

Hope and culture: Relationships and implications for research, clinical and organizational practices

Felipe Oyarzo^{a*}, Rogers State University, 1701 W. Will Rogers Blvd (Prep Hall), Claremore 74017, United States.

Chan Hellman^b, University of Oklahoma, 4502 E 41st St, Tulsa 74135, United States.

Raymond Williamson^c, University of Oklahoma, 4502 E 41st St, Tulsa 74135, United States.

Suggested Citation:

Oyarzo, F., Hellman, C., & Williamson, R. (2022). Hope and culture: Relationships and implications for research, clinical and organizational practices. *Global Journal of Psychology Research: New Trends and Issues*. 12(2), 112-120. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjpr.v12i2.7953>

Received from May 11, 2022; Revised from June 10, 2022; Accepted from September 22, 2022.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc Prof. Dr. Melis Seray Özden, Istanbul Kultur University, Turkey

©2022 Birlesik Dunya Yenilik Arastirma ve Yayıncılık Merkezi. All rights reserved.

Abstract

Hope and culture are currently two relevant concepts of interest across multiple fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, social work, government, education, and business. Both theories are significant for the facilitation of individual and social well-being, but there is limited knowledge available in the literature regarding how these two concepts interact and position with respect to each other, and about how they can be applied collectively to research, clinical, family and organizational practices. The purpose of this study is to comprehend from a conceptual perspective the relationships that exist between hope and culture and their implications for research and professional practices.

Keywords: hope, culture, empathy, resilience, research, therapy, organizations, family, clinical practice, counseling, cultural awareness, cultural improvement, cultural humility, smart culture.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Felipe Oyarzo, Rogers State University, 1701 W. Will Rogers Blvd (Prep Hall), Claremore 74017, United States.

E-mail address: foyarzo@rsu.edu / Tel.: +1-918-698-1483.

1. Introduction: Hope and Culture

The concept of hope in the context of this analysis is defined as a cognitive element that includes the three tenets of goal setting, pathways thinking, and agency (willpower). Hope theory as we know it in the modern world is based on the initial works made by psychologist Charles R. Snyder (Snyder, 2002). From his theoretical perspective, hope is not just a wish, but in the contrary, a desire to find strategies or pathways that will lead one to achieve a goal. According to Snyder's proposal, that goal cannot be achieved without willpower (referred within this theoretical framework as agency) and pathways. The willpower, described by some anthropologists as determination (Jansen 2016), is what makes a person achieve a goal because hopeful individuals dedicate mental energy to find or create pathways to achieve their objectives. Pathways thinking refers to the ability of identifying and considering the strategies that will likely lead to goal achievement. This way of thinking includes consideration of potential barriers and their hypothetical solutions. Several modern scholars define hope as the belief that the future will be better, and people have the power to make it happen. The relevance of this idea for scientific arenas, organizations, companies, and governments is that recent empirical studies have demonstrated that hopeful people can achieve greater goals than those who have low hope (Passmore et al., 2020). In the United States, agencies such as the Oklahoma Department of Human Services are currently incorporating hope theory into their organizational frameworks (e.g., training, leadership focus, impact on client well-being, etc.) Quantitative studies conducted by Hellman & Gwinn (2017) have also validated that hope interventions can have a positive impact in children exposed to domestic violence. Another study published by Munoz, Hanks & Hellman (2019) showed that hope can be a positive contributor to psychological flourishing among childhood trauma survivors. Peterson (2003) has also indicated that hope can help organizations and communities to develop positive leaders. In a recent project led by the Hope Research Center of the University of Oklahoma in Tulsa, United States, a statistical analysis of over 3,000 full-time human service employees demonstrated that hope is a stronger predictor of well-being and goal achievement than resilience (Hellman, Pharris & Oyarzo, 2020). For decades, the concept of resilience was considered the most important predictor of personal growth and a positive mental health, but recent findings are positioning hope above resilience within those measurements (Munoz, Hanks, & Hellman, 2020). Along with this, a developing association of research is currently demonstrating that hope is an essential component of organizational effectiveness, evidencing significant constructive connections with job satisfaction, burnout, turnover, and performance.

