

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“My name is Matshepo ... Mother of Hope”: Examining Hope amid the First-Year Experience

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Abstract

Student affairs practitioners have essential roles to play in assisting students in concretising a sense of hope. However, more research is needed to explore the role of hope amongst university students during the first-year experience. This article reports on a mixed methods study that explored hope in the context of the first-year experience. The quantitative phase of the study explored the relationships between hope, flourishing, psychological distress, and academic achievement amongst a sample of 296 first-year South African university students (mean age = 20.70, SD = 1.30, female = 63%). Statistical analyses revealed significant relationships between the constructs assessed. Students who reported high scores on hope also obtained higher academic marks compared to participants who reported lower scores on the same construct. The qualitative phase of the study explored differences in conceptions of hope between participants (N = 28, age-range 18-22) who reported high versus low scores on a quantitative measure of hope. Two qualitative themes emerged, namely the trichotomy of hope, and hope-based generalised resistance resources. The findings indicate that students who present with high levels of hope may be more inclined to pursue academic goals and experience a sense of well-being. Implications for student support are discussed, and the importance of promoting realistic hope amid the first-year experience is highlighted.

Keywords

first-year experience; hope; mixed methods; positive psychology; well-being

Introduction

Hope refers to the conviction that the future will be better than the present, and that people have the power to make it so (Anderson, Turner & Heath, 2016; Lopez, 2013). Many young people, such as first-year students, pin their hopes of a better future on completing a university degree (Cherrington, 2018). However, the road to achieving a university degree is fraught with challenges and a relatively small proportion of students eventually graduate (Habib, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In this regard, Freire (1997, p. 106) argues that it is essential to “maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite”. Persons working in a university context, such as student affairs practitioners, have essential

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roles to play in motivating students to embrace, *inter alia*, hope as a strength in the face of challenges (De Villiers, 2014; Mason, 2019).

Hope theory emerged as a prominent focus of discourse with the introduction of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The discipline of positive psychology studies factors such as positive emotions and virtues that make life worth living despite challenges (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hope refers to the expectation of a positive and meaningful future and the associated effort required to achieve such an outcome (Snyder et al., 1991).

Numerous studies have indicated that hope is positively associated with well-being and engagement and inversely related to experiences of anxiety and distress (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Martins et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002). In the higher education context, research points to positive relationships between hope and academic achievement, problem-solving and task completion (Day et al., 2010; Khodarahimi, 2013; Morisano et al., 2010). According to Cherrington (2018), hope has the potential to humanise the educational context by empowering students and others with the awareness that they can be active agents in scripting and enacting optimistic future-oriented perspectives. In light of these arguments, hope could have particular relevance for university students, especially during the stressful first-year university experience (De Villiers, 2014; Scott, 2018).

The transition from school to university is particularly demanding and students often require assistance in establishing the skills, knowledge and abilities needed to navigate the change effectively (Mason, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The demanding nature of the first-year experience is further exacerbated by, amongst other things, maturational challenges, socioeconomic stressors, and being first-generation students (Arnett, 2015; Booysen, 2017; Jansen & Walters, 2019).

It is against this backdrop that a number of scholars have called for the exploration of hope as a psychological strength in assisting students in coping with university-related stressors (Anderson, 2016; Cherrington, 2018; Guse & Vermaak, 2011). Specifically, researchers argue that hope centred around a compelling vision, problem-solving capacities and agency could assist students in managing university-related challenges and strengthening academic resilience (Day et al., 2010; Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Snyder, 2002).

To date, limited South African research has explored the role of hope as a construct within the domain of the first-year experience (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014). Previous research has focused mostly on international contexts (Martins et al., 2018; Snyder, 2002), while national studies have considered university students' conceptions of hope (Maree & Maree, 2013) and the relationship between hope and psychological well-being amongst schoolchildren (Guse & Vermaak, 2011). It is, therefore, necessary to examine empirically the value of factors, such as hope, that could strengthen the resolve and support students in navigating the first-year experience (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014).

