Hope for Help-Seeking: A Positive Psychology Perspective of Psychological Help-Seeking Intentions

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Abstract

In the present study, we used multigroup structural equation modeling in a sample of college students (N = 2,461) to examine ethnic and gender differences in the connections between dispositional hope and intentions to seek psychological help from formal and informal sources. In a personal-emotional problem scenario, we found a robust positive relationship between hope and intentions to seek help from informal sources, but no association for formal sources. In a suicidal thoughts scenario, hope was positively associated with intentions to seek both informal and formal psychological help. Results of exploratory moderation analyses indicated that the model was invariant across non-Latino White students and Asian American students, as well as across men and women. These findings address critical gaps in the hope and help-seeking literature, and suggest that increasing college students’ dispositional hope may provide a unique

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positive psychology-focused avenue for increasing help-seeking intentions, even within underserved populations.

**Keywords**

hope, college students, help-seeking intentions, ethnicity, gender

Nationally representative surveys indicate that a large number of college students experience significant mental health problems (American College Health Association, 2015; Lipson, Gaddis, Heinze, Beck, & Eisenberg, 2015). However, between 60% and 80% of students who may need psychological services do not seek professional help (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2012; Lipson et al., 2015). Of this group, men and ethnic minorities are among the least likely to seek psychological help (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). Failure to seek help in college, in turn, may be linked to several critical academic, personal, and social outcomes. Most notably, mental health problems are a primary reason for withdrawing from college (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2012), and an increasing number of students who die by suicide each year (as high as 85%) have never sought psychological help (Gallagher, 2012, 2013, 2014).

In an effort to understand and facilitate psychological help-seeking, a large body of research has focused on help-seeking barriers (Clement et al., 2015; Nam et al., 2013). Although studies examining barriers have led researchers and clinicians to insights about the characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs that should be reduced (e.g., stigma) to help facilitate psychological help-seeking behaviors, investigators have very little information about the positive psychological factors that could facilitate this process. In addition, comparatively little research has examined informal sources of help-seeking (Rickwood, Thomas, & Bradford, 2012), yet national surveys suggest that students are more likely to seek help from informal sources than formal sources (Eisenberg et al., 2012).

The psychology of hope (Snyder, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002) may be uniquely suited to address these gaps in the literature; hope is a goal-oriented construct with interpersonal and intrapersonal correlates, and it is a character strength that can be harnessed through targeted interventions (Feldman, Davidson, & Margalit, 2015; Feldman & Dreher, 2012). Despite direct and indirect theory-based assertions that hope should be an important facilitator of help-seeking (e.g., Snyder, 1994, 2000), researchers have yet to test these associations. In addition, a major criticism of positive psychology—and thus also the psychology of hope—is the relative lack of attention to important
cultural or contextual factors (see Teramoto Pedrotti & Edwards [2014] for comprehensive reviews). To help address these gaps in the literature, we examined racial and gender differences in the connections between hope and help-seeking in different contexts (i.e., formal and informal help-seeking) and scenarios (i.e., personal emotional problems or suicidal thoughts).

The Psychology of Hope

For more than 20 years, Snyder’s (1994, 1998, 2000, 2002) concept of hope has been an influential contribution to psychology in general (Lopez, 2006) and positive psychology in particular (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Hope is defined as two interrelated and reciprocal ways of thinking about goals: agency and pathways. Agency thinking represents the perceived will to achieve one’s goals, and pathways thinking is the perceived ability to develop routes to one’s goals or to overcome obstacles (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Together, agency and pathways signify a disposition for goal-oriented positive thinking (i.e., hope) that is distinct from similar constructs such as self-efficacy (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999; Snyder, 2002) and optimism (Snyder, 2000).

Researchers have argued that hope (a) helps to protect people from mental and physical health problems due to a feedback loop of successful goal pursuits and resultant positive affect (Snyder, 2002), (b) facilitates proactive steps to address mental and physical health problems (Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Snyder, Feldman, Taylor, Schroeder, & Adams, 2000; Snyder, Illardi, Michael, & Cheavens, 2000; Taylor, 2000), and (c) can be increased or enhanced through intervention (Lopez, Floyd, Ulven, & Snyder, 2000). In support of these theory-based assertions, dispositional hope has been linked in the expected directions to a variety of positive and negative mental health variables across multiple disciplines and study designs (e.g., experimental, correlational, and longitudinal research; see Rand & Cheavens [2009] and Snyder [2000, 2002] for reviews). In addition, investigators have created promising hope-oriented interventions aimed at increasing positive goal-oriented thinking and successful goal pursuits (e.g., Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012; Feldman et al., 2015). Most notably, college students’ goal attainment can be positively influenced through targeted hope interventions lasting as little as 90 minutes (Feldman & Dreher, 2012).

Hope and Psychological Help-Seeking

Given the numerous benefits associated with higher levels of hope, hope theory may provide a particularly useful framework for research on psychological help-seeking (Snyder, 1994; Snyder, Ilardi, et al., 2000). To date,
however, we were unable to locate any published studies examining the connections between hope and seeking psychological help. Nevertheless, researchers studying similar constructs have provided indirect evidence to support a connection between hope and help-seeking. For example, individuals with higher levels of hope are less likely to use avoidant coping strategies compared to people with lower levels of hope (e.g., Glass, Flory, Hankin, Kloos, & Turecki, 2009; Hassija, Luterk, Naragon-Gainey, Moore, & Simpson, 2012; Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Relatedly, numerous studies have connected hope to greater use of problem-focused coping strategies (see Rand & Cheavens, 2009 for a review). Researchers have also found that hopelessness is negatively related to help-seeking intentions (Wilson & Dean, 2010). Moreover, higher levels of domain-specific hope have been associated with greater information-seeking behaviors to manage specific medical concerns (Vernberg, Synder, & Schuh, 2005), and dispositional hope has been related to greater treatment adherence in primary care patients (Nsamenang & Hirsch, 2015).