The notion of culture has historically been approached from an explanatory perspective, being studied mainly from the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, and archaeology. After the industrial revolution, the business field along with other arenas took a special interest in the concept of culture, specifically towards the idea of organizational culture. One of the first anthropological definitions of culture was provided by 19th-century British anthropologist Edward Tylor, and it defined culture as a complex concept that includes human knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities or habits acquired by humans as members of a society (Tylor, 1920). Authors such as Jahoda (2012) propose a definition of culture based on the initial works of Kroeber & Kluckhohn's (1952), and it consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts, historical, and selected tradition. Recently, authors such as Oyarzo (2020) propose that culture is one of the most important concepts of social sciences, and governments, universities, organizations, companies, and research centers are not reflecting enough about this complex theory. The same author indicates that cultural awareness and cultural improvement (described by other writers as cultural

evolution) can positively change the present and the future of human groups because of their intimate connections with the mentality of human groups and hence with the thinking processes of the brain. Hudelson (2004) states that most anthropologists would define culture as the shared set of implicit and explicit values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behaviors that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself. From Hudelson’s perspective, culture is a complex and multi-faceted concept whose study requires conceptual models and research methods that can reflect this complexity.

2. Conceptual Relationships between Hope and Culture

Fields such as sociology have historically divided culture into three dimensions: a) Symbolic culture (values, traditions, mentality, language, etc.), b) Material culture (clothing, food, constructions such as houses and buildings, etc.) and c) Spiritual culture (all groups and civilizations observed and studied have evidenced some type of spiritual activity, religion, etc.) Since hope is a cognitive concept, and it is part of the thinking processes of the brain, hope is not culture. Hope is situated inside the cultural construct of a group, specifically within the symbolic culture. The mentality of a human group, which is the place where the thinking processes occur, has become the focus of interest of the authors of this study because of its networks with cognitive components. It exists within the symbolic dimension, and it is inside the mentality where hope is situated as shown on figure 1:

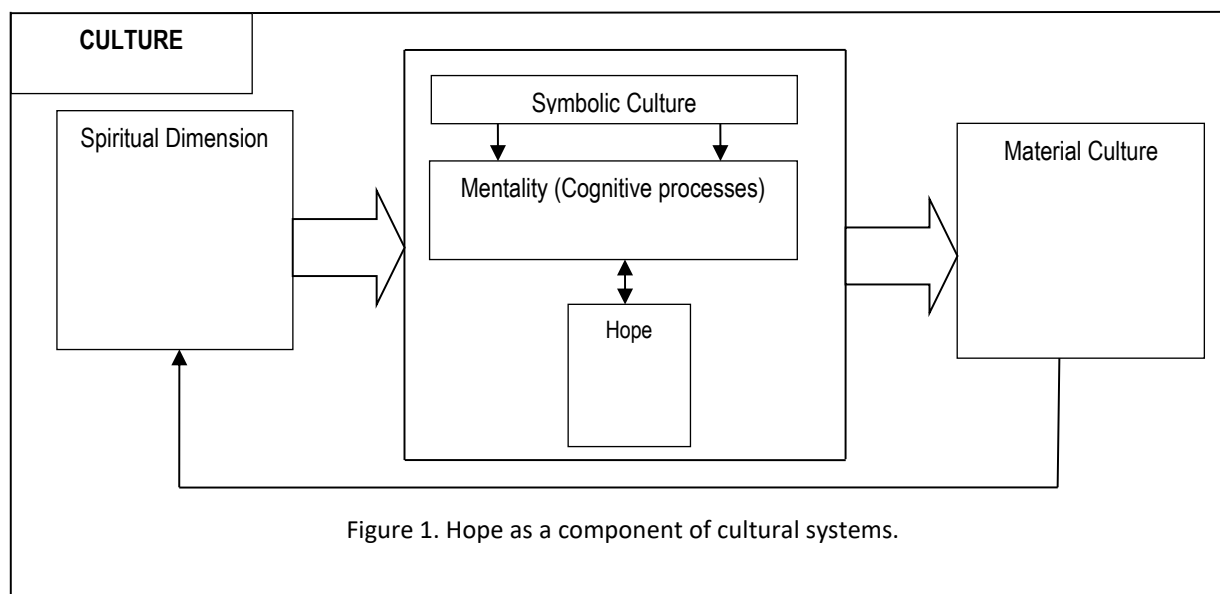


Figure 1. Hope as a component of cultural systems.