Quantitative investigations could offer objective results concerning the relationships between hope and significant university-related outcomes, such as flourishing, psychological distress, and academic achievement of students (Anderson, 2016; Trochim, 2016). In contrast, qualitative analyses could offer insight into students' conceptions of hope (Brocki

& Wearden, 2006). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can, inter alia, enable researchers to explore qualitatively the differentiation between participants who report high and low scores on a quantitative measure of hope, thereby offering a more nuanced perspective compared to adopting mono-methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This article reports a mixed methods study that explored hope amongst a sample of first-year South African university students. The quantitative data will indicate that hope has a significant bearing on flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement. The qualitative perspective will offer insight into students' lived experiences, with a particular emphasis on differences in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high and low scores on a hope scale.

In the next section, the theoretical perspective and variables being investigated are discussed. Then, the methodological approach that was adopted is presented. This is followed by reporting on the results of the study. The article is concluded by summarising the main findings.

Theoretical Perspective: Hope amongst University Students

At its core, hope is concerned with a person's mental perspective or vision of the future (Frankl, 2008; Marques, Gallagher & Lopez, 2017). Research indicates that an optimistic vision establishes a meaning-directed tension between where persons perceive themselves to be mentally in the present and where they long to be in the future (Bressler, Bressler & Bressler, 2010; Gallagher, Marques & Lopez, 2017). A fear-based or pessimistic orientation towards the future could be indicative of psychological distress (Frankl, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of hope comprises three interlocking processes: goals, pathways and agency (Lopez, Snyder & Pedrotti, 2003).

The first process of hope theory, namely goals, refers to an outcome that a person wishes to achieve within a specified time frame (Latham & Locke, 2002). Proponents of the goal-setting theory argue that conscious goals direct human behaviour in purposeful ways (Latham & Locke, 2002; Vincent, Boddana & MacLeod, 2004). Thus, goals establish and serve as the targets of deliberate mental action (Locke & Latham, 2002). Researchers distinguish between avoidance and approach goals (Snyder, 2002).

Avoidance goals suggest that a person moves away from a particular outcome due to fear of perceived adverse outcomes (Snyder, 2002). In contrast, approach goals indicate a move towards specific goals due to supposed positive achievements. The literature further differentiates between two types of achievement goals, namely mastery achievement and performance achievement goals (Grant Halvorson, 2012). Mastery achievement goals emphasise the development of knowledge and skills and reframe obstacles as opportunities for improvement; performance achievement goals focus on the expression of particular abilities and setbacks are considered to be the result of low talent or skill. Research suggests that hopeful persons may be more inclined to pursue approach and mastery achievement goals while also displaying a higher tolerance for ambiguity (Grant Halvorson, 2012). In contrast, persons who struggle with anxiety and depression may be more inclined to focus on avoidance and performance mastery goals (Grant Halvorson, 2012).

The second process, namely pathways thinking, refers to the perceived capacity to manage setbacks and challenges through generating workable paths to desired goals (Lopez, 2013). The broaden-and-build theory claims that high-hope persons tend to report higher levels of positivity, which in turn suggests better problem-solving capacities and higher levels of optimism (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Consequently, hope could serve as a meta-skill that assists in facilitating problem-solving, thereby establishing multiple pathways towards achieving goals (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Lopez, 2013).

The third process of hope theory, namely agency, points to a motivational component that promotes goal-directed determination (Lopez, 2013). In this regard, Duckworth (2016) refers to the capacity of grit as indicative of a person's capabilities to engage in agency thinking through the sustained and passionate pursuit of goals. Aspects such as agency and grit are critical in the pursuit of goals, especially when encountering obstacles (Snyder, 2002).

To establish and retain a sense of hope, persons require adequate resources to address the ubiquitous stressors of life (Frankl, 2008; Lopez, 2013). In this respect, Antonovsky (1979) introduced the salutogenic model, which rests on two pillars. The first pillar indicates that humans are confronted daily by a variety of stressors ranging in level of severity from traumatic events to everyday hassles. The second pillar stipulates that generalised resistance resources (GRRs) assist humans in dealing with stressors effectively. Antonovsky (1987) explains that GRRs refer to a variety of factors, such as material (e.g. money), social (e.g. family and friends) and knowledge (e.g. coping resources) that could assist people in coping effectively with the various stressful stimuli that they encounter. Moreover, GRRs could help people in establishing a sense of coherence, which refers, *inter alia*, to a sense of optimism and hope in the future (Antonovsky, 1979; Frankl, 2008).

