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# Harry Potter and the Enhancement of Hope: What Harry Potter and Positive Psychology can Teach Us about the Good Life

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# Harry Potter and the Enhancement of Hope: What Harry Potter and Positive Psychology can Teach Us about the Good Life

## **Abstract**

This capstone explores J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books through the lens of positive psychology, the scientific study of human flourishing. Specifically, it proposes that reading Harry Potter is a positive intervention, an evidence-based activity that enhances peoples well-being, especially given its potential to spark hope in its readers. Hope is one of the positive psychological character strengths most associated with happiness and life satisfaction, yet is one of the least endorsed worldwide. This suggests a need to offer people around the world easily accessible interventions through which they can cultivate more hope. Through its ubiquitous ability to resonate with children and adults alike across cultures, Harry Potter has much potential to do just that. By merging the principles of positive psychology with J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, readers may be better able to access hope that they can be who they want to be and create a world that they want to see. Indeed, as Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, the founders of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text articulate, "reading fiction doesn't help us escape the world, it helps us live in it".

## **Keywords**

Harry Potter, positive psychology, hope, positive interventions, positive humanities.

## **Disciplines**

Child Psychology | Counseling Psychology | Education | Psychology

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Harry Potter and the Enhancement of Hope: What Harry Potter and Positive Psychology can

Teach Us about the Good Life

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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Amy Holloway

August 1, 2018

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## Abstract

This capstone explores J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books through the lens of *positive psychology*, the scientific study of human flourishing. Specifically, it proposes that reading *Harry Potter* is a *positive intervention*, an evidence-based activity that enhances peoples well-being, especially given its potential to spark hope in its readers. Hope is one of the positive psychological character strengths most associated with happiness and life satisfaction, yet is one of the least endorsed worldwide. This suggests a need to offer people around the world easily accessible interventions through which they can cultivate more hope. Through its ubiquitous ability to resonate with children and adults alike across cultures, *Harry Potter* has much potential to do just that. By merging the principles of positive psychology with J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, readers may be better able to access hope that they can be who they want to be and create a world that they want to see. Indeed, as Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, the founders of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* articulate, "reading fiction doesn't help us escape the world, it helps us live in it".

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“My life was a dark one. And I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairytale resolution. I had no idea then how far the tunnel extended and for a long time any light at the end of it was hope rather than reality.”

-J.K. Rowling, Harvard Commencement Address, June 5, 2008

### **Introduction**

J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, first published in 1997, has now set an unprecedented record for the number of children’s books sold, reaching over half a billion worldwide in 2018 and translated into over 80 languages (“500 Million,” 2018). This means that roughly one in fifteen people in the world owns a book in the series (“500 Million,” 2018), demonstrating Harry Potter’s ubiquitous ability to resonate with cultures all over the world, adults and children alike. As a cultural and psychological phenomena, Harry Potter’s influence has extended far beyond the realm of the books, inspiring the creation of movies, theme parks, plays, massive social action, and much more. Now 20 years old, Harry Potter still catches the world’s imagination.

As a master’s student in Applied *Positive Psychology*, the scientific study of human flourishing, (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and a huge Harry Potter fan myself, I began to ask some fundamental questions about why the series is so successful and to wonder if it could play a role in the application of positive psychology. As I reread the books and thought about it more, it became apparent that the books were full of opportunities to engage with a wide range of major positive psychological constructs like grit, resilience, creativity, and character strengths to name a few. Moreover, it seemed like reading Harry Potter could benefit readers in a number of ways, by helping them feel better, think differently, challenge their skillsets, and induce a sense of belonging as they related to characters throughout the series. After much thought and research, however, I came to believe that one important reason why Harry Potter has remained so popular

is because it provides readers of all ages with hope - hope that people can be who they want to be and create a world that they want to see. In fact, Harry Potter seems to elicit hope in its readers via two dimensions: 1) their empathic experience of seeing the characters model this construct and effect their world in doing so; and 2) their more transactional experience of feeling better able to read more challenging books in the aftermath of completing a Harry Potter novel. These pathways may leave readers better able to access and build hope within themselves, and in doing so, expand the inner resources available to them so that they can lead happier lives. Because of its ability to inspire hope in its readers, along with the growing research on the power of narratives and stories to enhance individual wellbeing, I believe that reading Harry Potter makes a great *positive intervention*, an evidence-based activity that enhances people's well-being (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

“As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters.”

