kracke, 2002) because it provides a resource for obtaining career information and provides encouragement and security when engaging in the task of exploration.

Hope is also positively related to self-efficacy beliefs and social support. Both hope and self-efficacy refer to expectancy beliefs related to goals in the future. However, hope is distinct from self-efficacy because it combines both self-efficacy expectancies and outcome expectancies. In contrast to self-efficacy, hope also encompasses the intention to act and the envisioning of pathways that lead to desired goals (Snyder, 2002). Empirical research has confirmed that self-efficacy and hope are positively related but distinct factors (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). In the present paper, we specifically applied a measure of generalized self-efficacy. In contrast to Bandura's (1977) notion of (task- and situation-specific) self-efficacy, generalized self-efficacy represents a dispositional, context-independent tendency to believe that one is capable to perform behaviors that lead to desired outcomes (Sherer et al.,

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