



# The impact of hope, self-esteem, and attributional style on adolescents' school grades and emotional well-being: A longitudinal study

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## Abstract

We examined the distinctiveness of three “positive thinking” variables (self-esteem, trait hope, and positive attributional style) in predicting future high school grades, teacher-rated adjustment, and students' reports of their affective states. Seven hundred eighty-four high school students (382 males and 394 females; 8 did not indicate their gender) completed Time 1 measures of verbal and numerical ability, positive thinking, and indices of emotional well-being (positive affect, sadness, fear, and hostility), and Time 2 measures of hope, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. Multi-level random coefficient modelling revealed that each positive thinking variable was distinctive in some contexts but not others. Hope was a predictor of positive affect and the best predictor of grades, negative attributional style was the best predictor of increases in hostility and fear, and low self-esteem was the best predictor of increases in sadness. We also found that sadness at Time 1 predicted decreases in self-esteem at Time 2. The results are discussed with reference to the importance of positive thinking for building resilience.

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## 1. Introduction

If youth are to be successful in an ever-increasing competitive global environment, it is essential that their academic achievements reflect their innate ability and that they have the

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psychological resources to meet life's challenges. Sadly, this is not always the case (Elias, 2006), leading to the "waste and vast erosion of human potential" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 857). Psychologists and others have expended much research energy on identifying the factors associated with adolescents' school performance and overall adjustment (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006; Steinberg & Morris, 2001) and numerous individual difference factors of importance have been identified.

The present study is concerned with the impact of various forms of positive thinking and focuses on three variables, namely, hope, self-esteem, and positive attributional style. We selected these variables for two reasons. The first is their centrality to theories of well-being and effectiveness. Self-esteem and attributional style have long been examined as predictors of emotional well-being and academic performance (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Peterson & Steen, 2002), and literally thousands of articles have been written on them. The measurement of hope is somewhat newer, but the construct itself has a long history in psychology and is viewed by some as a key mechanism of change in psychological interventions (e.g., Snyder, 2000a; Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002).

Second, we chose these variables because they seem to capture different aspects of thinking style. Self-esteem reflects people's evaluations of self-worth and competence (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2003), hope reflects people's evaluations of the extent they can achieve their goals (Snyder et al., 2002), and attributional style reflects people's evaluations of the causes of positive and negative events in their life (Peterson & Barrett, 1987). Hope theory emphasizes future expectancies (e.g., setting goals), whereas attributional style focuses on how the past is explained (Snyder et al., 2002).

Although we selected variables that appear to be distinctive, there is not yet any evidence that they are in fact distinctive longitudinal predictors of important outcomes such as school achievement, adjustment, and emotional well-being.

### *1.1. Trait hope*

Trait hope involves the belief that one can produce "routes to desired goals" (Snyder, 2000b, p. 8). High hope individuals believe they can begin and maintain movement towards their goals (agency thinking) and believe they can produce plausible routes to the goals (pathways thinking). Being able to plan goals and set about to achieve them is also referred to as "mental action sequences" (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 258), which are proposed to be the major driving force that underpins an individual's positive emotions and psychological well-being, and also differentiates hope from similar constructs such as optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Snyder et al., 2002). In fact, Snyder claims that hope drives self-appraisal (Snyder et al., 1997).

Research among adolescents that assesses the longitudinal impact of hope on adjustment and school outcomes is rare (but see Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006). It has been reported that hope predicts additional variance beyond other predictors of academic achievement, at least among university students. For example, Snyder and colleagues found that grades on a psychology exam predicted outcome in a subsequent psychology exam and that hope scores were able to explain additional variance in final exam scores beyond that of the first exam (Snyder et al., 1991; see also Snyder et al., 1996, study 4). Not only was hope predictive of academic outcomes, but high hope students were also

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