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Locus-of-hope and life satisfaction: The mediating roles of personal self-esteem and relational self-esteem



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ABSTRACT

Research has demonstrated that hope is linked to better psychological well-being; however, little research has been conducted to examine the mechanisms underlying the link between hope and psychological well-being. The current study examined whether two types of self-esteem (personal and relational) would mediate the relationship between four loci-of-hope (internal, family, peers, and spiritual) and life satisfaction among Hong Kong and Macau college students ($n = 1008$). Structural equation modelling was used to test the hypotheses. Consistent with the hypotheses, both personal self-esteem and relational self-esteem partially mediated the effects of internal hope on life satisfaction. Moreover, relational self-esteem mediated the effect of external-family locus-of-hope on life satisfaction. Interestingly, a suppressing effect of personal self-esteem on the relationship between external-peers locus-of-hope and life satisfaction was found. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

According to Snyder's hope theory (2002), hope is the perceived capability to produce pathways to desired goals and to motivate oneself to use those pathways. The cognitive process of hope consists of three core constructs: (a) goals – the mental targets that direct human behavior, (b) pathways – the routes to the desired goals, and (c) agency – the perceived ability to achieve goals through pathways (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). To achieve the goals, individuals can rely on internal or external agents (e.g., family, peers, and spirituality) and generate internal or external pathways (i.e., locus-of-hope) (Bernardo, 2010, 2014). Regarding internal locus-of-hope, the self is considered as an inner locus to goal attainment. With external loci-of-hope, one would think family members, peers, or a spiritual entity/force have the agency and pathways for goal completion. Because all loci-of-hope share a common thread of positive goal-directed cognitions, they are correlated with each other (Bernardo, 2010, 2014), but relate to other psychological variables in distinct ways (Bernardo, 2010; Du & King, 2013).

Psychological well-being is one of those variables that has been proposed to be an important correlate of hope (Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Snyder, 2002). Numerous studies that investigate internal

locus-of-hope measured using the Dispositional Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991) provide evidence for this assumption by showing that internal locus-of-hope is a predictor of life satisfaction (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007), even when controlling for optimism (Alarcon, Bowling, & Khazon, 2013; Bailey, Eng, Frisch, & Snyder, 2007). Many of these studies show direct relationships between internal locus-of-hope (or dispositional hope) and life satisfaction, and other studies show the same direct relationship when hope mediates the negative relationship between stress and life satisfaction (O'Sullivan, 2011) or when hope mediates the positive relationship between purpose in life and life satisfaction (Cotton Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). The beneficial effect of internal locus-of-hope on life satisfaction can be experienced among both young (Marques, Lopez, & Mitchell, 2013) and older adults (Cotton Bronk et al., 2009), and also in different cultural/ethnic groups (Wong & Lim, 2009). And the causal nature of this relationship is supported by research involving hope training/intervention programs that result in increased life satisfaction (Proyer, Ruch, & Buschor, 2013).

As it is a relatively new construct, how external locus-of-hope is associated with life satisfaction are not as clear-cut as with internal locus-of-hope. Researchers have found that external locus-of-hope can predict psychological functioning beyond internal locus-of-hope, but not all the dimensions (i.e., family, peers, spiritual) contribute to life satisfaction equally (Du & King, 2013). In a sample of

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Chinese college students, beyond the prediction of internal locus-of-hope, external-family locus-of-hope emerged as a positive predictor of life satisfaction and self-esteem, whereas external-spiritual locus-of-hope showed as a negative predictor. External-peers locus-of-hope was not associated with life satisfaction and self-esteem, when controlling other dimensions of locus-of-hope (Du & King, 2013). But in a sample of Filipino battered women, external-peers locus-of-hope was correlated with life satisfaction, particularly among those who are still in their abusive relationships (Bernardo & Estrellado, 2015). Thus, the limited empirical literature shows no clear pattern so far regarding how the external locus-of-hope dimensions relate to life satisfaction, and this study aims to address this gap in the literature.

Another gap in the hope literature relates to the mechanism underlying the relationship between hope and psychological well-being (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Some hope theorists have suggested that hope may exert its influence on life satisfaction through coping with goal obstacles and pursuit of meaning in life (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). For instance, a study showed that the relationship between hope and life satisfaction varies depending on the type of coping strategy that individuals adopt (Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004). Studies that explore the variables that mediate and/or moderate the relationship between hope and life satisfaction can help clarify the psychological mechanisms that allow locus-of-hope to increase life satisfaction.

