

Hope theory in coaching: How clients respond to interventions based on Snyder's theory of hope

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Abstract

The concept of hope has infused human culture for millennia and in modern times challenged psychologists' attempts to define and measure individuals' level of hope. The beneficial impact of increasing hope to improve physical and mental well-being is a tested therapeutic intervention. However, little research has explored this matter in a coaching context. As a practicing coach, I regularly encounter issues around hope with my clients. As a consequence an action research project was designed to address my own personal development as a coach, but also to explore the challenges in identifying, improving and measuring levels hope in clients, using Snyder's hope theory (1994, 2002) and the hope scale (Lopez, Snyder and Pedrotti, 2003).

Key Words: Hope theory; coaching; action research; positive psychology; Hope Scale.

Introduction

The concept of 'hope' has been important in human philosophy since classical times; when Pandora released sorrow and disease into the world from her glass jar, only hope remained as a solace for mankind (March, 1998). Even the acerbic, satirical seventeenth century poet Alexander Pope thought hope is the essential disposition for contentment. As Pope reflects on the human condition in his *Essay on Man*, hope is a recurring theme, because with hope comes happiness. Hope helps man to overcome the fears of an unknown future: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast" (Davis, 1978, p. 244).

Indeed we find man's experience of hope in our culture throughout philosophy, religion and literature (Aronson, 1999; Magaletta & Oliver, 1999; Pippin, 1999; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). In the Christian tradition, hope prevails as 'an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Heb.5:19) and as a spiritual virtue from Job to John (Job 13:15; 1 John. 3:3.). The French existential philosopher Marcel gives hope a dominant role in his account of the human condition (Stratton-Lake, 1999). For Marcel, hope is different from optimism that has an implied detached certainty in one's prospects. Hope on the other hand, is always 'involved and participating in the creative process of being' (Stratton-Lake, 1999, p. 344).

In my coaching practice, I frequently work with clients who express a lack of hope, as they face adversity or struggle to achieve their goals and I think my practice could improve by helping clients enhance their level of hope. However, to achieve such a development, I need a more practical understanding of hope than the transcendent notions of Pope. Once I can explicate my meaning of hope, I shall also need a means to measure my clients' perceived changes in hope level.

In modern psychology, hope is a concept that has been the focus of considerable research. As a leading researcher in the field, Rick Snyder (1994, 2002) refined *his* theory of hope facing the greatest adversity himself, trying to manage debilitating pain, as he was treated for the cancer. Among the theoretical models for hope, Snyder's (1994) construct appeals most, because of the ostensible connection with coaching and therapy (Lopez *et al.* 2004; Kauffman, 2006; Magyar-Moe, 2009; Riskind, 2010).

According to Snyder (2002), understanding hope theory can make a broad, positive contribution to society by reducing frustration and despair. Psychological well being in society is improved if people are allowed to pursue goal directed activity and achieve rewards. A considerable body of research suggests high-hope individuals are more resilient, experience lower levels of anxiety and depression and experience better outcomes in the workplace and at home (Lopez *et al.* 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). They are less like to abandon their goals and more likely to stay the course in pursuing their aims (Seligman, 2002). Evidence suggests Snyder's hope theory is a robust model after many years of research and testing (Lopez *et al.* 2004; Kauffman, 2006; Riskind, 2006). This all implies fostering hope through coaching has broad benefits to my clients in themselves and in their relationships. As I shall discuss later, the potential wider benefits to social well-being of increasing hope, is consistent with the principles of action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

My interest in hope theory developed through research into positive psychology because the concept resonated in my coaching practice. The majority of my coaching is practiced in the framework of the British Broadcasting Corporation's internal coaching network of which I am a member. The network is an award winning coaching resource for senior leaders in the BBC and operates under the aegis of Corporation's training and development department, the BBC Academy. I also have some private clients. The participants in this research project came from both areas of my coaching practice. In this study, I am working with clients situated in challenging circumstances. One is journalist functioning in a high-pressure environment, subject to public scrutiny and under considerable financial pressures. The other is experiencing the contemporary recession in different ways, as a recent graduate struggling to pursue a fulfilling career.