Taken together, the aforementioned findings suggest that higher levels of hope are indicative of a general tendency to take proactive steps to manage mental and physical health concerns. It is a logical hypothesis, therefore, that hope should be positively related to intentions to seek psychological help from formal sources such as a psychologist, physician, or phone counseling help line. Moreover, several studies have found positive connections between hope and perceived social support (e.g., Consoli, Delucio, Noriega, & Llamas, 2015; Fruht, 2015), suggesting that people with high levels of hope are likely to have a number of different individuals that they could use for informal psychological help if needed. Thus, hope may also be positively related to intentions to seek help from informal sources such as a friend, romantic partner, or family member.

Although indirect evidence suggests that individuals with high levels of hope may have greater intentions to seek help than individuals with low levels of hope in general, the potential relationships between hope and help-seeking intentions could be quite complex and dependent on the particular help-seeking scenario. Due to the dearth of direct research linking hope to any form of psychological help-seeking, investigators have yet to test the influence of problem type with respect to hope and help-seeking from different sources. Nevertheless, a small but related body of literature suggests that intentions to seek help may be influenced by the specific context (i.e., formal or informal help-seeking) and scenario (i.e., type of problem) experienced by the individual.

Deane and Todd (1996) were among the first researchers to systematically test differences in help-seeking preferences based on the particular
help-seeking scenario. They found that college students reported greater intentions to seek formal psychological help in a “personal-emotional problem” scenario compared to a scenario in which they were experiencing suicidal thoughts. Ciarrochi and Deane (2001) extended Deane and Todd’s (1996) findings by examining formal and informal help-seeking intentions across the two scenarios (i.e., a personal-emotional problem or suicidal thoughts) in relation to potential positive psychological facilitators of help-seeking such as emotional intelligence (e.g., Schutte et al., 1998). The authors found that the associations between help-seeking intentions and different facets of emotional intelligence varied across each scenario. Specifically, managing self-relevant emotions (i.e., the ability to use emotions positively in one’s life) was related to intentions to seek informal help in both scenarios, but was related to intentions to seek formal help only in the suicidal thoughts scenario. Subsequent research (Ciarrochi, Deane, Wilson, & Rickwood, 2002; Ciarrochi, Wilson, Deane, & Rickwood, 2003) yielded evidence that individuals with the ability to manage and use self-relevant emotions may have a stronger social support network in general, and thus they may appraise family and friends as being the most appropriate for handling personal-emotional problems. By contrast, the same individuals may use both formal and informal sources of help for more severe issues such as suicidal thoughts (Ciarrochi & Deane, 2001; Ciarrochi et al., 2002, 2003).

Researchers have yet to expand on Ciarrochi et al.’s (2001, 2002, 2003) findings with respect to hope or other positive psychology constructs. However, it is noteworthy that many of the items used to measure the ability to manage self-relevant emotions across some of these investigations (e.g., “I motivate myself by imagining a good outcome to the tasks I take on,” and “I expect I will do well on most things I try”) share a high degree of conceptual overlap with the goal-oriented focus of hope. Thus, exploring hope in relation to intentions to seek formal or informal help across personal-emotional or suicidal thoughts scenarios may provide a similarly nuanced perspective of college students’ help-seeking intentions.

Hope, Help-Seeking Intentions, and Culture

Men as well as ethnic minority college students, compared to women and ethnic majority students, are less likely to seek psychological help (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2016). For example, minority students often report more negative attitudes toward psychological help than non-Latino White students, possibly because of inequities and discrimination regarding mental health care (e.g., Masuda et al., 2009). Unfortunately, ethnic minorities are also more likely to experience mental health problems than their non-Latino
White counterparts (hereinafter referred as “White”) due to living day-to-day with experiences of racism and discrimination (e.g., Alvarez, Liang, & Neville, 2016). Additionally, although White male students have been identified as being more likely to seek help than male students of color (Masuda et al., 2009), masculine gender role socialization, which emphasizes self-reliance and emotional stoicism, runs counter to many help-seeking behaviors in ways that have been shown to cut across different ethnic groups (Vogel & Heath, 2016; Vogel, Heimerdinger, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011).

A small but growing body of literature has examined the intersections of hope and participants’ gender or ethnicity. Many studies have found no significant gender differences in hope (see Snyder [2002] for a review). Most recently, Gomez et al. (2015) identified that the factor loadings of the Adult Trait Hope Scale (ATHS; Snyder et al., 1991)—the principal measurement used in the psychology of hope—were invariant between men and women. However, considering the substantial body of literature demonstrating that men’s gender role socialization often prohibits help-seeking behavior (see Vogel & Heath, 2016 for a review), invariant factor loadings do not preclude the possibility that hope may be differentially related to help-seeking for men and women. In addition, some studies have found that the positive coping benefits of hope identified in largely White college student samples may not apply to ethnic minorities (Banks, Singleton, & Kohn-Wood, 2008; Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004; Hirsch, Visser, Chang, & Jeglic, 2012). For example, Danoff-Burg et al. (2004) found negative and nonsignificant associations between various adaptive coping strategies and life satisfaction among Black college students with high levels of hope. In addition, certain cultural groups, such as Asian Americans, may be less inclined to use social support or engagement-focused coping strategies (e.g., Chang, 2001; Lam & Zane, 2004) than their White peers, thus calling into question whether hope may be related to the same proactive help-seeking outcomes among Asian American college students. In other words, given that help-seeking is a form of adaptive coping, studying ethnic and gender differences with respect to hope and help-seeking intentions could provide valuable information to address how hope functions in different ethnic groups.

