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How place shapes the aspirations of hope: the allegory of the privileged and the underprivileged

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ABSTRACT

We articulate a holistic understanding of hope, going beyond the common conceptualization of hope in terms of positive affect and cognition by considering what hope means for the underprivileged. In the recognition that hope is always situated in a particular place, we explore the perspective of the privileged and the underprivileged, clarifying how spatial contexts shape their goals for the future and their agency toward attaining these goals. Where some people experience precarity due to their disability, race, gender, sexuality, and social class, others enjoy enhanced agency due to their privilege. In our analysis, this loss of agency does not mean the underprivileged are hopeless; instead, it suggests that hope can incorporate negative affect and cognition. In our view, a spatial understanding acknowledges the power of hope in discouraging situations, and it points to practical measures through which hope can be cultivated by marginalized communities.

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Psychological research on hope has tended to emphasize hope's orientation toward particular goals. Although it is true that particular hopes are directed toward future aims, we will argue that more attention should be paid to the grounding of hope in the present. In our view, hope is a disposition or practice that does not emerge from nowhere; it is invariably situated in a particular place. Recognizing the way in which hope is shaped by place helps to clarify a key feature of hope that is easily overlooked: hope means something different for people who are privileged than it does for those who are marginalized (Bruner, 2017; Holder, 2007).



Although the definition of hope is contested, most theorists agree that hope is oriented toward a desired object that the hopeful person believes to be possible (Martin, 2014). For reasons we will explore in detail, what a person desires and what they understand to be possible depends on their circumstances. Where some people experience profound precarity due to their disability, race, gender, sexuality, and social class, others have ready access to resources that enable them to flourish. In our analysis, privilege encourages people to entertain more ambitious desires, and it enables them to imagine that these outcomes are possible (Bruner, 2017; Dowling & Rickwood, 2016). In contrast, for those who are marginalized due to their disability, race, gender, sexuality, and social class, even their basic needs can seem out of reach. Since communities are often impacted by

marginalization across generations, people in this situation may experience a reduced sense of agency.

This article explores the different ways in which place influences the aspirations of hope, focusing in particular on privilege and marginalization. We begin with a literature review that provides background information on how hope and place are linked. Next, we use the allegory of two contrasting groups (the privileged vs. the disadvantaged) as a dialectic technique (Whitman, 1987) to explore the ways in which power dynamics create and maintain systems of marginalization that restrict the aspirations of those who belong to the margins of society. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which members of an underprivileged group can cultivate and sustain the hope that will allow them to overcome the challenges that they face in life. We conclude with an analysis of the way agency arises out of the relationship between the place that we inhabit and our hope for the world that we live in.

Conceptualizing hope processes

Whereas some psychologists understand hope as an emotion (Mine, 1995), others argue that it also has a cognitive dimension (Snyder et al., 1991). In Snyder's account, hope is interactively derived from two distinct types of psychological tools in the context of goal achievement – namely, pathways and

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agency thinking (Snyder, 2002). The pathway tool refers to our reasoning abilities and resources that we use to make sense of the world around us in order to make sense of our goals and guide our actions toward achieving them. The agency tool refers to the motivational tendencies that drive us toward our goals and help us pursue them with persistence and commitment in the face of obstacles and challenges. According to this view, the function of hope is not only to keep us motivated to pursue our goals but also to help us make sense of our experience of engaging with the world around us so that we are able to face challenges with greater resilience (Snyder et al., 2002).

This definition of hope has been influential in the social sciences, but we think it is ripe for revision. In Snyder's account, the agency component of hope rests on the sense that one has successfully met goals in the past, while the pathway component refers to the sense that one will be able to form plans that will meet future goals (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 570). Snyder, et al. explain, 'Hope in the present context is not a goal-related state that is objectively defined according to sources external to the person, but rather it is an enduring disposition that is subjectively defined' (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 570). Yet although Snyder defines hope as a subjective disposition, other scholars have shown that objective circumstances affect a person's subjective sense of possibility (Arnau et al., 2007; Duncan et al., 2021). Whereas this implies that hope is a disposition particularly associated with privilege, marginalized communities sometimes understand themselves to be hopeful even when they possess neither the assurance of having met goals in the past nor the optimism that they will be able to meet their goals in the future.