3. The Influence of Culture on Hope

Conclusively, the symbolic, material, and spiritual dimensions of culture influence the mentality of a human group and vice versa. Historical and recent evidence suggest that these three dimensions have significant influence on a group’s mentality (Oyarzo, 2020). It seems like it is most likely for these three dimensions to influence mentality than for mentality to influence the group’s culture. Some civilizations in Asia and the Middle East have possessed similar cultural elements for thousands of years because the influence of culture in the way groups think and perceive reality is immense and can influence the mentality of a group for long periods of time. Although culture is continually changing, some cultural elements can stay as part of the cultural construct of a group continuously if these aspects are not intentionally removed or modified by the group. This phenomenon is one of the factors that explain

why some cultures take so much time to evolve (improve) or to recognize harmful elements within them. Therefore, culture does impact the levels of hope of an individual and of a human group. The three dimensions of culture (symbolic, material, and spiritual) will have an impact on the levels of hope of a group and a person because they directly influence the mentality of the group and hence of the individual. Besides this consideration, authors such as Maturana, Dávila & Ramírez (2016) have established connections between the biology of humans and their culture. The geographical location of the group (characteristics of the land in which humans live, weather, wildlife, food available, etc.) can also influence a group's culture as described by some authors such as Legwegoh & Riley (2014). Regardless of the race (biological characteristics of a human group) or geographical location in which a group develops, we believe that every human group has similar capacities to reason regardless of their race or psychical location in which they exist. From this approach, it is the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of culture that have the greatest impact on the mentality of any group and hence, in hope levels, beyond the material dimension, race and geographical context in which humans cohabitate. Conversely, hope can also be demonstrated through material culture. Parrott (2005) explored the way patients in a psychiatric facility related to the institution through the decoration of bedrooms and self-decoration through clothing and accessories. The evidence collected suggested that these patients continued to visualize themselves primarily in terms of another potential life outside the mental facility (they showed some level of hope regarding a possible better external life), attempting to live within material cultures that orientated them towards the future and to external relationships.

The influence of the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of culture are still predominant in a group's mentality. A contemporary study conducted with Alaska Native communities by Rivkin et al. (2019) demonstrated how positive cultural values, traditions, and practices can have a beneficial impact on stress and coping. Among the cultural elements identified by this group of researchers and that positively influenced coping were subsistence, dancing and drumming, intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and reflective awareness of interconnections with others. Participants found strength in family relationships, spirituality, helping others, and coming together as a cultural community. A similar study conducted by Masotti et al. (2020) in California measured culture in 3 sub-scales: Identity, traditions, and spirituality. This study demonstrated a definite link between cultural connectedness, mental health, and well-being using hope measures, concluding that culture is a strong social determinant of positive mental health and well-being for Indigenous Native groups in the United States. A similar phenomenon can be observed on other latitudes of the world, such as Asia. Panter-Brick & Eggerman (2012) conducted different longitudinal studies with Afghan families and concluded that cultural values are the foundation of hope for the future and resilience, as they both support the meaning attributed to great suffering. Outstandingly, these studies also showed that war-related trauma is not the principal driver of poor mental health but in the contrary, traumatic experiences are linked to fractured family relationships and a failure to achieve personal, social, and cultural milestones, evidencing the undeniable relationships between mental health, culture, and hope. These findings also demonstrated that cultural principles helped Afghans in the pursuit of honor and respectability, essential features of psychosocial resilience.

Another important aspect to consider in the compound relationship between hope and culture is research instruments that measure hope levels might not produce the same results if used in different cultures. This finding was published by a group of Italian researchers that applied American hope scales to Italian individuals. They found differences in the results of similar subjects assessed and which belonged to two different cultures (Magnano et al., 2019). According to these scholars, the differences observed should not be surprising as many authors have already emphasized the need to inspect the cross-cultural validity and usefulness of emotion measures in different cultures (Chan, Zhang, Fung & Hagger, 2015). Notice that hope is, in fact, present and can become a positive element of any culture, but it is the levels of hope that are influenced by the unique cultural mechanisms of each group as well as the understanding (or interpretation) of hope as a cognitive concept. Indeed, the shared beliefs and values of a culture will influence the goals that are considered desirable, and which pathways are accepted by the group. The significance of considering cultural elements when studying levels of hope

on different individuals is that culture can provide a great extent of accuracy, many realistic aspects of subjects, and elements of the life of a group in the mental, material, and spiritual dimensions.

