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An Investigation of Hope and Context

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Abstract

One of the tenets of community psychology is examining psychological phenomena in context, and our studies explored the relationship between hope and context among individuals in recovery for substance use disorders. Study 1 involved 595 participants who resided in 90 recovery homes. We found that context, as house effects, was salient in residents' perceptions of hope, suggesting that the context of recovery homes-- their configurations and dynamics-- may play a role in an individual's future perspective. Study 2 involved 102 recovering adults.

Findings indicated that one's perceived context (i.e., opportunities, choices, & obstacles) was related to not only one's self-reported levels of hope, but one's perception of hope for others. Approximately 50% of an individual's hopefulness was explained by contextual factors, thus suggesting that system level effects are critical to an individual's hopefulness. The finding that context was predictive of hopefulness suggests that a community psychology perspective on feelings of hope is critical, especially for individuals in substance use recovery. Implications regarding the importance of hope and context for ecological research and contextual influences on behavior change are discussed.

Keywords

Hope; Snyder; Context; Community Psychology; Substance Misuse; Substance Use Disorder; Recovery

While *hope* has been researched as a salient influence on an individual's motivation and achievement, and taps an individual's perception that something desirable may happen or that one's goals may be achieved (Snyder, 1994), little research has been done on the importance of ecological or contextual influences on individual levels of hopefulness. Psychological definitions of hope have mainly focused on its affective and cognitive characteristics (Snyder, Ilardi, Michael, & Cheavens, 2000). For instance, Snyder (1991) proposed two domains within the construct of hope - an individual's *agency*, which refers to their affective sense of successful determination in meeting goals, and an individual's *ability to generate pathways*, which involve successful plans to meet goals. Neither of these constructs however addresses the contextual opportunities, barriers, or risks an individual perceives in an appraisal of hopefulness.

Understanding psychological phenomena in context is a key component of community psychology and has been extensively researched (Moos, 1984; 2003a; 2003b). An individual's situational circumstances *interact* with personality characteristics to influence expression of certain traits (see Mischel, 2004, for a review). Adolescent violent behavior, for instance, is positively related to factors outside of the adolescent, such as peer behavior, family conflict, and exposure to community violence (Stoddard et al., 2013). As such, Trickett (2009) emphasizes the importance of considering context when designing and planning interventions in the community, particularly for those whose ultimate goal is individual behavior change. Community psychology therefore provides a unique framework from which to examine contextual influences on feelings of hope. Preliminary empirical support for a contextual and social basis for an individual's perceptions of hopefulness comes from various studies showing that the provision of hope is a factor in various community settings such as trauma self-help groups (Ankerman, Dominguez, Soto, Kajaerulf et al., 2005), mutual help settings for individuals with serious mental illnesses (Rappaport, 2000), and small community grants (Foster-Fishman, Fitzgerald, Brandell, Nowell et al., 2006).

Various observations regarding the impact of social and environmental factors indicate that viewing perceptions of hope in context may have important implications for individuals' levels of hopefulness (Peirson et al., 2011). Though hope has traditionally been theorized and empirically examined as an individual difference trait variable (i.e., something static and independent of broader ecological relationships; Snyder et al., 1991), recent investigations suggest that hope is more complex than an individual state. Bernardo (2010), for example, augmented existing measures of hope (Snyder et al., 2000) to include both internal and external loci of hope. Bernardo found that a person may work with others in generating plans for attaining goals, and draw from the resources of peers, family members, and spiritual (e.g., deities) or supernatural forces (e.g., fate) in pursuing these goals.

Tong et al. (2010) found that the ability to generate pathways to goals was not related to the experience of hope, suggesting that Snyder's model is context-specific and may apply more to situations where people are able to favorably change their environments. Tong et al. concluded that a sufficient understanding of hope as a psychological variable remains unrealized and that external environmental effects are consequential. Similarly, Braithwaite (2004) claimed that an individual's experience of hope and well-being has not been examined in context; in particular, the effect of group relations, such as social networks and social support, on an individual's experience of hope have not been taken into account and the influence of an individual's social life on his or her well-being has largely been ignored.

Hope and Recovery

Recovery is a process by which individuals try to improve future prospects, which is one of the key defining elements of hope. Addictions effectively work to dismantle characteristics of resilience including hope (Jason et al., 2008). In recovery, the cultivation and maintenance of hope among individuals is important because of its qualities for goal setting and motivation. Self-help organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) may provide a

context where this is more easily possible. Indeed, AA specifically emphasizes the sharing of strength, experience and hope among members (Jason, Ferrari, Davis, & Olson, 2006; 2010a; Jason & Ferrari, 2010a).