In the present study, we aimed to examine whether self-esteem serves as a mediator in the association of locus-of-hope with life satisfaction. Both hope and self-esteem are related to goal-directed thought, and built on valued activities and accomplishments. More important, the goal pursuit process directed by hope elicits positive or negative evaluations of one's self-efficacy related to the goal (Snyder, 2002), but also more generalized evaluations and emotions about one's self. In line with this argument, we suggest that, with locus-of-hope, people would evaluate their goal-oriented performance. Depending on the evaluation result, people can maintain or enhance a sense of self-worth, which will in turn affect the satisfaction with life.

Self-esteem is a strong predictor of life satisfaction across cultures (Diener & Diener, 2009). When people can gain a sense of self-worth, it indicates that they have good mental adjustment. For example, empirical studies have demonstrated that life satisfaction can be affected by self-esteem through the influence of allocentrism (Bettencourt & Dorr, 1997) and strength use (Douglass & Duffy, 2014).

Furthermore, a sense of self-worth can be maintained and enhanced through both individual-level characteristics and group-level roles in relationship with significant others (Du, King, & Chi, 2012). Individuals achieve a high level of personal self-esteem when they perceive themselves as good people and believe their own strengths (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001). With a relational self-identity, people can gain a high level of relational self-esteem if they are valuable to their significant others (i.e., family, friends) or feel proud of them (Du et al., 2012).

The differential influence of personal self-esteem and relational self-esteem has been demonstrated in recent research. A study of vulnerable children has shown that relational self-esteem was associated with multiple indicators of psychological well-being, including hopefulness, positive affect, depression, meaning of life, future expectation, and posttraumatic growth, even when controlling for personal self-esteem (Du, Li, Chi, Zhao, & Zhao, 2014). Another study demonstrated that relational self-esteem was a stronger buffer against terror of death relative to personal self-esteem among Chinese college students (Du et al., 2013). These findings emphasize the importance of distinguishing the effects of personal versus relational self-esteem on psychological well-being.

In summary, we propose that as part of the self-evaluation processes involved in goal pursuit, hope should be associated with an enhanced sense of self-worth, and in turn, be associated with life satisfaction. But the importance of locus-of-hope to personal and relational self-esteem would vary across the four dimensions of locus-of-hope. Regarding the direct effects, we predicted that internal hope and external-family locus of hope would be positively associated with both kinds of self-esteem and life satisfaction, whereas external-peers locus of hope would not be a predictor. Both personal and relational self-esteem would be positively associated with life satisfaction. No specific prediction was made for external-spiritual locus-of-hope because the current sample is colleague students in Hong Kong and Macau, where people have diverse religious beliefs (e.g., Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religions, non-religious) (Chan & Goto, 2003), with a majority of the population not being religious (e.g., a 2009 Gallup Poll ranked Hong Kong as among the 10 least religious countries in the world). In terms of indirect effects, we predicted that both personal self-esteem and relational self-esteem would mediate the associations of life satisfaction with internal and external-family locus-of-hope.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were 1008 college students (703 women, 297 men, and 8 who did not specify gender; mean age = 19.29 years, $SD = 1.43$) from a university in Macau and a university in Hong Kong. They were recruited from the two universities respective research participation pool and received course credit for their participation. Participants gave their informed consent prior to answering the research questionnaires. Less than 24% (241) participants reported that they were Catholic, Christian, or Buddhists.

2.2. Instruments

Locus-of-hope was assessed with the 40-item Locus-of-Hope Scale (Bernardo, 2010). This scale consists of 4 dimensions: internal locus-of-hope (e.g., "I meet the goals that I set for myself."), external-family locus-of-hope (e.g., "My parents have lots of ways of helping me attain my goals."), external-peers locus-of-hope (e.g., "I have been able to meet my goals because of my friends' help."), and external-spiritual locus-of-hope (e.g., "God has many different ways of letting me attain my goals."). Participants answered the items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Mean scores were calculated for the four dimensions, respectively, with higher scores indicating higher levels of hope. The subscales showed good reliability (internal hope $\alpha = .80$, external-family $\alpha = .91$, external-peers $\alpha = .84$, external-spiritual $\alpha = .96$).

Personal self-esteem was assessed with the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale measures a sense of self-worth through their personal attributes (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities."). Participants answered the items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Items were recoded and averaged with higher scores indicating higher personal self-esteem ($\alpha = .80$).

Relational self-esteem was assessed with the 8-item relational self-esteem Scale (Du et al., 2012). This scale measures a sense of self-worth through relationship with significant others (e.g., "I am proud of my family."). Participants answered the items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Items were averaged with higher scores indicating higher relational self-esteem ($\alpha = .85$).

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