In this paper I report how far I helped enhance hope in two clients, based on the three elements of Snyder's hope theory: goals thinking, pathways and agency (1994). I employed an action research (AR) methodology, ideal for this small scale, practice focused, project (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Denscombe, 2010; Bryman, 2008). The literature on hope determines how appropriate the Snyder Hope Model (1994, 2002) is for use in this context. I then describe the action research methodology used and finally I review the data collected from cycles of coaching with two clients.

Literature

In coaching practice literature, I found little evidence of explicit discussion of enhancing hope as a specific goal of coaching. However, as Kauffman (2006) points out, Snyder's hope model (2002) shares much with some widely used coaching interventions like brainstorming and the 'wheel of life' (Whitworth *et al.* 1998); both useful in developing pathways and agency thinking.

There is much more evidence of a relationship between hope theory and coaching in the application of positive psychology in coaching practice (Kauffman, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Green *et al.* 2007; Biswas-Diener, 2010; Kauffman *et al.*, 2010). The common conception of hope discussed here is based on Snyder's hope theory (1994, 2002) which describes hope as a positive motivated state and a cognitive process with three distinct, yet related elements (Snyder & Lopez (2007, p. 189):

- (i) “goal-directed thinking” - valuable but uncertain goals providing direction and end-point.
- (ii) “pathways thinking” - the “perceived capacity to find routes to desired goals.”
- (iii) “agency thinking” - “the requisite motivations to use those routes.”

It might be said that these three components of hope, map to the GROW model, commonly used in coaching (Whitmore, 2002): G is “goal-directed thinking”; Options express “pathways” and coaching interventions in the Will element of GROW, promote “agency thinking”. I also think there is a clear similarity between the GROW model in coaching and the G-POWER model designed as a hope enhancing tool for use in a therapeutic environment (Lopez *et al.* 2004, p. 396).

- G What is the client’s goal?
- P Which pathways does the client identify to move towards achieving the goal?
- O What obstacles lie in the client’s path?
- W What sources of willpower keep the client energised?
- E Which pathways does the client elect to follow?
- R Rethink the process to reassess the choices made

Therefore, I think this cognitive model is the pre-eminent modern conception of hope used in therapeutic and coaching relationships, often under the umbrella of positive psychology (Snyder *et al.*, 2000; Lopez *et al.*, 2004; Kauffman, 2006; Magyar-Moe, 2009; Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Biswas-Diener, 2010).

The literature also reveals, I think, that Snyder’s hope theory (1994, 2002) complements a range coaching and therapy models and interventions. For example, helping clients build hope is a key aspect of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (Neenan & Dryden, 2002a, 2002b) and Snyder *et al.* (2000) show how hope theory can be used in this context. In the developing arena of positive psychology, the Snyder and Lopez (2007) hope construct is influencing coaching and therapy interventions because, it is claimed, higher hope corresponds with greater psychological well-being, including improved relationships and improved performance, while inhibiting negative emotions (Kaufmann, 2006; Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Kauffman *et al.* 2010; Riskind, 2010). Hope is not only a factor in psychological but also physical health, even functioning as a painkiller, and an aid to strengthening recovery from illness (Frank & Frank, 1991; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010).

Two studies that employed Snyder’s hope theory (2002) in a coaching relationship reported successful results with clients. Green *et al.* (2007) demonstrated enhanced hope levels by coaching clients across a twenty–eight week life-coaching programme. They adopted a cognitive-behavioural, solution-focused coaching approach and measured significant increases in hope levels. In another study designed to assess the effectiveness of a programme to foster hope in student athletes, Rolo & Gould (2007) claim success in increasing client hope levels and recommend Snyder’s hope measures as a useful coaching tools. Although a short-term programme lasting only six weeks, each client received twelve sessions.