- Seneca

## **Positive Psychology 101**

### **What is Positive Psychology?**

Human flourishing has been a topic of human inquiry for thousands and thousands of years (Melchert, 2002). It's something scholars, philosophers, theologians, and historians have been exploring throughout the ages (Boniwell, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013), yet remains on our minds today. The emerging field of positive psychology, or the scientific study of what it means to live the good life, helps further this investigation into life's big questions using empirical evidence to do so (Boniwell, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2013). Positive psychology studies character strengths, positive emotions, positive relationships, positive institutions and positive experiences that enable individuals and organizations to thrive. Through rigorous scientific investigation,

positive psychology offers a unique perspective on what it means to live well and offers activities or positive interventions that promote human flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### **Positive Psychology: A History**

Positive psychology fulfills psychology's original intent to meet the following three objectives: 1) to mitigate mental illness; 2) to enhance the lives of *all* people; and 3) to promote human excellence (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While psychology as a field has typically focused on the first objective of reducing pathology, what's wrong with people and how to fix them, positive psychology focuses on the latter two objectives of what's right with people and how to bring out their best, and in doing so broadens the toolbox available for meeting the first objective as well (Seligman, 2011). Psychology's shift into studying the affirmative aspects of life took place after 50 years of an almost-exclusive focus on treating psychological disorders that was sparked in the aftermath of World War II (Seligman, 1999). While great advancements in treatment of mental illness were achieved during this time, this was to the detriment of psychology's latter two objectives, leaving a marked unevenness in the orientation of the field. Martin Seligman (1999) acknowledged this imbalance and set the stage for change in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, in which he called for a reorientation of the field towards the study of human strengths. Since then, his hope of understanding and enriching the positive human qualities that make life most worth living has sparked a boom of research in this area, and returned psychology to its original mission of enhancing the lives of all people, not just those struggling with mental illness (Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).



While positive psychology is very much a young discipline, many of the concepts addressed in the field were studied by prominent thinkers and psychologists long beforehand. The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, viewed *eudaimonia* or flourishing, as fulfilling one's true potential, the highest of all goods (Melchert, 2002). William James (1902/1958), the father of American psychology, supplied a vision of healthy-mindedness, the inclination to interpret things as being good. In 1933, Carl Jung described the mechanisms involved in optimal personal development through the concepts of self-hood, individuation, and self-realization (Jung, 1933). Following suit, Abraham Maslow (1968) provided a detailed model of self-actualization in the 1960s. Similarly, Carl Rogers (1961) explored what it means to be a fully functioning person. Indeed, both Maslow and Rogers were influential figures in the field of humanistic psychology, which characterizes individuals as having agency, pursuing goals, and leveraging reason and logic to understand meaning and optimal human functioning in life (Peterson, 2006). While humanistic psychology undoubtedly serves as an important precursor for positive psychology, it did not utilize the scientific method in many of its inquiries, believing science to be incapable of capturing the complexities of being human (Boniwell, 2012). This left a gap that positive psychology could fill, and positive psychology's reliance on empirical evidence is indeed the chief factor that sets the two fields apart. By measuring positive psychological constructs through science, positive psychology has served as the springboard for wide-scale and wide-ranging initiatives in a variety of contexts including schools, the military, and business (Bott et al., 2017; Norrish, 2015; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011; Kattenmaker, 2001). Subtopics within positive psychology such as positive psychotherapy, positive education, positive parenting, positive humanities, and positive organizational psychology are taking off in their own right as

well, as evidenced by an increase in research in these fields (Rashid, Howes, & Loudon, 2017; Bott et al., 2017; Sun & Waters, 2017; Tay, Pawelski, & Keith, 2017; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

### **Theories in Positive Psychology**

While there are many theories that influence the field of positive psychology, I would like to highlight three in connection with the Harry Potter series and the construct of hope: 1) hope theory (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015); 2) the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009); and 3) The VIA model of character strengths and virtues (Niemiec, 2017).

**Hope Theory.** The Harry Potter series is infused with themes of hope. Magyar-Moe and Lopez (2015) illustrate the importance of hope in fueling the good life through the perspective of hope theory. According to this model, cultivating hope involves three central cognitive processes: 1) conceptualizing goals clearly; 2) creating specific pathways to reach these goals; and finally, 3) fostering and maintaining motivation to make use of these pathways. While goals act as anchors in establishing hope, pathways provide various routes to reaching these goals, and motivation keeps people going throughout the process. Research shows that individuals with higher levels of hope have better academic, athletic, health, cognitive and psychological outcomes (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). What's more, interventions aimed at increasing hope have led to greater goal attainment, meaning, agency, self-esteem, life satisfaction and self-worth in individuals (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Thus, strengthening hope seems to be an important pathway to cultivating well-being in individuals and groups.

Hope is especially important in facilitating positive change in people (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Indeed, Snyder and colleagues (2000) posit that as people learn more effective ways to think about and reach their goals, change follows. Moreover, Snyder and colleagues (2000) hypothesize that, with regards to psychotherapy and before treatment methods even

begin, the main ingredient of change is the client's expectancy that therapy will improve his or her life. Indeed, Seligman (2018) posits that hope is the main ingredient in the cure of depression as well, and remarks that many physical and psychological disorders are characterized by a lack of hope.