Hope can also impact culture positively if the process is propitiated through an intentional thinking procedure, as it will be discussed in the next section.

4. Hope, Cultural Improvement and Cultural Awareness

In the framework of hope theory, improving a culture differs from cultural evolution in the sense that current evolution theories comprehend biological aspects of humankind, while cultural improvement refers to the free, rational, and intentional decision of an individual or a group to enhance their culture, regardless of their biological characteristics such as race. This assumption does not deny the complex and sphinxlike influence of biology in the different human groups but emphasizes the unique intellectual freedom that humans possess to create, modify, or improve their culture through intentional, free, and creative thinking processes. This distinctive characteristic differentiates human groups from other species. Human culture will not improve on behalf of the person or the group's well-being unless it is an intentional goal. This idea suggests imperative connections with hope theory. Historical cases of civilizations that reached well-being and development did it intentionally and through thinking processes; Well-being, development and scientific knowledge did not occur randomly, but intentionally (Oyarzo, 2020). Thus, the relevance of identifying hope within the mentality of cultural construct is that hope can be successfully utilized to improve a culture and to promote social well-being. Hope has the power to make changes in humans' mentality and behavior, so it could be utilized by a group to improve or remove harmful aspects of their culture, or to create new positive ones. This idea evidences the importance of hope and culture interaction, and it has direct implications involving the work with families, organizations, and research (scientific) projects.

Because individuals are always immersed in a culture (or cultures), hope cannot be separated from culture; each family has a culture, companies develop and inherit different cultures, schools cultivate different cultures, etc. Accordingly, the culture of a person, group or organization should always be considered in research analyses and professional practices. The study of the levels of hope on subjects, or the implementation of hope models in organizations should always and diligently consider the culture of both the organization and the subjects that are part of that association.

Consider an organization that struggles with gossip, a common element observed in numerous cultures. If the organization is not aware of that adverse cultural component it will be very challenging for that specific group to eradicate that cultural problem from the organization, even if the individuals participating in that group are highly hopeful. It is also known that certain individuals such as drug lords and narcissists are exceedingly hopeful and have been able to accomplish goals through their high levels of hope, perhaps, at the expense of others. Being hopeful does not mean that a group will automatically utilize their high levels of hope to create a positive culture that will benefit its participants, especially if building a positive culture is not a clear and intentional goal, and if the negative components of that culture have not been correctly identified. This transformation will also not occur if the group hasn't defined what a positive culture means for the group. Therefore, it is crucial to place hope within a culture that wishes to be positive for all its members.

Cultural awareness allows groups to identify what cultural elements they wish to improve, and hope becomes the resource to accomplish that enhancement. This relationship becomes significant for research because it gives hope the ambiance in which hope exists and could flourish or disappear. Furthermore, when groups work together to reach well-being, it could result very challenging to reach the goal if the group's culture is not considered. Robust research evidence suggests that hope can help individuals to achieve goals and reach well-being. One of the ways to become hopeful is through reflections of our perceptions, the analysis of how hopeful we think we are, and of how deterrent we are on creating pathways to achieve our goals. Examining the culture that we are part of could help us understand what makes us less or more hopeful, and, as stated earlier, it could also help us be aware of

our culture and thus improve it. Being aware of negative components of our culture can allow us to remove possible barriers for our objectives and help create stronger pathways for goal achievement. This same idea applies to family therapy and counseling because for these practices the consideration of a family's culture is vital, both for the therapist and the client. For organizational improvement and development, cultural awareness is also essential.

Culture also provides the setting in which the following central hope inquiry can be answered: Why to be hopeful? As mentioned earlier, individuals can use their high levels of hope to commit heinous acts that can harm society in many ways. When the purpose is to use hope as a resource to promote individual and social well-being, then the focus of hope theory is positive. The same positive emphasis is found within the concept of cultural improvement. Cultural improvement focuses on better culture starting with the group's mentality, on facilitating a culture that is respectful, warm, reasonable, and that it is a positive construct for all its participants. A company could eventually make its employees become more hopeful but still deal with gossip, jealousy, and other negative cultural components observed in many organizations. It is common to find that the cultural description provided by certain companies (what they envision as their professional culture) differs with the real culture perceived through research methods. Subsequently, thinking about what type of culture we desire, and why the group wishes to be hopeful can help the group leaders create a clearer and more effective pathways towards cultural success.