One community-based model for treating individuals in substance abuse recovery is the *Oxford House* model (see Jason, Davis, Ferrari, & Bishop, 2001; Jason & Ferrari, 2010b). Oxford House is the largest network of recovery homes in the United States, with over 1600 residences. Oxford Houses are democratically run, self-governed approaches to recovery homes which provide low cost housing to over ten thousands individuals in recovery. Requirements for residents include paying rent/dues, maintaining the house, remaining abstinent from drug or alcohol use, and refraining from disruptive behavior (Jason, Olson, & Foli, 2008). The model attempts to provide individuals with an environment conducive to the maintenance of sobriety, a critical part of which is the social support provided by the other residents in recovery much akin to and influenced by the AA model (see Jason & Ferrari, 2010a; 2010b, for details).

Bandura (2000) highlights that an individual's feelings self-efficacy with regard to any goal are closely tied to the feelings of self-efficacy of those around them regarding that goal, and that collective self-efficacy is important in the ability of any group to achieve a common goal. Perhaps the abstinent setting of Oxford House therefore provides residents a context in which hope may be cultivated or influenced by peers and the democratic nature. At this time, several studies have explored factors associated with individual differences in hope among Oxford House residents in recovery. Individual levels of hope have been found to be positively associated with days abstinent from drug use (Mathis, Ferrari, Groh, & Jason, 2009) and longer length of stay in Oxford House (Dekhtyar, Beasley, Jason, and Ferrari, 2012). In addition, Ferrari, Stevens, Legler, and Jason (2012) found that men and women residents of an Oxford House from across the USA reported higher levels of hope, self-esteem, and self-regulation skills with extended stay in these settings. However an investigation of the contextual influences on hope is necessary in order to obtain a more complete understanding of hope, especially for those in substance use recovery.

These state-like characteristics and various contextual influences provide the basis for the present study's empirical inquiry into hope and context. Our first study explored the evidence for overall house effects on hope levels (only agency scores due to findings by Arnau et al., 2007 and Tong et al., 2010). We also explored in Study 1 whether the tenure of the house members would be significantly related to agency levels (i.e., goal setting and motivation). In Study 2, we investigated whether perceptions of opportunities and of barriers related to an overall sense of personal hope, and, moreover, whether an individual's current state of hope predicted belief of hopefulness for others (Bernardo, 2010). We hypothesized, across these two studies, that context would be predictive of an individual's level of hope.

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedure—The larger sample from which the present study was based involved 897 adults living in Oxford Houses. These participants were surveyed a total

of 4 times in sequential waves, each separated by 4 months, for a total of 12 months between Waves 1 and 4 (for more details, see Jason, Davis, Ferrari, & Anderson, 2007). Baseline data was used in the present study.

For the present study, only houses with five or more residents participating in the larger study were examined so we could assess the influence of house level effects based on multiple individuals within each setting. The current study involved 595 participants in 90 houses, and on average each House had a mean of 6.61 participating residents ($SD = 1.66$, range = 5 to 12). Our sample included 421 males (70.8%) and 174 females (29.2%). Their mean age was 38.1 years old ($SD = 9.1$), and 58.3% ($n = 347$) were Caucasian (non-Hispanic), 34.6% ($n = 206$) were African American, 3.2% ($n = 19$) were Hispanic/Latino, and 3.9% ($n = 23$) were other. In terms of employment status, 67.6% had full-time jobs, 14.6% had part-time jobs, 12.3% were unemployed, 4.7% were retired or disabled, and 0.8% were students. As for marital status, 50.6% were never married, 5.2% were married, 14.3% were separated, and 29.8% were divorced/ widowed. The average length of stay in an Oxford House for Study 1 participants was 10.8 months ($SD = 15.3$, range = 0.03 to 121). Average length of sobriety was 17.8 months ($SD = 23.4$, range from 1 day to 19.25 years).

Measures—Participants completed Snyder's (1991) Trait Hope Scale consisting of 8 items scored on an 8 point Likert-type scale ranging from *definitely false* (1) to *definitely true* (8). Typical items include: "My past experiences have prepared me well for my future" and "I meet the goals that I set for myself." This measure has two subscales, Agency and Pathways. For this analysis, the Agency subscale was utilized, based on findings cited in the introduction (e.g., Arnau et al., 2007, Tong et al., 2010) and slightly better reliability for this subscale (current sample: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$ for Agency and only 0.68 for Pathways). In Study 1, the mean Agency sum score was 22.3 ($SD = 5.3$). In addition, Agency had non-significant correlations with length of sobriety ($r = .04$, $p = .31$) and length of tenure in Oxford House ($r = .02$, $p = .72$), thus allowing for a direct investigation of the maximum tenure of an individual in the house and its relationship with house resident's hope scores. Specifically, the tested house level relationship would not be confounded by the average tenure of individuals within the house.