Therefore, I think there is some evidence to suggest Snyder’s hope theory (1994) and coaching are complementary. The next challenge then, to justify my use of Snyder’s hope theory (1994, 2002) is to test how valid it is as a model and how far is it a distinct psychological concept and thus enable me to

attribute success to this intervention. I shall contrast Snyder's model with criticisms that his conception fails to take proper account of emotions in understanding hope. I shall also consider if Snyder's theory is not a distinct model but an aspect of other constructs such as optimism (Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002; Carver & Scheier, 2002; Carver *et al.* 2010).

Critics of Snyder's hope theory suggest it fails to incorporate other similar concepts such as self-efficacy and optimism (Lazarus, 1999, 2000; Peterson, 2000, 2006). Aspinwall and Leaf (2002), challenge this lack of integration and the cognitive focus of Snyder's (1994, 2002) description of hope, at the expense of the affective. One of their main criticisms is the emphasis on personal agency, which they say, neglects the social contexts influencing perceptions and events. However, Snyder might argue that even in difficult times, the psychological capital in high-hope people makes them more likely to be able to discern pathways to achieve their goals (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 429). Aspinwall and Leaf (2002) also challenge Snyder's model by stressing how a person's hope level may be influenced by the appraisal of others. As I shall discuss later, this was a factor for both of the clients who participated in this research.

Similarly, Lazarus (1999, 2000) draws an affective description of hope seen as part of a coping process, because without hope one would inevitably feel despair. He also challenges the agentic value in hope as "erroneous because we can hope even when we are helpless to affect the outcome. Self-efficacy, or a sense of competence and control, facilitates hope, and it certainly aids in mobilizing problem-focused coping actions, but it is not essential to hope" (Lazarus, 1999, p.674). Fredrickson suggested that if an affective value is built into the model, hope can be enhanced just as well by helping clients build positive emotions and thus broaden their "thought-action repertoire, suppress negative emotions and increase resilience" (2001, p. 224). It is easy to see how a client might experience greater hope in those circumstances. Earlier, Averill *et al.* (1990) devised a description of hope based on different elements. People hope when they believe their desired outcome is realistic and that what they hope for is socially and morally acceptable.

As in Snyder's model, hopeful people take action to achieve their goals. In Brunininks and Malle's (2005) later experimental study, they aimed to distinguish these key concepts. Interestingly the participants in their study referred to hope as "keeping a person focused on one's goals, as keeping a person going, or as a way to control negative feelings" (2005, p. 334). Their findings portrayed hope "as an emotion that occurs when an individual is focused on an important positive future outcome", often with little control over the outcome (2005, p. 338). Therefore, this study suggested that hope *is* distinguished from other states and, unlike Snyder's cognitive model, the participants defined hope in *emotional* terms while they described optimism as a *cognitive* concept. However, there are some similarities with Snyder, including the participants' recognition of the differences between hope and optimism, but other researchers discuss hope, not as a distinct concept, but rather as an aspect of optimism or self-efficacy.

Two leading researchers into optimism, Carver and Scheier (2002) suggest there is a strong resemblance between Snyder's hope theory (1994) and their description of optimism. They also challenge the importance of personal agency in Snyder's model. They suggest that confidence in a positive outcome is more important than a sense of agency in the process. For example, they say that people with religious beliefs may abrogate personal control over events in favour of divine intervention. Indeed research by Murphy *et al.* (2000) showed lower hopelessness and better health in people with religious beliefs. However, this perspective is rebutted by those who claim there are in fact significant differences between optimism and hope, identified particularly in terms of agency - not just the will but the ways (Snyder *et al.* 2000; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Rand & Cheavens, 2009).

Taking forward the importance of agency and comparing the concept of self-efficacy with Snyder's hope theory (2002) there are, I think, certain similarities between the conceptions. Maddux (2009) described self-efficacy as the belief one can bring about desired outcomes through one's own actions. This belief that 'you can do it' seems to me very close to aspects of Snyder's hope theory (1994, 2002). But I question how much real difference there is between the belief that you can generate pathways and agency, from the belief that 'you can do it'? and calls into question how different hope theory is from other models and therefore how useful it can be in coaching practice.