Previous studies have pointed to positive associations between hope and well-being (Day et al., 2010; Martins et al., 2018). The concept of well-being is defined as experiencing more positive than negative emotions and a general sense of life satisfaction (Wissing et al., 2014). Keyes (2016) refers to the concept of flourishing as a holistic state of well-being. More precisely, flourishing encompasses emotional well-being (experiencing more positive than negative emotions), social well-being (positive relationships and contributions to the social world) and psychological well-being (the pursuit of meaning, purpose and personal growth) (Keyes, 2016). Even though studies point to positive relationships between hope and flourishing (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Martins et al., 2018), more research is needed in the South African context (Wissing et al., 2014) specifically amongst first-year students (Cherrington, 2018; De Villiers, 2014).

Aim of the Study

This article reports on a mixed methods study that explored the relevance of hope amongst first-year university students. The quantitative phase of the study investigated the empirical linkages between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement amongst a sample of first-year students at a South African university. The qualitative phase of the study explored differentiation in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high hope statuses versus low hope statuses on a quantitative measure of hope.

The study was guided by the following two research questions: (1) What is the relationship between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement? (2) What are the differences in the quantitative measures, and in lived experience, of hope between students who report high scores versus low hope statuses on a quantitative measure?

Method

Research design and approach

A sequential explanatory mixed methods research approach was adopted as the overarching design for the study being reported on (Creswell, 2014). During the first phase of this two-phase approach, quantitative data were collected and analysed from June to November 2016. Based on the quantitative results, qualitative data were collected from participants who reported high and low scores on a measure of hope. The qualitative phase of the study took place from January to August 2017. The Research Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted approved the research project (Ref.#: SCRE/2014/07/004). In the sections that follow, the particular methodological aspects of the quantitative and qualitative phases are discussed.

Quantitative Phase

Research design and sample

A descriptive and correlational quantitative research design was adopted to investigate the empirical linkages between hope, well-being, psychological distress and academic performance (Trochim, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to collect data from 296 first-year university students (mean age = 20.70, $SD = 1.30$, female = 63%) who were registered for formal academic studies at a South African university. All participants were first-year university students, 18 years of age or older, and registered for a student development and support programme.

Data collection and instruments

Quantitative data were collected using the Adult Hope Scale (AHS) (Snyder et al., 1991), the Flourishing Scale (FS) (Diener, 2013), the Short Depression-Happiness Scale (SDHS), (Joseph et al., 2004) and a cumulative mark for academic achievement. These instruments are discussed in the sections that follow.

The AHS is a 12-item measure that empirically assesses the concept of hope in terms of two dimensions, namely pathways thinking and agency (Snyder et al., 1991). Examples of items include: "I energetically pursue the goals that I set for myself" (agency) and "There are lots of ways around any problem" (pathways). Participants respond to items on an 8-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Higher scores represent a more significant presence of hope in a respondent's life. The AHS presents with good to excellent psychometric properties (Daugherty et al., 2018).

The FS is an 8-item measure of flourishing (Diener, 2013). Examples of items include: “People respect me” and “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”. Participants indicate responses on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree) and a high score indicates that a person embodies numerous psychological resources and strengths. Diener (2013) reports excellent internal consistency in the FS.

The SDHS is a 6-item, statistically bipolar self-report scale that reports scores on depression and happiness (Joseph et al., 2004). Three items inquire about positive thoughts, feelings and kinaesthetic experiences (happiness). Three items ask about negative thoughts, feelings and kinaesthetic bodily experiences (depression). Respondents are asked to think about how they have felt in the past seven days and to rate the frequency of each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (often). For this study, only items that assess depression (e.g. “I felt dissatisfied with my life”) were used. The SDHS is a highly reliable and valid measure of depression and happiness (Joseph et al., 2004).

All participants were registered for five academic subjects within a management science course and their academic achievement reports were obtained from university records. Academic grades were calculated by summing the numerical values of each subject’s scores. Next, a mean score was calculated based on semester marks, which were all evenly weighted. The specific course and subjects are not named here to protect the anonymity of participants.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to manage the data analysis procedure. Hope was set as the independent variable (IV) and flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement served as the dependent variables (DVs). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the constructs and reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Pearson product moment correlations (Pearson’s r) were used to calculate the strength and direction of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, and the statistical significance was set at 0.05. Simple linear regression analysis was used to investigate whether hope (IV) predicts flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement (DVs) (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). The independent sample t -test was used to compare participants’ scores on the AHS, FS, SDHS and academic achievement performance between high (10% of $N=296$, thus $n=30$) and low (10% of $N=296$, thus $n=30$) status hope groups.