J.K. Rowling (1999) illustrates this point through her descriptions of the dark magical creatures called dementors in the Harry Potter series, which suck all the hope out of their victims, leaving them only with their worst memories, and demonstrating how dangerous hopelessness can be both physically and psychologically, as Harry repeatedly faints in the presence of the dementors and hears his parents being murdered by Lord Voldemort. Only by digging deep within his inner resources and thinking of his happiest memories is Harry able to overcome the dementors, which speaks to the power of positive emotions in jumpstarting the road to recovery from depression (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). In what is formally called hope therapy, therapists encourage clients to become their own hope-enhancing agents specifically through the use of narrative (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Indeed, one of the mini-interventions that Magyar-Moe and Lopez (2015) cite is "reviewing a favorite hope narrative," (p. 497). As Harry Potter seems to be a favorite narrative among millions of people already, it is a natural choice for individuals and communities who want to cultivate more hope within themselves, especially since hope is one of Harry Potter's central themes (Griesinger, 2002).

**Hope Broadens-and-Builds.** The Harry Potter series also supports the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Barbara Fredrickson's (2001/2009) broaden-and-build theory features two core elements, the first being that positive emotions broaden our perceptions of what is possible, opening our minds and hearts to a larger range of thoughts and actions than usual, and in the process, leaving us more creative and receptive to the world at large. The

second aspect of the theory surrounds the notion that positivity helps us uncover and build new skill sets, tools, connections, and knowledge, and in this way, transforms us into more of who we want to be. The broaden-and-build theory posits that positivity had far-reaching implications for our ancestors in that it expanded their mindsets and helped them discover new resources, thereby leaving them better able to face future threats and survive. Fredrickson (2009) quotes a greeting card in her book, *Positivity*, that reads “Life gives us negativity on our own. It’s our job to create positivity” (p. 230); if we intentionally structure positivity into our lives by engaging in positive interventions, we choose the path of an upward-spiral that enhances our resilience and leaves us more likely to flourish (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Fredrickson, 2009).

Fredrickson (2009) mentions ten forms of positivity that can spark this upward spiral, one of them being hope, which is distinguished from other positive emotions in that it typically appears in times of uncertainty and despair, rather than in times of safety and comfort. Fredrickson (2009) notes that at the crux of hope is the belief that circumstances can change, and that there are options to be considered. She further notes that hope fuels individuals to tap into their abilities and resourcefulness to sustain themselves, influence their situations for the better, and energize action towards creating brighter futures for themselves and others (Fredrickson, 2009).

Indeed, we see hope play out in this way at the end of the fourth Harry Potter book, when Harry comes face to face with and escapes death at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Although Harry had been sure “he was going to die,” (Rowling, 2000, p. 661) hope seems to have ultimately saved him (Rowling, 2000):

It was the sound of hope to Harry...the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life...He felt as though the song were inside of him instead of just around him...It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his

ear...*Don't break the connection* [...] He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed [...] Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve...but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand [...]. (pp. 664-665)

Just as Fredrickson (2009) describes, hope seems to have allowed Harry to access his inner-resourcefulness and sustain himself to survival against Lord Voldemort, not only in this example, but throughout the series.

**Strengths, Hope, and Harry Potter.** It's easy to spot character strengths in Harry Potter, especially since Hogwarts, the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has a built-in strength spotting system of its own that all students go through in their first year called the sorting hat. Likewise, research on character strengths has flourished over the past ten years in the non-wizarding world, providing a common language for individuals to identify and talk about what is good in themselves and in each other. The VIA is a classification and measurement tool of the 24 character strengths found to be ubiquitous across cultures and alive in each of us (Niemiec, 2017). Indeed, it has been taken by approximately six million people worldwide and translated into 39 languages, reaching almost every country in the world, even the most remote locations (Biswas-Diener; 2006). This widespread appeal of both the VIA and Harry Potter alike suggests that part of their universality comes from the mutual strengths embedded within each, such as bravery, curiosity, kindness, perseverance, love, and hope. In fact, in the three-year search for these universally-esteemed strengths, the VIA researchers exhausted almost every resource available to them, including identifying the character strengths that defined the houses of Hogwarts (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This not only demonstrates Harry Potter's applicability to positive psychology from the start of the strengths search, but its potential as an untapped tool

for understanding, identifying, and growing character strengths in ourselves and in each other as well (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The fact that Harry Potter's value was taken into account by the giants of the field to form what would later become one of the most well-researched and widespread topics in positive psychology reminds us not to overlook it in the everyday application of character strengths. As an avid Harry Potter fan myself, I believe that Harry Potter should have a specific place amongst the plethora of strengths interventions that have sprouted from this research. Not only has Harry Potter helped inspire the field in one of its biggest projects to date, but it is still very much an untapped tool in the realm of positive psychology with the potential to become a go-to positive intervention for helping people identify and build strengths like hope in themselves simply by reading it.