Snyder (2002) recognises the similarities between his model and the self-efficacy construct but points out the latter is situationally contingent on what one believes one can do in certain circumstances. Therefore, according to Snyder (2002), this means self-efficacy differs from hope theory. While goals are also emphasised in self-efficacy, their role in hope theory differs because "they may be enduring, cross-situational, situational goal-directed thoughts, or all three (2002, p. 257). While it might be argued these differences are minimal, Snyder (2002) distinguishes hope from self-efficacy claiming high-hope people assess their *overall* capabilities to achieve goals, find pathways and discern alternative pathways in the face of adversity across circumstances and over time.

The measure of hope devised by Lopez et al. (2003), which I employed in this research, is designed to measure an individual's level of pathways and agentic thinking, to give a 'hope score'. Clearly, it is not an infallible measure and is criticised by Tennen *et al.* (2002) who point out that many components of the scale conform to other positive psychological constructs, for example the 'Ways of Coping Scale'. They also suggest that more research is needed to look at how positive illusions may be a negative aspect of an apparently high-hope person. However, Snyder *et al.* (2002) refute these criticisms of false hope claiming that "positive illusions provide a sense of agency" (p. 1006).

Finally, another significant objection to the Snyder model (1994, 2002), which in my view casts doubt upon it as a distinct concept, is the notion of altruistic hope. For example, one's hope that people in danger of natural disaster will survive, is a disposition clearly beyond anyone's goal setting faculties, although I suppose one might set a goal to act charitably. It is in the light of these many contradictions this research was conducted.

Methodology

A characteristic of action research (AR) is its heterogeneity (Reason, 2003). Therefore, defining AR is challenging, given the range of descriptions (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Bryman, 2007; Denscombe, 2010). However, a consistent theme in AR inquiry is that "the researcher enters a real-world situation and aims both to improve it and to acquire knowledge" (Checkland & Holwell, 1998, p. 1). For this study, I entered a real environment (a coaching relationship), in order to acquire knowledge and improve my practice "learning in and through action and reflection". A central aspect of AR is that it is an "enquiry by the self into the self" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 15). Consistent with AR values, I also aimed to work with my clients in the coaching experience to help increase their levels of hope and thus add to their well-being. Therefore, the important elements of good practice in action research are the practical engagement of the researcher with a real life problem, in a real life setting, to stimulate change through a cyclical feedback loop of planning, action, critical reflection and learning (Denscombe, 2010).

The epistemology of action research is different from other empirical research, particularly in terms of validation. Rather than producing evidence that can be generalised or replicated, the aim is to assess through critical reflection how authentic experience influences practice and then demonstrate this in the research. Action researchers appreciate knowledge as an ever-changing experience of learning and it is

vital to acknowledge this epistemological stance for reputable action research; “the only certain object of research becomes the change process itself” (Checkland and Holwell, 1998, p. 11).

Given that improving practice and solving practical problems are central aims in AR, it is not surprising to find a strong influence of pragmatist philosophy. Following the ideas of Dewey, Lewin and more recently Rorty, AR is shaped by the pragmatist idea that knowledge is created through action in a given context (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Brydon-Miller et al 2003; Reason, 2003). The conception of knowledge in AR might be reflected in the pragmatist philosopher William James’s contention that ‘it’s true if it works’, so truth is a process that changes according to events (Putnam, 1990). Problems are not solved forever but are addressed through action and reflection to improve practice and understanding.