Qualitative Phase

Research design and sample

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted as the qualitative research design (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA focuses on exploring participants’ lived experiences of a phenomenon within a specific context. This study focused on exploring and differentiating between the lived experience of hope as experienced by first-year students in a university context based on high versus low self-report ratings on the AHS. Therefore,

IPA was regarded as an appropriate qualitative approach to guide the study (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for the qualitative phase of the study. Participants who reported the highest ($n=30$) and lowest ($n=30$) scores on the AHS were identified and contacted. A subset of 16 participants who reported high scores (female = 10, male = 6, age-range = 18–22) and 12 who indicated low scores (female = 7, male = 5, age-range 18–20) responded and provided qualitative data.

Data collection

The participants were requested to express their conceptions on the role of hope within the first-year experience via narrative sketches. A narrative sketch refers to a qualitative-based document written by participants based on a specific topic (Giorgi, 1985). The instruction on the narrative sketch was:

What does hope mean for you? What role does hope play for you in the context of the university experience? Use the space provided and share your perspective of hope concerning your university experiences. There are no wrong answers and no limit on the length of the essay. If you wish, you can use the following prompts to guide your writing: What does hope mean to you? Is hope important for first-year students? Motivate your response. Can you share specific examples where you drew on hope to enhance the first-year experiences?

Participants' narrative sketches ranged from one to five pages. The majority of narrative sketches were submitted via a typed format ($n=22$), whereas some documents were handwritten ($n=6$).

Participants were also requested to indicate their willingness to participate in qualitative interviews. A total of seven students from the high-hope status group and six from the low-hope status group agreed to participate in the qualitative interviews. The interviews were unstructured and guided by the following thematic question: *Tell me what hope means for you in the context of the first-year experience?* Follow-up questions were based on participants' responses and the focus was on understanding the role that hope plays in participants' experiences as first-year students. The interviews, which were 30–45 minutes in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed following four broad interwoven and iterative steps (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011). First, as qualitative researcher, I immersed myself in the data by reading the narrative sketches multiple times. During this initial phase, I made a deliberate attempt to bracket subjective thoughts and personal opinions using qualitative memo writing. Second, the coding process started at a granular level by selecting a unit of meaning (e.g. words, phrases, and sentences) and allocating a specific code to it. Third, associated codes were grouped as relevant themes and subthemes. Fourth, the qualitative interpretation was formulated through constant

comparison and relating the data to pertinent theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning et al., 2011). Throughout the qualitative analysis, I remained cognisant of the guiding aim of the qualitative phase of the study, namely to identify differences concerning the lived experience of hope between students who reported high versus low scores on the AHS.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the interpretation were ensured by cross-checking the findings against a literature control and participant verification. Verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the qualitative interpretation and reflexive qualitative memos were kept (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Henning et al., 2011).

Results and Discussion

Quantitative results

The descriptive statistics (mean scores, standard deviations, internal reliability) and relevant correlational values for the dependent and independent variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variables/ Statistical values	Mean	SD	Alpha	2	3	4	5	6
AHS (Total)	35.86	6.62	0.87	0.89**	0.90**	0.62**	-0.37**	0.22**
AHS (Agency)	18.25	3.43	0.85		0.61**	0.53**	-0.32**	0.13*
AHS (Pathways)	17.61	4.02	0.86			0.58**	-0.35**	0.25**
FS	37.57	8.80	0.82					
SDHS (Depression)	3.87	1.35	0.74					
AA	56.02	9.57	NA					

*Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; *p < 0.05 = Statistically significant; **p < 0.01 = Statistically significant*

The mean scores reported on the measures of hope (AHS Total, AHS Agency and SDS Pathways), flourishing (FS) and psychological distress (SDHS (Depression)) are consistent with internationally reported research (Daugherty et al., 2018; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013). All the scales presented with satisfactory to good internal coherence of 0.7 and higher (Field, 2013).