The Present Study

The psychology of hope may offer a useful framework for understanding, and thus increasing, college students’ psychological help-seeking. To date, however, the relative lack of research examining hope and help-seeking variables prevents any judgments about the possible utility of the theory for help-seeking research or intervention. Therefore, in our exploratory study, we tested a
theory-driven model interrelating hope and intentions to seek psychological help in different contexts (i.e., formal sources, informal sources) and scenarios (i.e., seeking help for personal emotional problems, seeking help for suicidal thoughts) to (a) test the predictions of hope theory with respect to help-seeking intentions; (b) ascertain the context and scenarios in which hope may have the strongest relationships with help-seeking intentions; and (c) identify whether these associations differ as a function of ethnicity (i.e., minority status, majority status) or gender (i.e., men, women).

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, hypotheses were not advanced for potential gender or racial differences in the model. However, taking into account theory-driven assertions that hope should be associated with help-seeking (Snyder, Ilardi, et al., 2000), we hypothesized that hope would be positively related to formal help-seeking intentions in both the personal-emotional problem and suicidal thoughts scenarios. In addition, considering the positive social support benefits of higher levels of hope (Consoli et al., 2015), we hypothesized that hope would be positively related to informal help-seeking intentions. Lastly, given Ciarrochi and Deane’s (2001) findings that college students’ help-seeking intentions and emotional intelligence were complex and dependent on the particular context or scenario, we expected a similar pattern of results such that hope would be differentially related to intentions to seek informal versus formal help across different scenarios. Specifically, we hypothesized that the associations between hope and intentions to seek informal help for a personal-emotional problem or suicidal thoughts would be significantly stronger than the associations between hope and intentions to seek formal help for either scenario.

Method

Procedures and Participants

After receipt of Institutional Review Board approval, data were collected via an anonymous online survey sent by e-mail to students enrolled at a large university in the Midwest as part of a campus-wide counseling center needs assessment. Although a true response rate cannot be determined due to an inability to know which students opened their e-mails containing the link to the survey, 17.84% (N = 3,567) of the target population participated in exchange for a chance to win one of twenty $30 gift cards to the university bookstore. From this group, 2,461 participants were selected for the present study because they completed measures on hope and help-seeking intentions. Participants’ mean age was 22.59 years (SD = 5.16), and the sample was primarily composed of heterosexual (90%), non-Latino White (72%), undergraduate students (62%).
Within the total sample, 51.3% of students identified as men \((n = 1,263)\), 48.5% identified as women \((n = 1,192)\), and .2% \((n = 6)\) preferred not to answer. In addition, 28.4% \((n = 699)\) identified as ethnic minorities of the total sample, 18.7% \((n = 460)\) identified as Asian/Asian American, 3.7% \((n = 91)\) as multiracial, 3.2% \((n = 80)\) as Black/African American, and 2.8% \((n = 68)\) as Latino. Although it is possible that international students are included in our final sample, we use the terms Asian American, African American, and Latino to refer to students with these ancestries who are currently residing in the United States. In the total sample, 37.8% \((n = 931)\) of students reported a history of previous formal psychological help-seeking (i.e., attending previous counseling).

**Measures**

**Demographics.** Participants completed a brief demographic section regarding their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class level, and previous counseling attendance.

**Dispositional Hope.** Hope was measured with the ATHS (Snyder et al., 1991), which consists of eight items assessing hope in two cognitive domains: agency (four items; e.g., “I energetically pursue my goals”) and pathways (four items; e.g., “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam”). Items are measured on an 8-point scale ranging from 1 (definitely false) to 8 (definitely true). Items on each subscale are added together and then averaged to create a total hope score indicating greater endorsement of agency and pathways thinking. A recent meta-analysis of the reliability of the ATHS by Hellman, Pittman, and Munoz (2013) supported these acceptable internal consistency scores, finding a mean estimate of .82 for the total scale across 16 studies. Hellman et al. also noted a test-retest mean estimate of .80. Snyder et al. (1991) demonstrated that the scale correlated positively with self-reported expectations of positive outcomes, control, perceived problem-solving abilities, and self-esteem, and negatively correlating with hopelessness and depression. A recent factorial investigation of the ATHS demonstrated that the hope construct is best measured by a total hope factor as opposed to separate dimensions (Gomez et al., 2015). In the present study, ATHS scores evidenced good internal consistency for agency \((\alpha = .84)\), pathways \((\alpha = .79)\) and total hope \((\alpha = .87)\).