In the pragmatic tradition, knowledge is judged by utility: the question should always be ‘What use is it?’ rather than ‘Is it real?’ (Rorty, 1993). Therefore truth is dispensed with in favour of what Dewey (1941) called ‘warranted assertibility and such warrant is always going to be contextual, historical or sociological (Talissee, 2012). In fact, Rorty would go further, taking an extreme relativist review and claiming that truth is not a philosophical matter at all; truth is what others will agree to; truth is not a goal of inquiry (Reason, 2003; Talissee, 2012). Therefore, by this measure, assuming I can conduct a valid AR process, apply appropriate critical reflection and demonstrate practical improvement, the findings of this study are valid, at least in terms of AR methodology. If the reader thinks these are weak criteria to establish validity (as do I), it must be said that AR is designed to be small scale and specific to the context and not to be considered generalisable (Denscombe, 2010).

Some critics argue that taking a pragmatist stance in research is flawed because accepting ‘what works’ as a premise for knowledge does not make clear the researcher’s assumptions (Lincoln, 2010). Hammersley (2004) goes further in challenging the philosophical foundations of AR. He claims the essential concern of AR involving a feedback between inquiry and practice is contradictory. The question for Hammersley (2004) is whether action research is about research or about action. It is less about commensurability and more about what he claims is a distinct difference between inquiry and action that cannot be overcome. He does however accept the pragmatist influence in AR that implies that inquiry *flows* from human action.

Action research is also influenced by the works of Polanyi (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) which emphasise tacit knowledge, accepting personal ways of knowing and disputing the idea that inquiry should follow a predictable path (Hammersley, 2006). The claims made in this inquiry accept tacit knowledge as a valid form of knowing.

The participatory and collaborative values in AR are, in my view, complementary with coaching as a discipline. Action research is used commonly in coaching research (Grant, 2009). One might say that the cyclical nature of the AR feedback loop is similar to some descriptions of the coaching process, for example Grant et al (2010, p. 128) describe coaching as a cyclical process to facilitate clients’ goal attainment.

- (i) identify desired outcomes
- (ii) establish specific goals
- (iii) enhance motivation by identifying strengths and building self- efficacy
- (iv) identify resources and formulate specific action plans
- (v) monitor and evaluate progress towards goals
- (vi) modify action plans based on feedback.

This process is described as a “monitor-evaluate-modification” pattern that I think is reflected in the knowledge creating process in AR described below.

Sampling

I am not a full-time professional coach so I work with few clients at a time. Given the time constraints to deliver the project, I approached two new clients and invited them to take part. The two participants are from very different backgrounds, age and experience. Adam is in his early twenties, living at home again after university and now working in the motor industry. He was unhappy, lacking in confidence and wanted to make some decisions about his future. Chris is a journalist who recently moved to the West. He is in his late thirties with a young family. He wanted to build his confidence and establish himself in his new job. Both clients agreed to record each session and participated in evaluating each session to influence the content and direction of next session.

Research ethics

I emailed details of the study including the context and reason for the research and my commitment to confidentiality. I sought permission to record the sessions and used Oxford Brookes proprietary paperwork to record this process formally. These actions are consistent with the ethical dimensions of AR outlined by McNiff and Whitehead (2002) and Denscombe (2010).

Action research process, data collection and analysis

Before the coaching programme, I invited the clients to complete the Lopez *et al.* (2003) hope scale (Appendix 1), to establish their level of hope. They completed the survey at the beginning (T1) and on completion of the coaching process (T2).

During each session, I framed the coaching around the three elements of Snyder’s (1994) Hope Theory using the G-Power model. I also used a range of tools to enhance my clients’ ability to define desired goals, identify pathways and increase their agency. For example, identifying cognitive dissonance to overcome blocks (Neenan & Dryden, 2002a, 2002b), recalling past successes and offered techniques to be used between sessions as hope reminders such as a daily diary of achievements (Lopez *et al.* 2004; Magyar-Moe, 2009).

A consistent model in action research is the cyclical nature of the process. Following the process shown in Figure 1, I planned each stage of the AR intervention before the coaching began, including inviting both participants to complete and return the hope scale (Lopez *et al.* 2003) as the bench-mark measure to assess how far coaching had changed their level of hope. I recorded and later transcribed each coaching session and analysed the transcriptions against the Hope Scale criteria. I used this data as a reflective tool to form new plans with my clients for the following sessions.