We think an adequate conception of hope should account for its use in marginalized communities. For this reason, we draw on developments in the study of hope by scholars in the humanities in order to develop a concept of hope that attends to the importance of place. In our view, reconceiving hope in this way is particularly important in light of increased recognition that some communities are subject to persistent difficulties, not only through chance events but also through systemic marginalization. In keeping with a growing literature, we aim to clarify the ways objective place-related factors (e.g. population density, land use, economic activity; Bryant & Charvet, 2003; Glaeser & Gottlieb, 2009) affect the psychological processes that are often associated with hope.

The centrality of place in everyday life

Like hope, place is an important concept in a wide range of disciplines. Anthropologists such as Michael Witmore have examined how people from different social and cultural backgrounds view their place in a particular community or society and how this shapes their views about themselves and their place in the world (Witmore, 2002). Geographers have found the concept of place valuable in their research because it provides insights into the ways people form perceptions and identities related to specific locations, thus influencing their interactions with the environment and shaping cultural, social, and economic dynamics in various spatial contexts (Johnston, 1991). Psychologists have found that the location of a person's upbringing can significantly influence their identity, shaping their worldview and sense of self (Morgan, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). In this context, environmental psychologists investigate the effects of place on psychological development, focusing on how it shapes individuals' perception and connection to their environment (Counted, 2019; Scannell & Gifford, 2017; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

As this overview indicates, place is a multi-faceted concept that cannot be reduced to a single definition (Counted et al., 2021). The term 'place' is often used to denote a specific geographical location, such as a neighborhood or city, and also used to refer to a particular address or a specific site within a certain geographical area (Comunian et al., 2010; Counted et al., 2021). Whereas geographers understand place in terms of the physical properties found in it, environmental psychologists conceptualize place as the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions associated with a spatial setting (Counted et al., 2021). Place, in this sense, represents the distinctive set of relationships between people and their environments.

At the cognitive level, individuals develop an understanding of who they are and what makes them distinct from people and communities at other places (Counted et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2013; Yung et al., 2003). Because such experiences are deeply linked to a person's sense of self and affective experiences in a place, they are pivotal in shaping an individual's identity and worldview (Sherry, 2000). The affective dimensions of place have been extensively studied in environmental psychology and demonstrate how people's emotions can be shaped by contextual factors like the values, norms, beliefs, and customs associated with particular places (Counted et al., 2021). However, the behavioral dimension of place involves the individual's interaction with his or her environment and how they use its resources to

meet their needs for survival and fulfillment (Gubbels et al., 2011). This dimension also refers to the various ways in which people use and manipulate their surroundings to meet their needs and fulfill their needs based on personal goals and preferences (Handy et al., 2002; Mine, 1995).

As a social construct with many dimensions – physical, psychological, sociocultural, and spiritual – there are a number of ways in which place shapes our experience of ourselves, our relationships with others, and our communities. For some people, place provides a tangible sense of security and predictability; this encourages them to envision a positive future for themselves and their loved ones there (Handy et al., 2002). In contrast, for individuals facing socioeconomic challenges place can be a source of stress and anxiety. As we will go on to argue, in keeping with its psychological significance place is the context from which hope emerges – a context shaped by privilege and marginalization.

Place and hope: introducing an allegorical framework

In order to clarify the sociocultural dimension of place that shapes the aspirations of hope, we draw on *allegoria* (or allegory) as an analytical tool. The term allegory was used by the Greek philosopher Plato to reveal abstract ideas or to form an opinion on a certain situation using imagery, symbolic figures, or events to create a moral and political lesson (Whitman, 1987). Later authors have taken up the technique as a rhetorical tool to convey hidden and complex meanings. Employing an allegorical analysis enables us to highlight the broader social, moral, and political context through which place shapes the aspirations of hope. In what follows, we personify privilege and marginalization by speaking of two groups, the privileged and the marginalized, in order to clarify the relation between place and hope.

As other scholars have noted, particular individuals experience privilege and marginalization in relation to characteristics that are compounded by their intersection (Crenshaw, 1989). On this understanding, the privilege that some enjoy on account of their economic status might be mitigated by the disadvantage they experience on account of disability. Alternatively, the disadvantage a person suffers due to their race can be compounded by their gender or sexuality. For this reason, it is not the case that there are simply two groups in society, the privileged and the marginalized. Instead, advantage and disadvantage operate at the nexus of class characteristics that intersect. Our allegorical

method enables us to abstract from this complexity, focusing on the role of privilege and marginalization in shaping hope.