**Intentions to Seek Psychological Help.** Psychological help-seeking intentions were assessed using the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ; Wilson, Deane, Ciarrochi & Rickwood, 2005). The GHSQ uses a matrix format with different help-seeking targets in response to two hypothetical scenarios: experiencing a personal-emotional problem and experiencing suicidal
thoughts. For the personal-emotional problem scenario, the following prompt was used: “If you were experiencing a personal-emotional problem, how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?” For the suicidal thoughts scenario, the following prompt was used: “If you were experiencing suicidal thoughts, how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?” Although the GHSQ is typically interpreted item by item, using the suicidal thoughts scenario, Wilson and Deane (2010) identified two oblique subscales representing formal and informal help-seeking sources. In the present study, consistent with Wilson and Deane’s (2010) scoring procedures, formal help-seeking consisted of the following sources for each scenario: psychologist, medical doctor, and phone help line. Informal help-seeking sources included: friend, parent, relative, or romantic partner. Items were measured on a 8-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 8 (extremely likely). Items on each subscale were added together and then averaged to create a total score indicating greater intentions to seek formal or informal help in each scenario. The GHSQ has been positively associated with measures of emotional competence (Ciarrochi et al., 2001, 2002, 2003), previous help-seeking behaviors (Ciarrochi & Deane, 2001) and intentions for future help-seeking behaviors (Deane, Ciarrochi, Wilson, Rickwood, & Anderson, 2001). GHSQ items have demonstrated adequate test-retest reliability ($r = .85$; Wilson et al., 2005) and adequate internal consistency estimates for the two identified subscales in the suicidal thoughts condition (Wilson & Deane, 2010): formal help ($\alpha = .75$) and informal help ($\alpha = .81$). In the present study, internal consistency estimates were somewhat lower for the suicidal thoughts scenario: formal help ($\alpha = .70$) and informal help ($\alpha = .75$). We were unable to locate any previous research using the subscale scoring for the personal-emotional problem scenario, but the internal consistency estimates were marginally acceptable for formal help ($\alpha = .62$) and informal help ($\alpha = .63$) in the present study.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Prior to conducting our primary analyses, we examined missing values, univariate and multivariate outliers, violations of normality, and zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations for all observed variables. First, of the 2,461 participants, some had missing data; however, because the number of individuals missing data in the sample was generally small (i.e., less than 5%; Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2013), we used full information maximum likelihood estimation to manage missing data in our primary analyses. Second,
Table 1. Zero-Order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Research Variables

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<th>Variable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GHSQ-Informal-PE</td>
<td></td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.56**</td>
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<td>GHSQ-Formal-PE</td>
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<td>GHSQ-Informal-SI</td>
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<td>.30**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
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<td>GHSQ-Formal-SI</td>
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<td>.17**</td>
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<td>ATHS-Agency</td>
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<td>.66*</td>
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<td>-.07**</td>
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<td>ATHS-Pathways</td>
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<td>.90**</td>
<td>-.08**</td>
<td>6.20</td>
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<td>ATHS-Total Hope</td>
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Note. GHSQ-Informal-PE = General Help-Seeking Questionnaire-informal help-seeking personal-emotional problems scenario; GHSQ-Formal-PE = General Help-Seeking Questionnaire-formal help-seeking personal-emotional problems scenario. GHSQ-Informal-SI = General Help-Seeking Questionnaire-informal help-seeking suicidal ideation scenario; GHSQ-Formal-SI = General Help-Seeking Questionnaire-formal help-seeking suicidal ideation scenario; ATHS = Adult Trait Hope Scale. All means for the GHSQ scenarios were statistically different from each other across conditions at $p < .001$. Previous Counseling was measured as a dichotomous variable.

Agency and Pathways scores yielded 30 and 22 participants, respectively, with $z$ scores above the absolute value of three, suggesting the presence of some univariate outliers. Likewise, 43 cases were possible multivariate outliers based on Mahalanobis distances. Because univariate and multivariate outliers represented less than 2% of the sample, they were not altered for the primary analyses in accordance with Meyers et al.’s (2013) recommendation.

Third, tests of normality indicated that agency and intentions to seek informal help for a personal-emotional problem were negatively skewed. Lastly, zero-order correlations indicated that hope was generally related to help-seeking intentions for informal sources but was differentially related to help-seeking intentions for formal sources (see Table 1). In addition, hope and intentions to seek formal help were unrelated to having sought past counseling, but past counseling was significantly correlated with intentions to seek formal help for suicidal thoughts. We used a series of paired samples $t$-tests to examine mean levels of help-seeking intentions across different contexts (i.e., formal, informal) and scenarios (i.e., personal-emotional problem, suicidal thoughts). Students reported significantly greater intentions to seek...
informal help in the personal-emotional problem scenario but greater intentions to seek formal psychological help in the suicidal thoughts scenario.

**Primary Analyses**

We conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) using the Mplus software version 7.31 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to examine the relationships among hope and the four types of intentions to seek help presented in our model (see Figure 1). SEM has several advantages over traditional regression analysis due

![Figure 1. Final Structural Model. Correlations between disturbance terms for each of the dependent variables are not depicted for readability.](image-url)
to the ability to determine the overall fit of the data to a hypothesized model and to control for measurement error (Kline, 2016). The latter advantage is particularly important for analyses involving instruments with a high degree of measurement error (Cole & Preacher, 2014), which was relevant to our study due to the marginal GHSQ subscale coefficient alphas. Following best-practice recommendations for SEM (Kline, 2016), we first tested a measurement model to determine whether each latent variable was adequately represented by its respective observed variables, and subsequently we tested a structural model with the hypothesized predictive paths between hope and help-seeking intentions. Lastly, we examined measurement and structural invariance between gender and ethnic groups. In evaluating each model, we used the following goodness-of-fit indices and recommended cutoffs (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016): the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI; values close to .95 indicate a good fit for both the CFI and TLI); the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with 90% confidence intervals (CI; values of .06 or less indicate a good fit), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR; values of .08 or less indicate a good fit). The chi-square test statistic was also reported (a nonsignificant value indicates a good fit to the data); however, it was interpreted with caution given the extremely large sample size (Kline, 2016). All analyses used full information maximum likelihood estimation to handle missing data and a maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors (Maximum Likelihood Robust; Muthén & Muthén, 2012) to address normality violations.