To aid the essential critical reflection aspect of Action Research (Checkland & Holwell, 1998) I kept reflection notes after each session using Oxford Brookes ‘Reflective Space’ proprietary forms. There is no space here to go into the heterogeneous definitions and descriptions of the reflective process (Lisle, 2000; Lynch, 2000; Willig 2001; Finlay, 2005, 2009; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Reflection in action is acknowledged as a valid, knowledge building process by one of the most influential writers in the field, Donald Schön, who appreciates the merits in “situations of uncertainty and uniqueness” like this (Schön, 1991, p. 69). I used Hay (2007) as an exemplar of managing the reflective process which is, I suggest, contiguous with the action research model outlined above (Hay, 2007, p. 8).



Figure 1: The Action Research Process - adapted from McNiff and Whitehead (2002, p. 40).

A number of concerns infused my research, not least some doubts about how effectively the Snyder Hope Scale results would reflect my coaching rather than the influence of other external events. Moreover, given the similarity between hope and other concepts how could I be sure the hope enhancing interventions (Lopez *et al.* 2004; Magyar-Moe, 2009), were delivering recognisable outcomes for my clients and me?

Findings and discussion

Before beginning the cycle of coaching, I examined the hope scale scores of each client. Four elements are the pathways sub-scale and four are the agency subscale; the additional four elements are distracters. The overall scale ranges from a low score of 8 to a high of 32 (Lopez *et al.* 2003). Both clients scored 26 at T1. This represents a moderately high score, so I would expect each client to be able to define, pursue and achieve clear goals. Therefore, I expected my clients would establish their coaching goals confidently and brainstorm creatively to devise pathways (Magyar-Moe, 2009). However, I found something rather different and working with both clients a common theme emerged - their own perceived lack of confidence and low-hope.

In cycle one Adam was struggling to make a decision about his future. He had a number of vague ideas, but felt unable to clarify what he wanted and to commit to any possible futures:

... because I'm scared, 'cause I don't know if it's the right thing to do. I'm scared of taking that risk because it is a massive gamble. It has to be something I'm comfortable with.

Chris described his habit of criticising his performance and how his confidence had been knocked a number of years ago when a new manager told him “*he should move on and find something else to do,*” which had a profoundly negative legacy.

I noticed their lack of confidence manifested in different ways. In Adam’s case, his lack of

confidence seemed to influence his inability to define a desired goal or summon the agency to pursue possible pathways. He engaged in playing the ‘yes, but’ game described in Transactional Analysis (Stewart & Jones, 1987). With him, there was a clear sense of stasis: *“It’s about having the confidence to take that jump in the first place, which is what I don’t have. I think that’s my problem.”* He was profoundly concerned that his career choice received approbation from his family and the wider world. This seemed to be inconsistent with the moderately high-hope person recorded in his hope scale result at T1, questioning the merit of this single instrument. However, Green *et al.* (2007) found the hope scale both internally and temporally reliable. They also found significant improvement in hope levels in their clients. Perhaps the greater number of coaching sessions in their study (ten compared with three) is significant.

On reflection after the first session, I felt that, despite his score, Adam was not demonstrating much hope by the Snyder (2002) criteria. Moreover, even after coaching helped him recognise his own ‘cognitive dissonance’ and his ‘yes, but’ thinking (Neenan & Dryden, 2002b), he was still unwilling to commit to a goal or pathways with agency. I have experienced this with clients before: despite their awareness of the cognitive dissonance in their beliefs, they still felt the same emotionally. This suggests to me that defining hope as a cognitive construct, underplays the feeling of hope as an emotion proposed by Aspinwall and Leaf (2002), as discussed above. Therefore, I decided in the next session I would invite Adam to explore the emotions around his fears to see if awareness would help develop his agency and commitment to goals.