Harry Potter may be able to provide a more accessible way for people to understand character strengths as the VIA defines them. The VIA operationalizes character strengths so as to reflect people's actual behaviors, hence the term values in action, that benefit both themselves and others rather than the values that they hold in their head, but do not necessarily live by (Niemi, 2017). J.K. Rowling (2007) illustrates what it means to put values in action throughout the Harry Potter series. For instance, Harry's hope that he can defeat Voldemort carries him on a journey to destroy horcruxes, of which Voldemort has put pieces of his soul in an attempt at becoming immortal. Though a nearly impossible endeavor, acting on hope is what ultimately allows Harry to succeed in this, thereby saving himself and making the world a safer place to live in for many others.

“The thing about growing up with Fred and George,” said Ginny thoughtfully, “is that you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.”

- J.K. Rowling (2003, p.655), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

**Why does hope matter?** Just like hope is important in the wizarding world, research illustrates that hope is important in the non-wizarding world as well. Hope is one of the 24 character strengths classified in the VIA and is highly correlated with happiness and life satisfaction, with most studies showing it to have either the highest or second highest correlation to happiness and life satisfaction after zest; this finding repeatedly holds for happy adults, youth, and young children alike (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Moreover, hope is among the top four strengths most associated with lives of meaning, engagement, and pleasure (Peterson et al., 2007), with meaning and engagement representing two prominent elements of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Although hope and happiness seem to go together, on average, hope appears to be among peoples’ lowest strengths on their profiles throughout the world (Park, Peterson, & Seligman; 2004), hence the need to identify mechanisms that build hope.

Although hope appears to be one of the least endorsed strengths generally speaking, this does not seem to hold when examining certain populations. In military samples from the United States and Norway, for example, hope turned out to be one of the most endorsed of all the strengths (Matthews, Eid, Kelly, Bailey, & Peterson, 2006). Some minority populations within the U.S. show similar trends as well, demonstrating higher levels of hope than their European American counterparts (Chang & Banks, 2007). These findings make sense given that individuals with higher levels of hope are better able to reframe obstacles as challenges, and that both military and minority populations likely encounter more goal-related obstacles than the general population, thus giving them more opportunities to nurture higher levels of hope as well (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Notably, hope is positively linked with heroism (Staats et al.,

2009) and highly correlated with bravery and perseverance (Niemi, 2017), which may be why it is more prevalent in the military, in minorities, and why it shows up in stories like Harry Potter. This may also help explain why hope seems to be more important for successful goal setting and purpose-related well-being than optimism (Gallagher & Lopez, 2009). J.K. Rowling (2007) illustrates the link between hope, purpose, and heroism (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, & Duckworth, 2014) towards the end of the seventh book, when Neville is explaining the reason behind the gashes on his face to Harry, Ron, and Hermione:

“Blimey, Neville,” said Ron, “there’s a time and a place for getting a smart mouth.”

“You didn’t hear her,” said Neville. “You wouldn’t have stood it either. The thing is, it helps when people stand up to them, it gives everyone hope. I used to notice that when you did it, Harry.” (p. 574)

This passage illustrates that Neville, who has become a leader in the resistance movement against the death eaters and of Dumbledore’s Army, recognizes the power of hope in fighting for a cause, and because of this recognition, acts heroically by refusing to do the bidding of the death eaters and by disagreeing with their ideology. Furthermore, Neville’s new-found leadership also give the readers hope that even the meekest can prosper and self-actualize in life, one of the central functions of fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1976). Additionally, Neville’s heroism speaks to the generally higher levels of hope alive in youth (Park & Peterson, 2006).

Youth in the U.S. endorse higher levels of hope than adults (Park & Peterson, 2006), suggesting that as individuals grow older it may be especially important to harness this positive psychological construct within themselves and furthermore, to learn from those younger than themselves. Adolescence is a time of risk and opportunity, whereby teens can leverage their natural propensity for risk-taking and higher levels of hope to change the world for the better (A. Mackey, personal communication, February, 2, 2018), and thereby serve as symbols of hope for



those who watch, as Neville does in the example above and as Harry does throughout the Harry Potter series.

To this point, large-scale research in 56 middle-schools demonstrates the power that small groups of teenagers have to change entire school-cultures by actively using their voices in anti-bullying campaigns and in this way, reducing overall school conflict (Paluck, Shepherd, & Aronow, 2016). This study reminds us not to underestimate youth, but rather to value their voice, especially in problems concerning themselves as they may be better able to come up with more effective solutions than adults, especially since their tendency for higher levels of hope is associated with more pathway thinking and agency (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Indeed, multiple anti-bullying interventions had been tried in schools leading up to this study but were unsuccessful. By putting these interventions into the hands of the students, however, decreases in disciplinary reports indicated improved school-safety (Paluck et al., 2016). J.K. Rowling (1998) illustrates the importance of empowering and listening to the hopeful voice of youth in the Chamber of Secrets, as it is Ron's hope that Ginny is still alive that causes him and Harry to try to find her, and ultimately, save her. With the help of Hermione, two teenage boys were able to figure out what the teachers in the school could not and save a life by taking matters into their own hands, none of which would have been possible without Ron's hope:

“Harry,” said Ron. “D’you think there’s any chance at all she’s not - you know -”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t see how Ginny could still be alive.