In the context of our analysis, ‘the privileged’ enjoy the benefits of health, wealth, and other social advantages, while ‘the marginalized’ suffer from disability, poverty, precarity, racism, classism, ageism, etc. This heuristic helps to clarify two ways in which place shapes hopeful aspirations. First, place sustains the agency of the privileged. Due to the advantages they gain from their social location, they may easily imagine that they have the potential to attain their goals. If those goals are not immediately in their power, they can access resources and opportunities that make it possible for them to achieve them, and so they may more easily maintain the motivation required to pursue these goals. Second, place also shapes the imagination of the disadvantaged. Their lack of access to resources and opportunities makes it more difficult for them to achieve their goals, and this frustration may encourage them in turn to have lower expectations for the future. In our view, the hope of the marginalized faces the challenge of repeated disappointment.

The disabled vs. The abled-bodied

One of the most obvious ways in which place impacts a person’s ability to hope for a better future is through the experience of disability. Everyone faces limitations to their physical and mental abilities that are accommodated by supports that allow them to move through the world: roads and vehicles enable people to move more easily, while pen and paper enable them to work around the limits of memory. However, some people have impairments that are not accommodated in a particular context. Under these circumstances, their limitations become a disability that makes it more difficult to live as they would like (see Shakespeare, 2010).

On Snyder’s understanding of hope, someone who is experiencing disability will find hope particularly challenging. Recall that for Snyder hope involves ‘the perception of successful agency related to goals’ and ‘the perceived availability of successful pathways related to goals’ (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 570). Someone whose limitations are not supported by physical and social infrastructure repeatedly finds that pathways to their goals are not available – sometimes literally, when their physical motion is obstructed. The empirical research that has been done in this area indicates that children experiencing disability show lower rates of hope using Snyder’s Children’s Hope Scale (Lackaye et al., 2006; see; Snyder, 2002).

It is easy to understand why this might be the case: the experience of repeated frustration may make it more difficult for someone experiencing disability to imagine successful pathways for achieving their goals, and it likewise reduces their perception of successful agency. Because disability often intersects with poverty and other forms of marginalization (Saunders, 2007), its disempowering effects can be compounded. In contrast, ‘the privileged’ – those whose needs are supported by the infrastructure available in a given context – experience repeated success in achieving their goals. They are thus likely to have a stronger perception of perceived agency and perceived availability of viable pathways to achieving their goals. For this reason, the privileged are likely to be more hopeful based on Snyder’s definition.

The rich vs. The poor

Something similar is true of economic privilege and marginalization. Whereas some claim that people become poor because they lack ambition (see Alesina et al., 2001), the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that the experience of poverty diminishes a person’s tendency to form aspirations (Appadurai, 2004). Appadurai (2004) explains, ‘I am not saying that the poor cannot wish, want, need, plan, or aspire. But part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur’ (p. 69). In Appadurai’s analysis, the aspirations of individuals can’t be considered in abstraction, for poverty constrains the possibility of planning.

Where C.R. Snyder’s influential definition of hope focuses on the goal-oriented desires of individuals, Appadurai (2004) situates desires for the future within social and cultural context – which is to say, in place. In support of Appadurai’s (2004) account, empirical research has shown that poverty is associated with stress and negative affect states, which in turn make it more difficult to form and maintain goal-directed behaviors (Haushofer & Fehr.). Whereas people experiencing poverty are often forced to focus on short-term aims (such as the need to obtain basic necessities for their survival), those who are wealthier tend to find that a wider range of aspirations is available (see Ray, 2006).

Sociological research has likewise found that people experiencing poverty are sometimes unable to articulate a future different from their present circumstances, and their expectations for the future are constrained by the limited opportunities open to them (Bryant & Ellard, 2015). Because people experiencing poverty suffer from the narrowing of perceived possibility that comes from persistent deprivation, they also find it more difficult to maintain hope in Snyder’s sense (see Dalton et al., 2016). Because many people who are economically

marginalized nevertheless understand themselves to be hopeful, this points to the need for a reconceptualized understanding of hope – one that accounts for the importance of place.