Concerning the correlations, the hope scores (AHS Total, AHS Agency and AHS Pathways) shared significant positive associations with the construct of flourishing and academic achievement. These results echo previous studies and suggest that persons who report higher scores on a measure of hope are also more inclined to report higher scores on assessments of holistic well-being and tend to perform better academically when compared to persons reporting lower scores (Daugherty et al., 2018; Day et al., 2010; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013; Morisano et al., 2010). Correspondingly, hope was inversely related to the measure of psychological distress (SDHS), indicating that hope is associated with enhanced flourishing versus ill-being (Day et al., 2010; Lopez, 2013).

To investigate the premise that hope (IV) is a unique predictor of flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement (DVs), regression analyses were conducted. Table 2 presents the respective results from the regression analyses.

Table 2: Summary of standard multiple regression analyses

Model 1. DV: FS IV: AHS (Total)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	9509.60	1.0	9509.60	209.76	0.01**	0.42	0.41
Residual	133328.76	294	45.34				
Total	22838.36	295	-				
Model 2. DV: FS IV: AHS (Agency)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	6374.71	1.0	6374.71	113.84	0.01**	0.28	0.28
Residual	16463.65	294	56.00				
Total	22838.36	295	-				
Model 3. DV: FS IV: AHS (Pathways)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	8558.32	1.0	8558.32	176.20	0.01**	0.37	0.37
Residual	14280.05	294	48.57				
Total	22838.36	295	-				
Model 4. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Total)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	86.80	1.0	86.80	56.67	0.01**	0.16	0.16
Residual	450.33	294	1.53				
Total	537.12	295	-				
Model 5. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Agency)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	57.61	1.0	57.61	35.32	0.01**	0.11	0.10
Residual	479.51	294	1.63				
Total	537.12	295	-				
Model 6. DV: SDHS IV: AHS (Pathways)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	78.68	1.0	78.68	50.46	0.01**	0.15	0.14
Residual	458.44	294	1.56				
Total	537.12	295	-				
Model 7. DV: AA IV: AHS (Total)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R²	Adjusted R²
Regression	1374.68	1.0	1374.68	15.76	0.01**	0.05	0.05
Residual	25637.00	294	87.20				
Total	27011.68	295	-				

Model 8. DV: AA IV: AHS (Agency)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Regression	479.51	1.0	479.51	5.31	0.02*	0.02	0.01
Residual	26532.17	294	90.25				
Total	27011.68	295	-				
Model 9. DV: AA IV: AHS (Pathways)	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Regression	1797.82	1.0	1797.82	20.96	0.01**	0.07	0.06
Residual	25213.86	294	85.76				
Total	27011.68	295	-				

Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; * $p < 0.05$ = Statistically significant; ** $p < 0.01$ = Statistically significant

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement based on participants' reported hope scores. Significant regression equations were found between the quantitative measure of flourishing (FS) and the AHS (Total) ($F(1,294) = 209.76, p < 0.01$), AHS (Agency) ($F(1,294) = 113.84, p < 0.01$), and AHS (Pathways) scores ($F(1,294) = 176.20, p < 0.01$). A noteworthy regression equation was also found between the total ($F(1,294) = 56.67, p < 0.01$), agency ($F(1,294) = 35.32, p < 0.01$), and pathways scores ($F(1,294) = 50.46, p < 0.01$) on the AHS and the SDHS. Medium practical effect sizes emerged, suggesting that hope plays a role in students' experiences of flourishing and depression, but is not the overall determining factor.

Similar to previous studies, the data for this sample strongly indicated that hope is associated positively with a measure of well-being, in this case, flourishing (FS) and inversely related to a measure of psychological distress (SDHS) (Daugherty et al., 2018; Day et al., 2010; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013). Thus, the regression analyses indicate that hope could have an essential influence on students' success at university through promoting flourishing behaviour and possibly protecting against psychological distress (Anderson, 2016).

The AHS (Total) significantly predicted academic achievement amongst the participants ($F(1,294) = 15.76, p < 0.01$). Likewise, the AHS (Agency) ($F(1,294) = 5.31, p < 0.05$) and the AHS (Pathways) ($F(1,294) = 20.96, p < 0.01$). However, small practical effect sizes emerged on the AHS (Total) ($R^2 = 0.05$), the AHS (Agency) ($R^2 = 0.02$) and the AHS (Pathways) ($R^2 = 0.07$) (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). Thus, the AHS only accounted for a small percentage of variance regarding participants' academic achievement (AHS (Total) = 5%, AHS (Agency) = 2%, AHS (Pathways) = 7%).