Results and Discussion

Study 1 explored the evidence of house effects on individual hope levels. We examined whether the maximum tenure (length of stay in the house) of the most experienced house member would be significantly related to Agency hope levels (goal setting and motivation). We used this mixed model equation to test this model:

$$AGENCY_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} * LNMAXTEN_j = u_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

where γ_{01} measured the relationship of longest tenure of any individual within the house and u_{0j} tested if house level effects persisted beyond those explained by tenure.

As evident in Table 1, the natural log of maximum tenure was significant and accounted for about 6.4% of variance in Agency (Cohen's $f^2 = .068$). In addition, the House effects were

still significant, as about 7% of total variance was still unexplained. Overall, the findings suggest that house level effects are predictive of individual levels of hope and specifically, that having a person with longer tenure in the house is positively associated with the agency construct of hope.

Study 2

Study 2 examined whether perception of context (opportunities, barriers, and obstacles) was related to feelings of personal hope, and the relationship between an individual's current state of hope and his or her belief of hopefulness for others (Bernardo, 2010).

Method

Participants and procedure—A total of 102 respondents were recruited at the 2011 annual Oxford House conference in Washington, DC. Regarding sex, 46% ($n = 47$) of participants were women, leaving 54% ($n = 55$) men. Mean age was 41.4 years ($SD = 11.5$, range = 19 to 73). Regarding race/ethnicity, 79 % ($n = 81$) were White, 17% ($n = 17$) were African American, and 4% ($n = 4$) were other. In terms of education, 6.9% ($n = 7$) of respondents did not finish high school, 25.5% ($n = 26$) held a high school degree or its equivalent, and 67.6% ($n = 69$) had some college or more. Regarding marital status, 48% ($n = 49$) were single or never married, 41% ($n = 42$) were separated or divorced, 10% ($n = 10$) were married, and 1% ($n = 1$) was widowed. Finally, 62% ($n = 63$) of respondents reported they were employed full-time, 17% ($n = 17$) part-time, 4% ($n = 4$) unemployed, and 17% ($n = 17$) were either students, disabled, or retired.

Measures—Participants in Study 2 completed Snyder's et al. (1996) State Hope Scale consisting of 6 items scored on an 8 point Likert-type scale (1 = *definitely false*, 8 = *definitely true*). Typical Items included: “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it” and “At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.” With the present sample, mean state-hope sum scores were 6.98 ($SD = .95$), and Cronbach's α was 0.83.

To measure “environmental context,” we developed single-items that assessed opportunities, choices, and obstacles. The three items, respectively, were: “Right now I don't feel limited by the opportunities that are available.” “I feel like I have plenty of good choices in planning my future.” and “The obstacles I face are similar to what everybody else faces.” Responses on these three context items were summed and labeled in Study 2 our “context scale,” yielding a mean sum score of 6.69 ($SD = 1.34$), and Cronbach's α of 0.79.

Furthermore, to examine the effects of environment and self, participants were asked the following questions: “Overall, how hopeful are you right now about the future for” and respondents rated the following categories: “Yourself”, “For Others You Know in Recovery”, and “For Your Family & Friends”. For each of these categories, the respondents used a slider which ranged from “Not hopeful at all (–10) to very hopeful (10),” with 0 being a neutral rating.

Results

Our dependent variables were hopefulness scores for Self, Others in Recovery, and Family & Friends. The mean hopefulness score was 8.82 ($SD = 1.45$) for Self, 6.92 ($SD = 2.88$) for Others in Recovery, and 7.91 ($SD = 2.55$) for Family & Friends. These dependent variables were regressed in a path model (see Figure 1) to test the relationship between state hope appraisal and perception of opportunities and barriers with their assessment of overall levels of hopefulness. The only significant path for the individual's hope state was to their own level of hopefulness. Context was a material and significant predictor for all three dependent hopefulness scores (see Figure 1 & Table 2), with context being approximately equivalent to state hope levels in predictive strength for the individual self. These findings provide evidence that context (opportunities, choices, & obstacles) is important to the level of hope one self-reports and that this perceived context affects one's perception of hope for others.

Conclusion

Both studies suggest that context, as house effects or as perceived opportunity sets, may be salient in perceptions of hope by a person recovery from substance abuse. In Study 1, house effects persisted even after a significant test for whether a proxy of leadership or mentorship (maximum tenure) would be related to an agency of hope. These small to medium effect sizes suggest that the context of Oxford House-- its configurations and dynamics-- may play a role in an individual's future perspective. In Study 2, we found that one's perceived context (i.e., opportunities, choices, & obstacles) is related to not only one's self-reported levels of hope, but one's perception of hope for others. Overall, Study 2 results indicated that approximately 50% of an individual's hopefulness was explained by contextual factors, thus suggesting that system level effects are critical to an individual's hopefulness.