“D’you know what?” said Ron. I think we should go and see Lockhart. Tell him what we know...” (pp 295-296)

Had Ron not had this small glimpse of hope, the outcome could have been very different. The boys’ success in saving Ginny’s life highlights again how hope and heroism go together, and

how important and potentially life-saving this strength is, especially when it comes to influencing future actions.

Considering that hope is one of the least endorsed strengths around the world, yet is so closely correlated to happiness and heroism, it seems important to have an easily accessible, widespread positive intervention through which individuals and communities can build hope. Reading Harry Potter seems to be that intervention.

### **Positive Humanities Background**

The field of the *positive humanities* (Tay et al., 2017), the study of human culture through the lens of human flourishing, while officially still in its infancy, can be traced back to the early Greeks. Plato and Aristotle recognized the power of the humanities to influence thought, action, and moral character; indeed, they considered the effects of the humanities to be so potent that they called for the government to regulate its consumption (Wang, 2004; Barker, 2012). Aristotle believed that artists were obliged to exert their power over words extremely carefully (Barker, 2012), while Plato (trans. 1974) remarked in his republic that “the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling the most fundamental, political, and social conventions” (pp. 665-666). Though these ideas may sound far-reaching, history indicates that fundamental changes in the humanities can yield fundamental changes in society as well; for example, in Western culture, the creation of different kinds of operas have been known to spark riots throughout the history of music, with the creation of operas themselves shifting overall societal preference to that of public performances attended for pleasure purposes over private ones attended for religious purposes (J. Coopersmith, personal communication, January 12, 2018). Likewise, the Harry Potter series has inspired massive social action in the ensuing creation of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), which has engaged millions of fans (“What We Do,” 2018). From helping to

build libraries throughout the world, to which HPA activists donated over 350,000 books (“Accio Books Campaign,” 2018), to raising over \$123,000 for Partners in Health to send five cargo planes to Haiti with life-saving supplies (“Success Stories,” 2018), the Harry Potter Alliance demonstrates the real-world impact that the humanities can have on people's lives. The release of the Harry Potter books between 1997 and 2007 also coincides with individuals who grew up in Generation Z, or those born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Notably, Generation Z marks the shift from the “Me” generation of the millennials to the “We” generation, dedicated to changing the world for the better and leaving a positive impact (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). While there is not yet sufficient research data to support such a claim, perhaps this generation, who grew up with literature like Harry Potter, cultivated more hope as a result of reading books like it, and in this way, developed more motivation and expectation for a positive future as is reflected above.

**Positive Humanities: Literary Fiction.** While Harry Potter is an example of children’s literature, and can more specifically be thought of as a fairytale (Bettelheim, 1976), it appears to contain aspects of *literary fiction* as well. Literary fiction, which focuses on character over plot development, can aid individuals in understanding the nuanced mental states of others, an ability called *theory of mind (ToM)*, and can more broadly influence how people engage in the real world (Kidd, Ongis, & Castano, 2016). As Bettelheim’s (1976) work shows, fairy tales focus on the process of change by meeting readers where they are and hinting in the direction of where they might need to go, primarily through focusing on the process of personal development itself. In this way, fairytales are similar to literary fiction, in that they both give special attention to character development. In fact, one fMRI study shows that reading emotional passages from Harry Potter modulates neural substrates involved in theory-of-mind processing (Hsu, Jacobs, &

Conrad, 2015), suggesting that, like literary fiction, Harry Potter helps its readers better represent the mental states of others. A fieldwork study on teen Harry Potter readers also indicates that youth draw parallels between the relationships they read about in the books and those in their own lives and continue to reflect on them long after their initial encounter (Das, 2013). This potentially enhanced theory-of-mind through reading Harry Potter is important in that theory-of-mind has been shown to promote cooperative social relationships (Dunbar, 2003), an important aspect of well-being (Seligman, 2011). This is also important in that social competence, perceived social support, and having a broader circle of friends are all associated with the character strength of hope (Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Thus, by offering readers insight into the psychological experience of its characters, Harry in particular, the Harry Potter series may subsequently enhance readers relationships and foster hope within them.