**Measurement Model.** The hope latent variable was formed by the two subscales of agency and pathways, and the help-seeking intentions latent variables were formed by their respective items on the GHSQ. Because the intentions to seek help items were measured in a way where the sources of help stay the same (i.e., from a friend), but the instructions change from seeking help for a personal-emotional problem to suicidal thoughts, the error terms for these indicators were specified to correlate across problem types (i.e., personal-emotional problem vs. suicidal thoughts (Kline, 2016). For example, the error term of intentions to seek help for a personal-emotional problem from a friend was correlated with the error term of intentions to seek help for suicidal thoughts from a friend.

Results of the CFA generally indicated an acceptable fit of the measurement model $\chi^2 [87, N = 2,461] = 756.43, p < .001, \text{CFI} = .95, \text{TLI} = .93, \text{RMSEA} = .06, 90\% \text{CI} = [.05, .06], \text{SRMR} = .04$. In addition, all of the indicators significantly loaded on their respective latent variables (see Table 2). The associations between latent variables in the model indicated that hope was positively correlated with intentions to seek help from informal sources
for a personal-emotional problem ($r = .45, p < .001$) but was not significantly associated with intentions to seek help from formal sources for a personal-emotional problem ($r = .01, p = .753$). By contrast, hope was significantly associated with intentions to seek help from informal sources for a personal-emotional problem ($r = .37, p < .001$) and suicidal thoughts ($r = .23, p < .001$). Thus, based on the overall results of the measurement model, we proceeded to examine our hypothesized structural model.

**Structural Model.** In the structural model, directional regression paths were specified for the links among main variables.$^1$ The model yielded accept-
able fit to the data commensurate with the measurement model, $\chi^2 (87, N = 2,461) = 756.44, p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .06], SRMR = .04. Figure 1 displays the standardized regression results of the final structural model.² Similar to the measurement model, hope was related to intentions to seek help from informal sources in both help-seeking scenarios. However, hope was not predictive of intentions to seek help from formal sources in the personal-emotional problem scenario. In this scenario, hope explained 21% of the variance in intentions to seek informal help and 0% of the variance in intentions to seek formal help. In the suicidal thoughts scenario, however, hope explained 13% of the variance in intentions to seek informal help and 5% of the variance in intentions to seek formal help. Furthermore, to determine whether the differences between hope and help-seeking intentions across scenario or context were statistically significant, we used the Wald test of parameter constraints to examine whether certain parameters were equivalent in the model. This test indicated the association between hope and intentions to seek informal help for a personal-emotional problem was significantly stronger than the association between hope and intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem, $\chi^2 (1) = 44.16, p < .001$. Likewise, the association between hope and intentions to seek informal help for suicidal thoughts was significantly stronger than the association between hope and intentions to seek formal help for suicidal thoughts, $\chi^2 (1) = 58.03, p < .001$.

**Exploratory Moderation Analyses**

To determine whether the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions differed by gender (man or woman) or ethnicity (ethnic minority students or White students), we tested for measurement and structural invariance (Cheung & Lau, 2012; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; Kline, 2016; Vandenberg, 2002). Specifically, Kline (2016) recommended three forms of invariance to test moderation in SEM: configural invariance, factorial invariance, and direct-effect invariance. Configural invariance (i.e., ensuring that the model is a good fit to the data for each group independently) is an important requirement for examining factorial invariance (i.e., ensuring that each latent variable is measuring the same construct across groups). Factorial invariance, in turn, is a precondition for examining direct-effect invariance (i.e., invariance of direct effects between latent variables to determine moderation). Direct-effect invariance is the final step of the moderation analysis, and, if significant differences in the strength of the relationships between latent variables are found, then moderation is evident (Kline, 2016). Together, these analyses provide a sophisticated test of moderation not otherwise available through
traditional regression analyses that do not account for the confounding impacts of measurement error or differential item functioning (Kline, 2016).

Traditionally, invariance testing in SEM involves constraining parameters to be equal across groups and then using a nested chi-square difference test to determine whether cross-group equality constraints significantly impact the fit of the model. Invariance is demonstrated when the addition of cross-group equality constraints does not significantly increase the chi-square test statistic. However, researchers have identified that even modest changes in chi-square can be statistically significant in large samples (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Accordingly, we used two other invariance-testing methods in the present study to supplement the chi-square difference test: changes in CFI (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002) and bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (Cheung & Lau, 2012). Specifically, a decrease in the CFI of approximately .01 or less when equality constraints are imposed has been identified as a reasonably reliable indicator of invariance. Invariance is also demonstrated if zero falls within the 99% confidence interval of the difference in parameters between groups extrapolated over 1,000 bootstrapped samples (Cheung & Lau, 2012).

Invariance for Gender. Tests of the measurement model in each group indicated acceptable fit for men, $\chi^2 (87, N=1,263) = 456.471, p<.001, \text{CFI} = .95, \text{TLI} = .92, \text{RMSEA} = .06, 90\% \text{CI} [.05, .06], \text{SRMR} = .05$, and women, $\chi^2 (87, N=1,192) = 414.01, p<.001, \text{CFI} = .94, \text{TLI} = .92, \text{RMSEA} = .05 90\% \text{CI} [.05, .06], \text{SRMR} = .04$. Likewise, a configural invariance model examining men and women simultaneously with no cross-group equality constraints yielded acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2 (174, N=2,455) = 870.18, p<.001, \text{CFI} = .94, \text{TLI} = .92, \text{RMSEA} = .06, 90\% \text{CI} [.05, .06], \text{SRMR} = .05$. Thus, we proceeded with tests of factorial invariance by testing a model in which the factor loadings of each observed variable on its respective latent variable were constrained to be equal across men and women. Despite the large sample size, the scaled chi-square difference test was not significant ($\Delta \chi^2 [11] = 11.69, p = .387$), indicating that the imposition of cross-group equality constraints was not a significantly worse fit than the configural model. In addition, the change in CFI was negligible ($\Delta \text{CFI} = -.001$), and zero was present in each of the 99% confidence intervals of the differences in the unstandardized regression coefficients across groups (see Supplemental Table 1A available online at journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0011000017693398).