Table 3 represents the variance in participants' reported scores on the quantitative measures between the subsections of the sample that reported high hope ($n = 30$) and low hope ($n = 30$) statuses.

Table 3: Independent samples *t*-test

Variables	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>df</i>
Low hope group	30				
AHS (Total)	30	23.73	3.43		
AHS (Agency)	30	12.67	2.67		
AHS (Pathways)	30	11.07	2.42		
FS	30	24.67	8.34		
SDHS (Depression)	30	5.10	1.60		
AA	30	49.63	12.82		
High hope group	30				
AHS (Total)	30	45.00	2.39	24.64*	58
AHS (Agency)	30	22.83	0.96	19.32*	58
AHS (Pathways)	30	22.17	1.13	22.38*	58
FS	30	45.47	4.82	9.81*	58
SDHS (Depression)	30	3.67	1.55	-3.39*	58
AA	30	57.92	11.76	2.57*	58
<i>Note: AHS = Adult Hope Scale; FS = Flourishing Scale; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; AA = Academic achievement; *$p < 0.05$ = Statistically significant; **$p < 0.01$ = Statistically significant</i>					

The differences between the two groups' reported AHS (Total) ($t_{(58)} = 24.64; p < 0.01$), AHS (Agency) ($t_{(58)} = 19.32; p < 0.01$) and AHS (Pathways) ($t_{(58)} = 22.38; p < 0.05$) scores were statistically significant. Additionally, the differences between the high- and low-hope status groups were significant on the FS ($t_{(58)} = 9.81; p < 0.01$), the SDHS ($t_{(11)} = -3.39; p < 0.01$) and in terms of academic achievement ($t_{(58)} = 2.57; p < 0.01$).

The comparison between high- and low-hope status groups indicates that there are significant differences in terms of students' flourishing, reported levels of psychological distress, and academic achievement. Thus, the data suggest that students who report high-hope statuses function better in terms of the presence of positive experiences (flourishing), the absence of negative emotions (psychological distress), and academic achievement during the first-year experience. However, this study did not control for external variables that could influence students' experiences of hope, such as socioeconomic status, social support, or coping resources. Therefore, the findings should not be considered in a deterministic manner, but ought to be regarded as trends that emerged from a single data set. Nonetheless, the quantitative data support the existing literature by indicating that hope may serve as a relevant psychological strength in enhancing students' experiences (Cherrington, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2017; Lopez, 2013).

The beneficial effects of hope as a psychological strength would likely be realised when students are motivated by an optimistic vision of the future, engage in agency thinking and have multiple pathways available to achieve goals (Lopez, 2013). However, the conditions

that could assist in strengthening a sense of hope were not investigated. Based on the challenges within the South African higher education context, such as the stressful nature of the first-year experience, socioeconomic pressure, and epistemic access, the conditions that facilitate the development of hope might not be readily available to the entire first-year student cohort (Anderson et al., 2016; Cherrington, 2018; Scott, 2018). It was with these thoughts in mind that the qualitative phase of the study was initiated.

Qualitative findings

The qualitative phase of the study explored the different conceptions of hope, as expressed by students who reported high-hope statuses ($n = 16$) versus those who reported low-hope statuses ($n = 12$). Two themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (1) the trichotomy of hope, and (2) hope-based GRRs. In the sections that follow, the qualitative themes are presented. Then, the quantitative results and qualitative findings are summarised and discussed.

The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), group (H = high reported hope group, L = low reported hope group), data collection method (NS = narrative sketch, I = interview), gender (M = male, F = female), and age. For example, 'P#1, H, NS, F, 18' refers to participant number one, who reported a high hope status, provided data via the narrative sketch, is female and 18 years of age.

The trichotomy of hope

The major set of qualitative differences between students who reported high-hope statuses versus those who reported low-hope statuses related to how they described three essential facets of hope, namely their visions for their future, goal-directedness, and pathways thinking. Concerning their vision of the future, the high-hope group sketched much clearer images of the directions of their lives. For example, one participant from the high-hope group explained that she had *"big plans for my future ... I want to complete my degree ... register for postgrad studies and pursue an academic career ... I wish to become a university lecturer. I want to uplift other young female students"* (P#3, H, NS, F, 19). Another student from the high-hope group shared that his future perspective: *"is optimistic ... there are many opportunities in the world ... all over the world ... it may sound silly, but my dream is to be the MD of an international motor company"* (P#13, H, I, M, 20).