**Positive Humanities: Personal Narrative.** Many types of stories can shape us on our paths towards thriving (Tomasulo & Pawelski, 2012). Indeed, stories have long been leveraged to prescribe how to live and what to value, as well as how not to live and what not to value (Tomasulo & Pawelski, 2012). The story of Harry Potter fulfills both of these functions by providing powerful juxtapositions of the paths and daily choices individuals make in pursuit of the good life through characters like Harry and Voldemort, who share much in common, in that they are both orphans who can speak parseltongue, yet pursue the good life in radically different ways.

While the Harry Potter series is an example of a written narrative, I believe that it can call readers to reflect on their own *personal narratives*, or stories surrounding personal memories as well. Personal narratives are of central importance in personality literature in that they can help

integrate the narrator by allowing them to show empathy and understanding for themselves and others and by providing them with a *narrative identity* (Tomasulo & Pawelski, 2012). Dan McAdams (1996), who is a thought-leader in the field of personality psychology, describes narrative identity as the “internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self” (p. 242). Thus, the developing self can be thought of as a combination of the storyteller and the stories he or she tells (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; Tomasulo & Pawelski, 2012).

Beyond their usefulness for ego development and enhanced complexity in thinking about the self and others, integrative personal narratives are sometimes associated with higher levels of psychological well-being as well (Bauer et al., 2008). Tay and colleagues (2017) propose that engaging with the humanities can indeed lead to *reflectiveness*, the deliberate, cognitive-emotional practice of forming, bolstering, or discarding one’s behaviors, character, ideals, or perspectives; reflectiveness is a key facet involved in constructing personal narratives (Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). The Harry Potter series likely stimulates reflectiveness in its readers, and in this way encourages their personal narratives to evolve further as well.

In addition to its potential to spark personal reflection in its readers, the Harry Potter series suggests different ways of thinking about the self, and illustrates what the process of personal narrative formation might look like throughout the novels. The process of forming these life stories is indeed a process, rather than something that takes place once a year; in fact, it occurs during everyday events, like reading or discussing Harry Potter for instance, that allow people to see things in a different light, and reflect on how all the pieces in their lives come together (Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000).

The Harry Potter books demonstrate that personal narrative formation indeed is a lifelong process; as Harry grows up throughout the series and learns things about himself that he is

uncomfortable with, such as his similarities with Voldemort (for example, his ability to speak parseltongue), he reflects on what this might mean about himself, which leads him to try on the sorting hat again to see if he was placed in the right house or not and to ask Dumbledore about it at the end of the second book (Rowling, 1998):

“Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue - resourcefulness - determination - a certain disregard for rules,” he added again, his mustache quivering again. Yet the sorting hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.”

“It only put me in Gryffindor,” said Harry in a defeated voice, “because I asked not to go in Slytherin...”

“*Exactly*,” said Dumbledore, beaming once more. “Which makes you *very different* from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” (p. 333)

Dumbledore’s perspective on the issue demonstrates how personal narratives can be shaped through simple daily activities, like conversations, and also offers Harry hope that he can still be the person he aspires to be, all aspects of himself taken into account. It may also provide readers hope in suggesting that the uncomfortable parts of ourselves and our lives do not define our future; rather, as Viktor Frankl (1963) reminds us, we have a choice between stimulus and response.

As the Harry Potter series falls into Bettelheim’s (1976) framework of fairy tales, it offers readers a space to explore these elements in their own stories. Indeed, fairytales prompt children to ask the question “Who do I want to be like?” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 10), which they then project onto the characters they identify with in the stories. I believe that this question lays the basis by which children will later be able to envision their best possible selves into their best possible futures without having to immerse themselves in tales. Each Harry Potter book also

classifies as a fairy tale in that it always concludes with a “happy” ending, which Bettelheim (1976) describes as the integration of the protagonist’s personal conflict. In this way, Harry Potter may serve as a launching point in which individuals can construct personal narratives that inspire hope, both on the subconscious and conscious level. Indeed, stories of fictitious characters have frequently been utilized to help children, teens, and adults alike to better craft their own personal narratives of hope (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015).

**Positive Humanities: Conclusion.** Historical narrative and philosophy alike have demonstrated (McMahon, 2018; Pawelski & Moores, 2013) that the humanities can be transformative on both the individual and societal level, which speaks to the popular culture that has emerged around the Harry Potter books. Indeed, Plato argues that literary education should start by telling myths rather than facts, if it is to produce citizens of an ideal republic (Bettelheim, 1976). Likewise, Aristotle, the father of logic, states that “the friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 35). Bettelheim (1976) reiterates just how important fairytales are for learning and improvement in saying that: “factual knowledge profits the total personality only when it is turned into personal knowledge” (p. 54). Research supports these claims, indicating a positive link between reading literature and life satisfaction (van Peer, Mentjes, & Auracher, 2007). Because of the important role that the humanities’ play in the fostering of wellbeing, (Pawelski, 2016) and, specifically Harry Potter’s popularity, there is a need to understand the elements of it that positively touch people’s lives and the opportunity to use the reading of it to foster thriving in ourselves, others, and society at large. I believe that Harry Potter can specifically enhance people’s’ sense of hope in life and in this way, qualify as a positive intervention.