Because factorial invariance was supported, we explored structural invariance by testing a model in which the regression paths between hope and help-seeking intentions were constrained to be equal between men and women compared to a model with no cross-group equality constraints. The configural invariant structural model with no cross-group equality constraints
generally evidenced an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2 (174, N = 2,455) = 941.43$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .06], SRMR = .05. The imposition of cross-group equality constraints on the direct effects in the model from hope to help-seeking did not significantly impact the chi-square ($\Delta \chi^2 [4] = 2.75, p = .387$) or CFI ($\Delta \text{CFI} = 0$), and zero fell within the 99% confidence interval for each difference between men and women in the associations between hope and help-seeking (see Supplemental Table 2A available online at journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0011000017693398). These findings indicated that gender did not moderate the associations between hope and help-seeking in the model.

**Invariance for Ethnicity.** Although we originally intended to examine invariance between ethnic minorities compared to ethnic majority students, a closer examination of the present sample suggested that comparing Asian American students to White students was most appropriate given the low number of African American, Latino, and multiracial participants. The measurement model was generally an acceptable fit for White students, $\chi^2 (87, N = 1,762) = 509.18$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.05, .06], SRMR = .05, and Asian American students, $\chi^2 (87, N = 460) = 251.151$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.06, .07], SRMR = .06. Next, a configural invariance model, in which Asian American and White students’ parameters were freely estimated in the same model without any cross-group equality constraints, yielded an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2 (174, N = 2,222) = 764.19$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .06], SRMR = .04. The scaled chi-square difference test was significant after the imposition of cross-group equality constraints on all factor loadings ($\Delta \chi^2 [16] = 40.08 \ p = .001$). However, the change in CFI was negligible ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .002$), and zero was only absent in the 99% confidence intervals for intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem from a phone help line, suggesting that Asian American students’ unstandardized factor loadings on this item were significantly larger than White students’ (see Supplemental Table 3A available online at journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0011000017693398). However, considering this was the only factor loading that demonstrated nonfactorial invariance, the model met the requirements for partial factorial invariance (e.g., Kline, 2016).

Next, the structural model with no cross-group equality constraints on the direct effects evidenced an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2 (174, N = 2,222) = 754.210$, $p < .001$, CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.05, .06], SRMR = .04. Moreover, the imposition of cross-group equality constraints on the direct effects did not significantly impact the chi-square ($\Delta \chi^2 [4] = 6.43, p = .169$) or the CFI ($\Delta \text{CFI} = .001$), and zero fell within the 99% confidence interval for
each difference score (see Supplemental Table 4A available online at journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0011000017693398). These findings indicated that ethnic minority status (i.e., being Asian American) did not moderate the associations between hope and help-seeking in the model.

Discussion

Despite direct and indirect theoretical assertions that higher levels of hope represent a general disposition to seek mental health help if needed (Snyder, 1994; Snyder, Feldman, et al., 2000; Taylor 2000), we were unaware of any published studies examining even basic bivariate associations between hope and psychological help-seeking variables. Using multigroup SEM analyses and a large sample of college students, the present study addressed this gap in the literature by (a) examining the relationships between hope and intentions to seek formal and informal psychological help, (b) further delineating between different sources of help-seeking and problem scenarios, and (c) attending to possible gender and ethnic differences in the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions. We hypothesized that hope would be positively associated with intentions to seek formal and informal psychological help. In addition, we hypothesized that the associations between hope and intentions to seek informal help would be significantly stronger than the associations between hope and intentions to seek formal help across each help-seeking scenario.

Hope and Help-Seeking Intentions

Our results partially supported our hypotheses. We found that hope was robustly related to intentions to seek informal psychological help in the personal-emotional problem and suicidal thoughts scenarios. In addition, the results of the Wald test indicated that hope was more strongly associated with intentions to seek informal help than intentions to seek formal help across each scenario. The robust positive associations between hope and informal psychological help-seeking intentions are consistent with our hypotheses and what would be expected based on the current literature on the psychology of hope. Specifically, several studies have found that hope has profound interpersonal benefits (Rand & Cheavens, 2009), and that individuals with higher levels of hope perceive greater social support than individuals with lower levels of hope (e.g., Fruhiht, 2015). Thus, hopeful college students may have a rich interpersonal network that they can draw upon for managing psychological distress, whether it is for a personal-emotional problem or a more severe issue such as suicidal thoughts.
Contrary to our hypothesis, however, hope was not significantly associated with intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem. In addition, although not specified in our hypotheses, it is noteworthy that hope was not associated with past use of formal psychological help in our preliminary analyses. These null findings run contrary to theoretical assertions that hopeful people are likely to reach out for help from professionals when needed (Snyder, Feldman, et al., 2000), as well as to help-seeking theories positing that self-efficacy, a construct related to hope, is a critical component of one’s willingness to seek help (i.e., the health beliefs model; cf. Vogel & Heath, 2016). However, hope theory researchers also suggest that individuals with high levels of hope are able to formulate multiple avenues to their goals (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Seeking formal help may be but one of the many potential strategies in dealing with mental health. Another route may be to manage mental health concerns by drawing on internal resources. For example, there is some evidence that high-hope individuals can withstand physical and psychological distress to a greater degree than low-hope individuals (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Individuals with higher levels of hope also approach obstacles with more confidence (Snyder, Feldman, et al., 2000) and tend to interpret challenges in a more positive light than their low-hope peers (Snyder et al., 1991). Thus, individuals with high levels of hope may not perceive that a personal-emotional problem warrants formal psychological help. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that perceived need, which is a factor that cuts across a variety of help-seeking models, is an important factor in college students’ decisions to seek help (Eisenberg et al., 2012). Future research is thus needed to examine the connections between hope and perceived need, possibly as a mediating variable, to better understand the role of hope in one’s intentions to seek help for specific problems.