A group that desires to improve its culture must be aware of the tensions that can arise between symbolic culture (traditions and values), change, reasoning and thus with hope.

5. Hope and Culture in Clinical Settings

When using hope theory with patients facing terminal illnesses, precautions should be considered. Although hope is always an excellent resource to promote well-being, its use might vary when clients are facing extreme circumstances such as terminal illnesses, this is, imminent death. Identifying and considering the unique culture of a patient facing a terminal illness could facilitate the challenging work of physicians and therapists. Not all cultures face death in the same way; Considering the patient's culture in the treatment process could prevent the promotion of loss of hope, leading the patient to a reduction of trust and ultimately despair (Yadav & Jhamb, 2015). In therapy and medical settings, culture can provide a rich and realistic context for the use of hope theory.

6. Towards a Culture of Hope

Because of the importance of hope for the promotion of a positive mental health, social well-being and the achievement of personal goals, some authors suggest that groups and leaders should promote the development of cultures of hope. According to Gwinn & Hellman (2018) there is strong scientific evidence to believe that hope can positively help individuals to overcome trauma, adversity, and everyday struggles. As stated by these scholars, hope is one of the most predictive indicators of well-being in a person's life in all the research done on trauma, illness, and resiliency. This idea has been built on nearly 2,000 published empirical studies regarding hope as a cognitive concept. These same researchers also emphasize the positive impact that hope can have on public policy, education, business, social services, and many other parts of modern society. Some social programs in Toronto and Guatemala City have been successful in attracting street children through key cultural elements such as mainstream culture (Karabanow, 2003).

Considering the creation of cultures of hope and the facilitation of positive relationships among different cultures, it seems that cultural improvement is a better concept to consider than the modern term of cultural humility. Cultural improvement refers to an intentional intellectual process of bettering one's culture to create a smart and positive culture for each participant of the group (Oyarzo, 2020). This idea of positive culture differs with the notion of cultural humility because a smart culture respects

other cultures, it does not show humility before them, as humility is a personal characteristic, a personal value, not an observed component of cultures studied by major social sciences. Humility is also not necessarily a positive value for many cultures, particularly in regions such as Asia and the Middle East. It seems like it is easier to make a group respectful through an educational process rather than to make it humble, especially when considering large groups such as the thousands of members of a university, or the millions of citizens of a country. From this perspective, hope becomes an element within the mentality of a positive culture, a culture that promotes reasoning and well-being for each participant of the group. Even the concept of empathy surpasses the notion of cultural humility, as empathy has been positively observed in complex cultural encounters between medical doctors and patients with terminal illnesses, in which empathy and hope facilitate the communication and relationships between medical professionals and patients (Richardson, Macleod & Kent, 2012). Humility on the other hand presents itself as a positive social value, not studied through effective research practices as it is in the case of hope, empathy, and resilience.

Building a culture of hope can be beneficial for families, organizations, companies, and even macro groups such as an entire country. Cultures of hope in school settings can provide a design for schools wanting to meet the socioemotional needs of youth placed at risk (Gibson & Barr, 2015). Regarding medical settings, some European scholars such as Godskesen et al., (2020) suggest that physicians should get more opportunities to deliberately reflect over the characteristics that should constitute a culture of hope within clinical environments.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study was conducted by members of the Hope Research Center of The University of Oklahoma in Tulsa, United States, in the context of the research work managed by this organization regarding the concept of hope. Authors have no conflicts of interest. All standards of research involving humans as subjects have been considered and respected.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank The University of Oklahoma (OU), the OU Faculty of Social Work, Rogers State University, and the OU Hope Research Center in Tulsa for the support on the production of this publication.

References

- Chan, D. C., Zhang, X., Fung, H. H., & Hagger, M. S. (2015). Does emotion and its daily fluctuation correlate with depression? A cross-cultural analysis among six developing countries. *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, (5), 65-74. doi:10.1016/j.jegh.2014.09.001
- Gibson, E. L., & Barr, R. D. (2015). Building a culture of hope for youth at risk: Supporting learners with optimism, place, pride, and purpose. *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2015.010103>
- Godskesen, T. E., Petri, S., Eriksson, S., Halkoaho, A., Mangset, M., & Nielsen, Z. E. (2020). The culture of hope and ethical challenges in clinical trials: A qualitative study of oncologists and hematologists' views. *Clinical Ethics*, 15(1), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477750919897379>
- Gwinn, Casey & Hellman, Chan. (2018). Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life.