In contrast, participants from the low-hope status group made fewer references to their future visions and were more likely to sketch pessimistic visions. Participant 4, an 18-year-old female, exclaimed during the interview: *"I don't feel very optimistic about the future. I have little hope in living a life filled with joy ... when I think of where I want to be in 10 years' time, I don't see much happiness."* This sentiment was echoed by participant nine, a nineteen-year-old male from the low-hope status group who reported the following in the narrative sketch: *"There is not much positiveness in the future ... circumstances have given me a bad deal, poverty and no role models ... there's no escaping it."*

Empirical research indicates that persons who establish compelling personal visions are more likely to set specific and personally relevant goals (Masuda et al., 2010).

Correspondingly, persons who set specific and meaningful goals are more likely to achieve their stated outcomes when compared to persons who set vague goals (Locke & Latham, 2002; Vincent et al., 2004). Consequently, a personal vision appears to play an integral role in motivation and the achievement of meaningful life goals (Masuda et al., 2010).

Concerning goals, students in the high hope status group were more likely to make references to meaningful mastery-orientated goals ("*I have learning goals that I want to achieve ... for example, I aim to get a 75% average this year to apply for a bursary and get accepted at company X to do an internship after I graduate*" P#7, H, I, F, 18) and made greater reference to multiple pathways to achieve their goals ("*I had a teacher in school who used to say 'there's more than one way to crack an egg'. I thought about it for long and I began to understand it ... many ways to get to a solution ... get to an answer. You must explore different options to get what you want*" P#12, H, I, M, 22). To the contrary, participants in the low-hope status groups made limited reference to approach-based objectives, but instead appeared to adopt avoidance-based orientations ("*... often feel that I do not belong here and will fail at university*" P#9, L, NS, M, 19).

These findings are consistent with the literature (Cherrington & De Lange, 2016; Grant Halvorson, 2012) and suggest that students who report higher hope statuses exhibit better goal-directedness in real-life settings. The knock-on effect is that students could experience higher levels of positivity ("*I would describe myself as a very happy person ... satisfied with my life ...*" P#5, H, I, F, 19) versus "*my life is not very pleasant ...*" (P#2, L, NS, F, 18) that could broaden and build skill sets, which is tantamount to enhanced pathways thinking (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Lopez, 2013).

Hope-based generalised resistance resources

Students who reported high scores on the AHS were more vocal about the presence of GRRs in their lives. More specifically, students who reported high-hope statuses referred to three specific GRRs, namely emotional support ("*many people care deeply for me ... people who love me*" P#8, H, I, F, 18), social support ("*my grandmother is my rock ...*" P#5, H, NS, F, 19) and greater financial security ("*being poor is hard ... NSFAS support with studies helps me to relax ... financial stability is important when you think about developing a plan for life*" P#15, H, I, M, 18). In contrast, students who reported low-hope statuses were more likely to describe experiences of emotional distress ("*there's so many things that worry me ... not coping well ...*" P#11, L, NS, M, 18) and point to financial challenges ("*I hate that everything is about money. If you don't have money it is like you don't matter ... inequality means that many people will never be a success*" P#9, L, I, M, 19).

As one of the most unequal countries in the world, South Africa is characterised by an imbalanced distribution of resources (Booyesen, 2017; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). It is against this backdrop of inequality that deliberate attempts were made by the government to widen access to university (Jansen & Walters, 2019; Scott, 2018). However, access without the necessary resources required to achieve success at university does little more than expose the existing societal fault lines that plague success in the higher education context (Habib, 2016; Scott, 2018). As reported elsewhere, access to university ought to be augmented with the required resources to ensure, inter alia, emotional support, social support and financial security to students (Habib, 2016; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014).

However, what has not necessarily been reported elsewhere is the importance of GRRs in establishing a context where hope could be instilled as a psychological protective factor in the lives of first-year students.

Integration

This mixed methods study had two overarching aims. First, the study sought to investigate quantitatively the empirical linkages between hope, flourishing, psychological distress and academic achievement amongst a sample comprising first-year students at a South African university. Second, the study explored qualitatively the distinctions in the conceptions of hope between students who reported high-hope statuses versus low-hope statuses.