“...the efficacy of psychological interventions [is] in many ways the bottom line of work in positive psychology.”

-Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005, p. 413)

### **Positive Interventions 101**

#### **What is a positive intervention?**

Seligman (2011) didn't just want positive psychology to be theoretical; he wanted it to be applicable. Indeed, positive psychology works to build what is good in life primarily through the creation and employment of positive interventions, or research-based intentional activities designed to enhance well-being (Seligman et al., 2005). Positive interventions are tools of change that can help people improve their lives in a variety of ways, from helping to form new habits to improving one's mood to boosting one's character strengths (Lyubomirsky, 2007). With regards to enhancing hope, for instance, research supports the efficacy of the “best possible self” intervention (Niemiec, 2017), in which writing about one's ideal future self is linked with immediate boosts in positive moods and increases in happiness several weeks thereafter (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

#### **What makes for an effective intervention?**

One goal of positive psychology is to come up with a consistent criteria of what renders positive interventions most effective. Lyubomirsky (2007) first and foremost highlights the importance of *person-activity fit* in choosing an intervention, as it takes into account individual needs, strengths, and lifestyles, offering a more personalized approach to happiness. Indeed, Lyubomirsky (2007) argues that, if there were to be a ‘secret’ to happiness after all, finding the interventions most suitable for oneself would be it. The rationale behind this is that people benefit more from interventions that they value and are self-motivated to perform as opposed to



those that they feel pressured to partake in (Brown & Ryan, 2015). Schueller (2014) also highlights the importance of individual differences and research findings that support these concerns as well. Indeed, Lyubomirsky (2007) found that participants who had a better fit with the “best possible self” intervention were more likely to: 1) experience it as being enjoyable and natural; 2) keep practicing the intervention after the fact; and consequently, 3) experience the largest gains in happiness. Despite these promising findings on the benefits of finding a good fit, however, Lyubomirsky (2007), acknowledges that people are still likely to experience roadblocks along the way and emphasizes the importance of variety if interventions are to be sustainable.

The impact of variety on intervention effectiveness is evidenced in broader scale empirical research (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Indeed, a meta-analysis showed that positive interventions are correlated with small to moderate increases in well-being and decreases in depressive symptoms, with variety possibly moderating these outcomes (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Specifically, variety may lead to longer lasting well-being through mitigating *hedonic adaptation* (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Hedonic adaptation is the process by which people adjust to boosts in well-being over time, preventing long-term happiness by way of two mechanisms: decreasing positive affect and increasing expectations. This process may be overcome by embracing variety. Indeed, people who experience a wider range of positive events and positive emotions attain both longer and larger boosts in well-being (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Individuals can create this variety in positive interventions by: 1) engaging in more than one intervention at once; 2) periodically changing the way they perform the interventions themselves; 3) cycling through different interventions; and 4) practicing interventions with others to capitalize on events and ideas they might not have thought of themselves (Bao &

Lyubomirsky, 2014). Variety is an important element in keeping positive interventions fresh.

Positive interventions are evidence-based tools that can help enhance people's daily lived experience. They are most effective and sustainable when they meet people's individual needs and lifestyles and when they allow room for variety. Evidence suggests that reading Harry Potter may qualify as an especially effective positive intervention through its ability to meet individual needs and its variety-filled content.

### **Fairytales as Positive Interventions.**

As a fairytale, Harry Potter may possess the unique quality of being able to meet individual needs on an incredibly broad scale. Indeed, child psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim (1976) contends that, in addressing universal human predicaments, fairytales meet individuals wherever they are in their psychological and emotional experience. In fact, Bettelheim (1976) argues that hardly anything is more enhancing or gratifying to adults and children alike than fairytales. Additionally, a central feature of fairytales is that they spark hope in people. Bettelheim's (1976) insights suggest that Harry Potter may not only be a good person-activity fit for people on a universal scale, but people can increase their hope by simply reading it.