A holistic approach to hope

As we have seen, Snyder defines hope in terms of two subjective characteristics: a sense of agency and a sense that one can generate the plans required for success (Snyder et al., 1991). Whereas the examples Snyder provides in his analysis of hope are generally drawn from the experience of someone accustomed to success – that is to say, from the perspective of privilege – we have argued that people experiencing disadvantage face significant obstacles to maintaining a perceived sense of agency and possibility. The scholarship on disability and poverty that we have discussed indicates that the marginalized will find it harder to hope in Snyder’s sense of the term. In our view, Snyder’s neglect of place represents a weakness of his account of hope, and for two reasons.

First, Snyder’s definition of hope fails to account for the way in which the term ‘hope’ is often used. As we have described, people experiencing disadvantage draw on the language of hope to describe their experience. In some cases, the people in question understand themselves as keeping hope even when their agency is greatly diminished and the pathways toward achieving their goals are minimal (see Biehl, 2007). Under these circumstances, what people describe as hope is not simply a positive sense of their agency and the pathways available; on the contrary, some people experiencing disadvantage maintain hope for outcomes they believe to be extremely unlikely – including outcomes that are beyond their agency and in relation to which no pathways to success are apparent. Snyder’s definition of hope does not account for this usage.

Second, associating hope with privilege risks disempowering disadvantaged communities. Because Snyder associates hope with a sense of agency and possibility, his own work leads us to expect that hope is associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes, as ongoing research in this area has shown. However, this is not only true when hope is defined in terms of the sort of positive affect and cognition that is associated with privilege; it also holds when hope is colored by the challenges faced by people experiencing disadvantage. Groups that are marginalized due to poverty, disability, or race sometimes indicate that hope enhances their resilience and sense of agency – even when their hope is associated with negative affect and cognition (see West, 2004). This helps to explain the fact that the language of hope is

often central to social justice movements that face profound obstacles (Duggan & Muñoz, 2009). Snyder's definition of hope undercuts the capacity of disadvantaged groups to draw on this resource.

For the reasons we have described, although Snyder's definition of hope has enabled a fruitful research program on hope to develop, we think it should be reconceived in order to account for its importance for marginalized communities. In the remainder of this paper, we will argue that hope should be understood in a holistic fashion that accounts for the objective factors we have described under the category 'place'.

Hope in interdisciplinary perspective

Much as psychological research generally defines hope as positive cognition geared towards agency and possibility, some scholars in the humanities associate hope with positive affect and cognition. On this basis, some theorists conclude that marginalized communities would do better to reject hope; after all, if hope entails positivity, it may function as a pacifying distraction from the systemic violence they experience (Wilderson, 2010; Warren, 2015). In response, other theorists argue that hope can encompass negative cognition and affect, and for that reason it is not at odds with the experience of marginalized communities. For example, Winters (2016) suggests that the Black intellectual tradition expresses a melancholic hope, which incorporates negative affect, while Eagleton (Eagleton, 2017) contends that hope should not be equated with positive cognition at all. Whereas the tendency to associate hope with positive affect and cognition suggests that hope is the prerogative of the privileged, a hope inflected by negativity can persist even when there are no reasons to expect success.

In its most radical form, this understanding of hope entails that a person can hope for an outcome that they believe to be impossible. This cuts against the consensus among philosophers, who argue that hope involves the desire for an object that is possible but uncertain (see Martin, 2014). This is already broader than Snyder's definition insofar it does not depend upon the capacity for pathways and agency thinking. However, we have argued elsewhere that this definition is still too narrow (Newheiser, 2019, 2022). The requirement that hope must be possible resolves into the claim that the person hoping must understand the object of their hope as a possible outcome. However, this only operates as an ironclad constraint if the individual views their understanding of what is possible to be comprehensive; if one accepts that one's understanding is limited, then one can keep hope for an outcome that seems inconceivable

on the basis of one's knowledge of the world. There is evidence that people sometimes do hope for outcomes of this kind – for instance, in the case of marginalized communities which hope for an improvement in their circumstances (Newheiser, 2016, 2021).