This study supports the notion that individual psychological phenomena are best understood in context. Various aspects of the surrounding context enabled individuals to feel more hopeful, underscoring the necessity of considering person-environment interactions (Mischel, 2004) with regard to individual feelings and behaviors (Trickett, 2009). The finding that characteristics of other individuals in the Oxford house influenced levels of hopefulness, and that an individual's perception of hopefulness influenced their perception of the hopefulness of others, also speaks to the importance of considering collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000) when studying goal-directed behavior such as recovery.

Transitioning from a dispositional to a context-specific perspective of hope has important implications for behavior change, especially with regard to individuals in substance use recovery. Hope may be a crucial part of the recovery setting and a changing personal trait, two elements that are important to consider successful treatment for substance use (Moos, 2003a). As such, hope has utility as a critical element for health behavior change models, which include elements of awareness, attitudes, benefits and risks, preparation and planning, intention, and action and maintenance (Uskul, Keller & Oyserman, 2008). Hope involves future appraisal of positive outcome, influenced by perceived opportunities, likelihoods, degree of control, and motivation (Snyder et al., 2000). Context and settings may significantly influence the degrees to which hope may play an enabling or disabling role in an individual's transition from a behavior state such as substance use recovery.

This context-specific view of hope is critical in helping individuals set future projections and goals, particularly with regard to resilience. Hope and resilience both include the capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out, a positive view of oneself and confidence in one's strengths and abilities, and skills in communication and problem solving. In a cross cultural study, Ungar (2008) found that resilience is related to access to material resources, access to supportive relationships, and the development of a desirable personal identity (e.g., self-liking, adherence to cultural traditions, and the experiences of power and control, a sense of cohesion with others, and social justice). Future research examining hope within a contextual framework might investigate the temporal focus and stability of these characteristics interrelated with hope as a future appraisal of an optimistic trajectory of self (Peterson, Balthazard, Waldman, & Thatcher, 2008).

Our research also has important implications for the relationship between hope, context, and social justice. Given that context, defined as opportunities, choices, and obstacles, was found to be related to levels of hope, hopelessness could be an indicator of lack of opportunity, lack of fair outcomes, and lack of control and power (Jason, 2013). Hope levels therefore may be a good proxy or measure of perceived social justice. Theoretically, a socially just society would have equivalent levels of hope across all segments of society except for random individual differences. While this may be more of a philosophical argument, the operational characteristics are predictive and testable with opportunities, likelihoods, and perceptions of fairness.

Though these studies were exploratory and based on self-report data, the findings on the importance of context are consistent with research on community development (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006), community recovery (Ankerman et al., 2005), adolescents' violent behavior (Stoddard, McMorris, & Sieving, 2011) and adolescents' perspectives on the future (Kloep et al., 2010). Continued research on ecological and contextual contributions to hopefulness would benefit both applied and theoretical community research, such as ecological and contextual relationships to general resiliencies, recovery-related phenomenon in substance use disorders, motivations for change, and social justice.

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Figure 1.
Study 2 path model of individual state and contextual scores on relationships with overall hope assessments. Bold lines denote significance, $p < .05$, dashed lines were *ns*.

Table 1

Hierarchical Linear Model of Individual Agency Hope Levels and House Level Effect of Maximum Tenure:
Study 1

Final estimation of fixed effects (with robust standard errors)						
Fixed Effect	Coefficient	Standard error	<i>t</i> -ratio	Approx. <i>df.</i>	<i>p</i> -value	
Individual Score						
Intercept	22.16	0.27	80.73	87	<0.01	
Tenure	0.63	0.26	2.44	87	0.02	
Final estimation of variance components						
Random Effect	Standard Deviation	Variance Component		<i>d.f.</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i> -value
House Level	1.32	1.73		87	122.66	<0.01
Individual	4.70	22.05				

Table 2

State Hope and Context Path Model, Study 2

Dependent	Independent	Estimate	S.E.	Est./S.E.	<i>p</i> -Value	Std Beta
Self	State Hope	.52	.18	2.91	0.004	.34
	Context	.49	.12	4.26	<.01	.45
Others in Recovery	State Hope	-.37	.47	-.79	0.43	
	Context	.90	.42	2.14	0.03	.42
Family & Friends	State Hope	.20	.33	0.60	0.55	
	Context	.53	.22	3.36	0.02	.28