With Chris, his lack of confidence manifested in a powerful uncertainty that his boss had faith in him despite the explicit contradictory support: *“yes, Mark did tell me he was delighted to have me here and that he knew I was ‘the right man for the job.’”* Chris described how he doubted colleagues’ approval in his skills and qualities. He said he would always think about what had gone wrong for him during that day on his journey home. He felt his previous bad experience with a former boss had really knocked his confidence and now he did not know what to do. This seemed again, inconsistent with his hope scale score. For Chris to begin to develop pathways and agency, I felt he needed to build some confidence, so I decided to work on helping him reframe his former experience and to let go of that grudge (Magyar-More, 2009).

My learning from this first cycle with Chris was that there are many emotional aspects to building a sense of hope. I decided that enhancing hope was more complicated than helping clients define goals, pathways and a sense of agency in a cognitive process and that the deep emotions at play, also needed to be explored in order to enhance hope. This would mean exploring and surfacing my clients’ emotional barriers. I also asked Chris to complete a diary, in which he would record three achievements each day. I hoped this classic positive psychology tool for generating positive emotions would help him reframe his negative thinking (Kauffman, 2006).

In the next coaching cycle, Chris said the diary exercise was particularly helpful:

*I’ve kept my little book, I’ve been doing that, three things actually and sometimes I look back over it [...]. It helps me keep thinking about the good things in the day rather than thinking f**k that went wrong today. It’s definitely made me think in a different way.*

Chris also found that reframing his bad experience with a former boss within the context of his whole career, was very helpful. He said he was feeling more positive generally. During this session, Chris was clearer about his goals and more flexible in pathways thinking. The positive emotions generated by the achievements diary appeared to enhance Chris’s hope. He seemed more positive about his sense of agency. This might imply that hope that can be developed by building positive emotions (Fredrickson,

2001).

In Adam's second cycle, I planned to help him surface where his fears and blocks were coming from and which appeared to cause his inability to commit to a goal with a sense of agency. I asked Adam what he was *really* worried about.

I think it's failure; it's a sense of pride [...], I think it's all about pride. It's about appearance having the right appearance with people who think you are successful. 'It is ridiculous but you don't want people to think you're some tramp' 'It's completely irrational.

Adam felt that if others approved of his choices, they became valid. For me, this resonated with the Aspinwall and Leaf (2002) challenge to the Snyder hope theory, that social context and approval of others are important influences. I tried a range of interventions with Adam to move away from his 'yes, but' thinking by recalling previous successes.

On reflection, this was a more helpful session. I felt that during the first cycle, I had worked within my professed cognitive-behavioural, solutions-focused approach and we were stuck. I adopted a different approach as Adam explored the emotional impact of his fears and what they meant to him.

In session three, Chris expressed and portrayed a distinct improvement in his level of hope. He was certainly more positive: "*Yeah, I think.... I'm enjoying it a lot more. It was frustrating, but talking things through and, you know, dealing with things differently.*" In this session, Chris wanted to work on a longer-term goal for his future career. He visualised the person he wanted to become:

someone who's more confident and more self assured [...], I have put things away in dark rooms to avoid them, to just carry on and survive them [...], I do feel I have turned a corner actually.

By cycle three Adam too had found a sense of agency. He said that he felt:

A lot lighter. When you are in a state of confusion and make progress, you feel happier and confident and you can action those things [...]. Three positions I applied for last night, I wouldn't have applied for before [...]. I would spend hours looking aimlessly so now I know what kinds of thing I want to do.

On reflection after this cycle, I felt that both clients' hope was enhanced. They seemed more confident and they had acted on the pathways they devised. However, referring back to other theoretical models, I think both clients were also more optimistic, in that they described the expectation of a good outcome, which Carver and Scheier (2002) recognise as different from the agentic process in hope theory. Perhaps hope and optimism are too closely related to treat separately.