Relatedly, another potential explanation for the lack of the association between hope and intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem is that hopeful individuals may be likely to rely on informal support networks for managing mental health concerns. Considering that hope was positively associated with intentions to seek informal help for a personal-emotional problem in the present study, high-hope individuals may decide not to seek formal psychological help if they perceive the problem is something they can solve through their informal networks. Furthermore, because college students generally use informal support networks to a much higher degree than formal networks for mental health issues (Eisenberg et al., 2012), it is therefore possible that informal networks are perceived as the fastest and easiest avenue toward recovery in some instances, and thus informal networks may be particularly attractive to hopeful students who are driven to achieve their goals quickly and efficiently. Additionally, consistent with
Ciarrochi and Deane’s (2001) assertions, students with positive character traits may also have had more positive past experiences with their informal networks in terms of managing mental health concerns, thus strengthening the associations between positive character strengths, such as hope, and informal help-seeking intentions.

Although hope was not associated with intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem, it was positively associated with intentions to seek formal help in the suicidal thoughts scenario, albeit modestly. These findings support our hypotheses and are aligned with several studies suggesting that hopeful individuals are unlikely to engage in self-destructive behaviors, especially suicide (Rand & Cheavens, 2009). Thus, our findings indicate that hopeful students may be most likely to seek formal psychological help when not seeking help may have dire consequences. These results coincide with previous findings that individuals with more severe mental health problems (e.g. suicidal thoughts in our study) were more likely to seek professional help compared to those with less serious mental health concerns such as the emotional-personal problems in our study scenarios (Oliver, Pearson, Coe, & Gunnell, 2005). The modest positive association between hope and intentions to seek formal help for suicidal thoughts may also help qualify the null association between hope and intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem in the present study. One possibility for future exploration, for instance, is that higher levels of hope are associated with greater intentions to seek psychological help only when a person perceives that his or her informal networks will not be sufficient to address the severity of the issue.

**Exploratory Ethnicity and Gender Invariance Tests**

In addition to testing specific hypotheses regarding the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions, we explored ethnicity and gender as possible moderators in our hypothesized model. Although we were unable to fully test ethnicity as a moderator due to the relative lack of different ethnic groups in our sample, the results indicated that (a) the model demonstrated an acceptable fit for White and Asian American students, as well as men and women in the total sample (i.e., configural invariance), (b) hope and help-seeking intentions appeared to be measuring the same constructs in all groups (i.e., factorial invariance), and (c) the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions were statistically similar across all groups (i.e., structural invariance). Because the model demonstrated structural invariance, neither gender nor ethnicity moderated the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions. Therefore, higher levels of hope correlated with greater
intentions to seek psychological help despite the potentially different cultural worldviews corresponding with one’s gender (i.e., that seeking help is a violation of traditional masculine roles; Vogel & Heath, 2016) or ethnicity (i.e., that seeking help may violate Asian cultural values of emotional self-control; Kim, Kendall, & Chang, 2016).

Due to the dearth of research on hope and help-seeking, it is critical to note that the present study represents the first of its kind to examine possible gender or racial differences in the associations between hope and help-seeking intentions. Our findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that the agency and pathways components of hope are invariant across men and women (Gomez et al., 2015). However, our results are inconsistent with previous findings that high levels of hope were unrelated or negatively related to a variety of adaptive coping strategies in ethnic minority college students (Danoff-Burg et al., 2004), as well as evidence that Asian Americans, in particular, are unlikely to use engagement coping strategies (e.g., Chang, 2001; Lam & Zane, 2004). Because help-seeking is a form of coping, the fact that ethnicity did not emerge as a moderator in the present study is particularly intriguing. One explanation for the discrepancy between the present study and previous research is that we used an analysis technique, SEM, with several advantages over traditional moderation approaches such as a multiple regression (Kline, 2016). Most notably, testing for moderation in SEM is a systematic process that takes into account measurement error that could otherwise distort moderation effects. SEM also ensures that any possible moderation effects are not the result of differences in the underlying measurement of each construct, because it requires both configural and factorial invariance before testing moderation through direct effect invariance (Kline, 2016). Previous investigations examining ethnicity as a moderator have relied on more traditional regression analyses, and thus the significant moderation effects identified in those investigations may be exaggerated by the presence of measurement error or differences in the meaning of coping across groups. In addition, previous research has primarily used Black/African American college students. Although both Asian American and Black/African American students experience racism and discrimination, they are distinct cultural groups and thus, future research is needed to determine whether the same moderation results would be replicated in a more diverse sample.