In keeping with the growing literature on the relation between hope and negativity, we think the hope of marginalized communities is best reflected in a conception of hope that does not rely on positive affect or cognition – including a positive evaluation of the possibility of success. On this view, a person can hope for something they believe to be extremely unlikely, up to and including the belief that it is impossible. Rather than associate hope with the experience of privilege (in the form of past success), a hope of this kind consists in a disciplined resilience that persists despite its uncertainty. We think this more inclusive understanding of hope better acknowledges the importance of place.

Spatial hope

As we have argued, positive affect and cognition are influenced by the experience of privilege or disadvantage that is associated with intersecting identities in terms of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, social class, disability, etc. Place theory accounts for these influences by examining the way people make sense of the world around them and create identities and roles based on the assumptions that they develop about their social environment (Seamon, 2018). It helps us to understand the different ways in which different people interact with others and perceive the world around them, as well as how they conceptualize the future and their place in it. By re-conceiving hope so that it does not depend on positive affect and cognition, we open the possibility that hope can be found in many places – not only in the position of privilege that has shaped prior research on the psychology of hope.

This holistic approach to hope considers the different ways that place shapes how people, across different strata of society, cultivate hope. We use the term 'spatial hope' to describe the many ways that place shapes people's aspirations across privileged and underprivileged groups. These differences are not necessarily negative, since all individuals and groups develop their own coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges that they face in life. Hope, on the other hand, is essential to the pursuit of social, political, and economic justice because it helps to empower individuals and communities to create a better future for themselves and for future generations.

This approach can be applied to develop meaningful policies that aim to promote social justice, equality,

and dignity for all members of society. As such, it should be viewed as extending prior research in this area because it provides an alternative perspective that focuses on the role of place in cultivating hope in individuals from different walks of life. This approach is therefore unique as it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between place and hope by bringing together ideas from different disciplines such as urban planning, geography, sociology, and psychology.

Practical implications

This paper points to the need for a research program that explores the practical implications of our approach. Among other things, it has highlighted the importance of supporting the different pathways and psychosocial processes that provide people with the resources they need to flourish. It is clear that policymakers should therefore collaborate with community groups to identify gaps in services and devise solutions to support the different ways that people cultivate hope across cultures, regardless of their placement in society. While the privileged may take a role in shaping the conditions that are necessary for them to achieve their goals, the marginalized are often disempowered. In order to support policymaking, further research is needed on the capacities for resilience that enable people to keep hope in the face of systemic marginalization, even when negative affect and cognition are present.

There are also some clinical aspects of the implications discussed in this paper that may be useful in developing strategies to help treat mental illness and promote positive well-being among underprivileged people. For example, it may be beneficial to explore ways in which cognitive behavioral therapy can be used to help them identify and deal with stressful situations. Dismantling deep-seated worldviews that constrain people's aspirations of hope may also be useful in addressing conditions such as depression and other mental health issues that are associated with a diminished capacity for hope (Arnau et al., 2007; Captari et al., 2022).

Despite the above-mentioned differences, however, there are nevertheless certain common factors that can help promote a sense of hope and shared purpose among people who are facing similar challenges in their lives. In particular, the development of strong social networks and supportive environments is of vital importance in promoting hope among different groups (Irving et al., 1997). For this reason, governments should work

together with local communities to provide the necessary resources and support necessary to foster hope and encourage meaningful social interaction among people from different walks of life. This will help to create a more inclusive environment in which people from diverse backgrounds (regardless of their social strata) can work together to pursue shared goals and overcome common challenges in their hopeful aspirations.

Conclusion

Place has been at the forefront of a number of debates on contemporary issues, including migration, social inclusion, COVID-19 pandemic, and cultural recognition (Bruner, 2017; Counted, 2019; Counted et al., 2021; Dowling & Rickwood, 2016). It is also central to the concept of identity as it is used to define individual and collective affiliations with particular locations. As such, understanding how places shape an individual's worldview is crucial if we are to develop more effective policies that address the pressing challenges that are facing societies today. By promoting a sense of hope and solidarity among members of disadvantaged communities, governments and other institutions can help to bridge social and economic divides and foster closer ties among communities that share common bonds but have often been divided by the social or political systems of society. Through such initiatives, we can encourage a more tolerant and inclusive society.

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