At the end of the coaching programme, Adam and Chris completed the hope scale index again (T2). There was barely a difference, with both clients still being moderately high hope individuals. I cannot know if this might have changed with continued cycles of coaching. Judging by my clients' explicit improvements in devising pathways and actions, it is reasonable to believe their level of hope would increase, but perhaps not reflected in the Hope Scale. Moreover, I cannot know that it is hope enhancement and not self-efficacy or optimism and wonder 'does it really matter?'

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to improve my coaching practice by developing my ability to foster hope in my clients using Snyder's hope theory (2002). My assessment of the outcomes is mixed and uncertain for a range of reasons. My conclusions, consistent with AR studies, are equally cautious and limited.

This project was successful in terms of learning. I developed more knowledge of positive psychology and Snyder's hope theory (2002) and the hope scale (Lopez *et al.* 2003). I learned about action research and the focused critical reflection throughout the process was helpful. However, in terms of the aims for this research, to improve my practice by fostering hope in my clients, I think this study was unsuccessful. Looking at the evidence and reflecting on my experience, I think my clients experienced improvements in their levels of hope. However, I think Snyder's theory simply reflects what happens in most of my coaching sessions: I work with clients to build valued goals, devise pathways and develop agency. I think the Snyder model is broadly similar to conventional coaching models such as GROW. Therefore, although I can describe hope in terms of Snyder's cognitive model, it has not helped me develop my practice.

It seems to me that hope is not a discreet phenomenon defined in such simple terms. My experience of the way my clients presented their challenges suggests that effectively I always work with Snyder's hope theory, but simultaneously with optimism, self-efficacy and self-esteem. My experience suggests that isolating a cognitive description of hope from the affective world is unhelpful, maybe even wrong.

As for measuring hope using the hope scale, this proved unhelpful. Perhaps there are flaws in the design and such simple, blunt questions may not reveal an inherent complexity in the meaning of hope. Notwithstanding the vast amount of research supporting its validity, I was unable to infer any useful understanding of the scale to influence and assess my practice. If assessment tools are used at all, perhaps a more helpful way to develop practice is by using range of scales measuring optimism, ways of coping, self-efficacy, resilience and hope, under the umbrella of "psychological capital" (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 429).

Of course, many of these outcomes may be connected with flaws in the design of this research. On reflection, more coaching sessions might have delivered different results in common with Green *et al.* (2007) for example. I failed to involve my participants as rigorously as I might in the design of the project. While there was collaboration, feedback and dialogue with the participants throughout, there was not a partnership of equals in the research. Another difficulty affecting this project was a 'clash' between action and research. I found it difficult to maintain a happy integration between these two essential components, often unsure what was research and what was action - perhaps supporting Hammersley's criticisms of AR (2004), but also likely due to my inexperience as a researcher.

Finally I am unconvinced I can attribute any benefits for my clients in employing Snyder's hope theory; however my clients reported benefits from the coaching. Such as they were, these benefits may be attributed to many factors - the relational nature of coaching and my presence and encouragement in developing positive emotions for example (Fredrickson, 2001). Perhaps hope is best assessed through clients' feedback, described in their own vernacular, rather than a scale. This matters to me more, regardless of how well my coaching fits with theories or models.

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Appendix 1

Hope Scale (adapted from Lopez *et al.*, 2003 p. 401).

Below is a series of questions which are designed to give a sense of people's beliefs and attitudes which will help with goals. Please read the following questions and grade each, 1-4 according to the scale below. Please try to answer according to your honest beliefs. When you have completed the questionnaire please return by email. Thanks.

1. = Definitely false 2. = Mostly false 3. = Mostly true 4 = Definitely true

1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam
2. I energetically pursue my goals
3. I feel tired most of the time
4. There are lots of ways around any problem
5. I am easily put off in an argument
6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me
7. I worry about my health
8. Even when others get discouraged I know I can find a way to solve the problem
9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future
10. I've been pretty successful in life
11. I usually find myself worrying about something
12. I meet the goals that I set for myself

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