Limitations and Additional Directions for Research

The present findings should be interpreted with consideration of several limitations. First, the sample was primarily nonclinical in nature,
and thus additional research is needed to determine whether students who are currently experiencing psychological distress may have different associations between hope and help-seeking intentions. Because high levels of hope generally protect individuals from mental health concerns (Rand & Cheavens, 2009), and thus high-hope individuals may be unlikely to need to seek professional psychological help in general, our findings may reflect hopeful students’ reactions to a hypothetical help-seeking scenario and not the reality of an actual situation where they may need to seek help. On the other hand, it is important to note that people, regardless of their level of hope, can experience stressful situations that could push them into serious psychological despair. Although hope is a buffer against such factors (Rand & Cheavens, 2009), it is not a 100% guarantee that mental health problems will not arise. Indeed, the association between hope and suicidal ideation in some studies has been negative but modest in size (e.g., Tucker et al., 2013). Accordingly, additional research is needed examining the connections between hope and actual help-seeking behaviors to better ascertain how and why hope was associated with hypothetical help-seeking in the present study.

Second, the correlational and cross-sectional nature of the present study precludes any firm conclusions about causality and the temporal order of relationships in the model. Additional research is needed using controlled experimental designs as well as longitudinal methods to confirm that hope leads to help-seeking intentions as presently modeled and as implied by hope theory-driven perspectives of prevention (e.g., Snyder, Feldman, et al., 2000). Third, the sample was generated at only one public institution using a convenience sample, and thus it may not be representative of all college students. Fourth, the exploratory nature of the study, although a strength in terms of addressing a critical gap in the literature, is also a limitation. Accordingly, researchers are encouraged to replicate and extend the present findings with more complex designs. A related area for future research is to extend the present findings to additional help-seeking targets such as mentors, advisors, professors, resident advisors, and religious leaders. Although our model provided acceptable fit to the data, and the items of the formal and informal subscales of the GHSQ personal-emotional problem scenario appeared to be tapping into their respective constructs (see Table 2), the marginally acceptable internal consistency estimates of these items are noteworthy. Thus, additional research is also needed to examine hope in relation to other, more internally consistent measures of help-seeking attitudes and behaviors. Lastly, although the present study had a large enough sample size to examine differences between White and Asian American students, additional research with more diverse samples is needed to examine potential differences between ethnic groups and to improve the generalizability of findings. For example, although
the present model was invariant across groups, this does not preclude the possibility that different cultural groups have additional components to their definitions of hope. Qualitative research could be especially important for uncovering what hope means to various groups. Likewise, researchers should build upon the present findings to examine within-group differences in the associations between hope and help-seeking by examining more nuanced measures of ethnicity such as ethic identity, perceived discrimination, and other culturally-based experience measures.

**Implications for Practice**

Despite its limitations, our findings have implications for novel methods of increasing college students’ help-seeking intentions. In particular, several studies offer direct and indirect evidence suggesting that individuals struggling with mental health problems can learn to increase their hope through imagery techniques, cognitive reframing, seeking information and education about their conditions, and strengthening social connections with family and friends (see Schrank, Bird, Rudnick, & Slade, 2012, for a systematic review). Although researchers have yet to extend these hope-facilitating techniques into programs designed to address college students’ mental health help-seeking, a small but growing body of literature has focused on increasing hope in college students to promote academic and vocational success (e.g., Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012; Feldman et al., 2015). Most notably, Feldman and Dreher (2012) implemented a single-session, 90-minute intervention that combined psychoeducational approaches with selecting personal goals, goal mapping, and hope visualization. Students who were randomly assigned to the 90-minute presentation reported greater hope at posttest and greater goal accomplishment at a 1-month follow up compared to students assigned to a generic session of progressive muscle relaxation.

Programs aimed at increasing or harnessing hope for academic aims could be modified to include discussion of psychological help-seeking as a potential avenue for overcoming obstacles. More precisely, educating students about campus resources and providing psychoeducation about the links between mental health and academic performance may help students develop ways to overcome potential mental health issues that could influence their academic outcomes. In addition, considering that hope was most robustly associated with informal help-seeking in the present study, students may benefit from discussing how they can strengthen their existing social networks as potential resources for managing mental health. Because students are more likely to seek help from friends and family in general (Eisenberg et al., 2012),
clinicians should make additional efforts to ensure that individuals in these social networks are educated about mental health issues and campus resources.

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**Notes**

1. Because past help-seeking was positively associated with intentions to seek formal help, a logical question arises as to whether past help-seeking may be an important covariate in the model. The model with help-seeking as a covariate yielded somewhat lower indices of fit, $\chi^2 (98, N = 2,461) = 1,067.57, p < .001$, CFI = .93; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .06, 90% CI = [.06, .07], SRMR = .05. Moreover, the associations between the covariate and the dependent variables were unusually high compared to what could be expected based on our zero-order correlations. For example, the regression between the covariate and intentions to seek formal help for a personal-emotional problem was strong ($\beta = .89$, $p < .001$), whereas this association was much weaker ($r = .22$, $p < .001$) in our preliminary analyses. Thus, the addition of the covariate in the model yielded exaggerated parameters estimates, suggesting potential model miss-specification. Following the recommendations of Kline (2016), we opted not to retain a model in which the parameters are suspect and thus did not include past help-seeking as a covariate. In addition, the model exhibited both measurement and structural invariance between students with and without a history of previous counseling. Full results of these analyses are available by request from the lead author.

2. As an alternative model, we examined agency and pathways separately using the individual items comprising those scales as indicators for each latent variable. The same pattern of results emerged as what is reported in the present article. Thus, to be most consistent with the conceptualization of hope being a combination of agency and pathways (Rand & Cheavens, 2009; Snyder, 2000), we decided to model hope as general latent variable.
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