The quantitative data indicated positive correlations between hope and measures of flourishing and academic achievement. Additionally, an inverse relationship emerged between hope and a measure of psychological distress. Furthermore, regression analyses echoed the findings from the extant literature by indicating that persons who report high-hope scores are more likely to experience flourishing, perform better academically, and tend to be less prone to depression (Daugherty et al., 2018; Dixson et al., 2018; Khodarahimi, 2013; Snyder et al., 1991). Comparisons between participants who reported high-hope statuses and low-hope statuses suggest that hope may be a significant protective factor that promotes holistic well-being and academic achievement while serving as a possible buffer against psychological distress.

The qualitative findings supported the quantitative data by pointing out that participants who reported high-hope statuses were more likely to have well-established and optimistic visions, set and pursue mastery and achievement-orientated goals and engage in more significant pathways thinking. Thus, the qualitative analysis augmented the quantitative argument that hope is a vital psychological attribute that could promote holistic student success by fostering flourishing and academic achievement.

However, the qualitative findings also indicated that high-hope participants had access to three specific GRRs, namely emotional support, social sustenance and greater financial security. This qualitative finding demonstrates that the availability of foundational support plays an essential role in promoting a sense of hope amongst students. Thus, while the quantitative data pointed to the significance of hope in terms of well-being and academic achievement during the first-year experience, the qualitative data highlighted the contextual factors that assist in making hope possible.

The findings from this mixed methods study, therefore, confirm that while hope is a vital feature of promoting holistic student success, attention should also be paid to the GRRs that support an optimistic vision of the future, goal-directedness and pathways thinking. Hence, student affairs practitioners would do well to focus on strengthening hope by solidifying the GRRs and contextual factors that might be hidden below the metaphorical surface of student achievement.

Conclusion

This mixed methods study explored the concept of hope within the context of the first-year experience. The quantitative results supported the existing literature by indicating that hope was positively associated with flourishing and academic achievement and inversely related to psychological distress. The qualitative findings indicated that high-hope students were more likely to report positive and optimistic vision statements, be goal-directed and adopt multiple pathways in pursuing meaningful goals. Furthermore, the qualitative data drew much-needed attention to the relevance of GRRs in actualising the potentiality of hope.

Taken altogether, the study provides convincing evidence for the significance of hope as a psychological strength within the context of the first-year experience. Moreover, this article highlights the importance of three specific GRRs, namely emotional support, social support and financial means as critical drivers that promote a sense of hope.

This study was limited in the following ways: first, given that the study was conducted in a cross-sectional manner at a single South African university, the results should not be over-interpreted. Hence, while the findings are consistent for the specific quantitative and qualitative data sets, over-generalisations should be avoided. Second, while the language of regression may appear causal, it should be kept in mind that a correlational research design was adopted during the quantitative phase of the study. Therefore, the strong relationships between hope and the dependent variables should not be considered indicators of causality; only true experimental designs would allow for causal inferences. Third, limited qualitative data were collected from a subset of the sample based on self-report scores on the AHS. Self-report measures are fraught with social desirability. Thus, an assumption was made that the assessment of hope via the AHS was reflective of real-world differences. Even though the AHS presented with valid and reliable psychometric properties, a different qualitative narrative could have emerged if more diverse voices had been included in the study.

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings point to promising avenues for further research. Amongst other things, researchers should be encouraged to examine the concept of hope from an Afrocentric perspective. Studies that consider hope and other positive psychology-based constructs from Afrocentric perspectives could offer greater insight and potentially contribute to the advancement of African psychology. Moreover, such studies could provide theoretical lenses to explore the local realities that students struggle with from indigenous perspectives. Additionally, it appears relevant to develop support programmes and establish contextual frameworks that promote a sense of hope. In this regard, researchers should consider first-order (vision, goals, pathways and agency) and second-order (GRRs) factors that promote a sense of hope.

This study affirms that a vision of a hopeful future could serve as a beacon of light during the stressful first-year student experience. One participant captured this affirmation as follows: "*My name is Matshepo ... it means 'mother of hope'. In my life, hope is like a protector, the inspiration for my future ... hope helps me to keep believing*" (P#7, H, I, F, 18). The roles that student affairs professionals can play in assisting students in concretising hope should not

be underestimated. Student affairs staff ought to champion the cause of helping students to develop optimistic future perspectives, along with the belief systems and contextual requirements to make hope happen.

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