- Hellman, C. M., & Gwinn, C. (2017). Camp hope as an intervention for children exposed to domestic violence: A program evaluation of hope, and strength of character. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, (34), 269-276.
- Hellman, C. M., Pharris, A., & Oyarzo, F. (2020) Hope centered agency: Staff hope survey results spring 2020. Unpublished report, Hope Research Center, University of Oklahoma, Tulsa, OK.
- Hudelson, P. M. (2004). Culture and quality: An anthropological perspective. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 16(5), 345–346. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzh076>
- Jahoda, G. (2012). Critical reflections on some recent definitions of “culture.” *Culture & psychology*, 18(3), 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X12446229>
- Jansen, S. (2016). For a relational, historical ethnography of hope: Indeterminacy and determination in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian meantime. *History and Anthropology*, 27(4), 447–464.
- Karabanow, J. (2003). Creating a culture of hope: Lessons from street children agencies in Canada and Guatemala. *International Social Work*, 46(3), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728030463008>
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions. Papers. *Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University*, 47(1), viii, 223.
- Legwegoh, A. F., & Riley, L. (2014). Food, place, and culture in urban Africa: Comparative consumption in Gaborone and Blantyre. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 9(2), 256–279. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1080/19320248.2013.845868>
- Magnano, P., Di Nuovo, S., Scioli, A., & Di Corrado, D. (2019). A study of the comprehensive state hope scale in Italian culture. *TPM: Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 26(2), 287–304. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.4473/TPM26.2.8>
- Masotti, P., Dennem, J., Hadani, S., Banuelos, K., King, J., Linton, J., Lockhart, B., & Patel, C. (2020). The culture is prevention project: Measuring culture as a social determinant of mental health for native/indigenous peoples. *American Indian & Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center*, 27(1), 86–111. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.5820/aian.2701.2020.86>
- Maturana R., H., Dávila Yáñez, X., & Ramírez Muñoz, S. (2016). Cultural biology: Systemic consequences of our evolutionary natural drift as molecular autopoietic systems. *Foundations of Science*, 21(4), 631–678. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1007/s10699-015-9431-1>
- Munoz, R. T., Hanks, H., & Hellman, C. M. (in press). Hope and resilience as distinct contributors to psychological flourishing among childhood trauma survivors, *Traumatology*.

- Oyarzo, F. (2020). The cultural improvement theory and the social sciences' intellectual crisis. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(3), 01–12. <https://doi.org/10.18844/prosoc.v7i3.5226>
- Panter-Brick C., Eggerman M. (2012) Understanding culture, resilience, and mental health: The production of hope. In: Ungar M. (eds) *The Social Ecology of Resilience*. Springer, New York, NY.
- Parrott, F. R. (2005). 'It's Not Forever': The material culture of hope. *Journal of Material Culture*, 10(3), 245–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183505057151>
- Passmore, S., Hemming, E., McIntosh, H. C., & Hellman, C. M. (2020). The relationship between hope, meaning in work, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout among child abuse pediatric clinicians. *Permanente Journal*, 24(1), 29–34. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.7812/TPP/19.087>
- Peterson, Suzanne & Luthans, Fred. (2003). The positive impact of development of hopeful leaders. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, (24), 26-31. 10.1108/01437730310457302.
- Richardson K., Macleod R., & Kent B. (2012) A Steinian approach to an empathic understanding of hope among patients and clinicians in the culture of palliative care. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 68(3), 686–694.
- Rivkin, I., Lopez, E. D. S., Trimble, J. E., Johnson, S., Orr, E., & Quaintance, T. (2019). Cultural values, coping, and hope in Yup'ik communities facing rapid cultural change. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 47(3), 611–627. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1002/jcop.22141>
- Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, (4), 249-275.
- Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1920 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. New York: J.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Yadav, B. S., & Jhamb, S. (2015). Hope in palliative care: Cultural implications. *Journal of Palliative Care*, 31(3), 189–192. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1177/082585971503100309>