### **Harry Potter as a positive intervention.**

#### **Harry Potter may improve well-being.**

Research indicates that reading Harry Potter may increase well-being, and thereby act as positive intervention, by activating positive emotions and engagement, and enhancing academic achievement (Hsu, Jacobs, Altmann, & Conrad, 2015; Dempster, Oliver, Sunderland, & Thistlethwaite, 2016). Indeed, participants in a fMRI experiment who read magical rather than non-magical passages of Harry Potter described the experience as being more enjoyable, while also experiencing heightened neural activity in the left amygdala, a brain region linked with

feelings of surprise and pleasure (Hsu et al., 2015b). It seems that the descriptions of magical events, full of novelty and unexpectedness, triggered these feelings within the participants (Hsu et al., 2015b), thus speaking to the power of variety in positive interventions and highlighting how the variety within the Harry Potter series may make it an especially effective positive intervention when it comes to sparking positive emotions and engaging readers. Harry Potter also appears to enhance well-being by way of achievement. In a small-scale study, pupils who identified themselves as Harry Potter “enthusiasts”, meaning that they had read four or more books in the series, reported that reading the novels had improved their reading abilities (Dempster et al., 2016). Indeed, their responses reflected enhancements in their *Literacy Self-Concepts* (LSC) in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, reading confidence, and creative writing inspiration. Literacy Self-Concept is a subcategory of *Academic Self-Concept* (ASC), which measures self-understanding with regards to one’s academic pursuits and skills. Since individuals with high academic self-concepts typically achieve highly, and Potter enthusiast reports indicated enhanced literacy self-concepts in several areas (Dempster et al., 2016), this suggests that reading Harry Potter may be associated with enhanced academic achievement, and thus well-being.

In light of the two studies discussed here, Harry Potter seems to qualify as a positive intervention. It appears to enhance three prominent pathways of Seligman’s (2011) well-being model, positive emotions, engagement, and achievement, and furthermore, appears to have variety already built-in. Based on this evidence, Harry Potter seems promising as an effective positive intervention. At the very least, these studies encourage further exploration of the well-being effects that reading Harry Potter may offer.

**Harry Potter appears to have immediate and lasting impact.**

Harry Potter does not just appear to be a positive intervention, but a *sustainable* one that offers long-term well-being benefits for its readers; indeed, it seems to impact readers in such a positive way in the moment so as to motivate their future actions as well (Dempster et al., 2016). In a small-scale, focus group study, the majority of primary and secondary-school Harry Potter readers, who had read at least one book in the series, reported that the books had motivated them to: 1) read more books in general; 2) try out books that were harder to read; and 3) read more fiction novels (Dempster et al., 2016), suggesting that the books had an impact beyond just the moment of reading them. Moreover, many children stated that reading all seven books in the series left them more confident to read other novels that they might not have explored otherwise, a finding that may have to do with the fact that the books get progressively longer as the protagonists grow up, with some books being around 700-800 pages (Dempster et al., 2016). The fact that the Harry Potter series contains seven books in itself implies that it may be a more sustainable intervention for readers who go on to complete the series, as it may be better able to hold people's attention over longer periods of time than other interventions. Even without having completed the series, however, this study (Dempster et al., 2016) suggests that reading Harry Potter may have long-term impact with regards to reading ability and confidence.

**Harry Potter can enhance social support and engagement.**

Harry Potter not only offers benefits to well-functioning kids and adults, but has sparked greater social support and engagement in the lives of youth struggling with mental illness in therapeutic settings as well. Colman Noctor (2006) offers a small-scale clinical example of how the Harry Potter series was incorporated into the psychotherapeutic group process for adolescents

ages 12-16, and how it enhanced their experience. While not everyone in the group was as familiar with Harry Potter at first, this actually sparked discussion and a sense of support in the group as the more well-versed members were excited to explain the assortment of themes and symbols to the other members of the group. Over time, this allowed these young individuals to discuss their emotional difficulties and challenges through the guise of the magical objects, characters, and themes of Harry Potter and insert themselves into the story. The degree of engagement Noctor (2006) witnessed was markedly different from anything that he had experienced before, thus illustrating Harry Potter's value to youth struggling with mental health issues, its use in seemingly unlikely settings, and its ability to activate Seligman's (2011) well-being pathways of relationships and engagement.

### **Harry Potter and Variety: The Spices of Life.**

Research indicates that positive interventions are more successful when there is variety (Lyubomirsky, 2007). In light of the empirical evidence discussed earlier, Harry Potter readers can create more variety by: 1) reading more than one Harry Potter book at once; 2) changing the way they read the books (silently, over audio, in a book club, out loud, or with an accent); 3) cycling through the books; and 4) reading the books with others. For readers who have already read the books many times, however, the suggestions indicated here offer hope that the experience needn't be any less magical. Indeed, long-time fans can and do infuse variety into their experiences with Harry Potter by expressing their creativity in creating costumes, attending camps and festivals, engaging in conversation starters, and other such activities. The podcast, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, serves as a wonderful example of how to specifically keep the reading of the books fresh with variety as well; indeed, its founders, Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, read the books chapter by chapter each week through different themes, like hope, love,

and happiness, as a means of sparking discussion. In the process of exploring the chapters, they share personal stories that match the week's theme, apply spiritual practices to the text, share the interpretations of listeners who call in, and even have live shows where followers can gather to read the text together. This podcast demonstrates that there are many ways to infuse variety while reading Harry Potter.

Though Harry Potter readers can intentionally cultivate more variety as they read the books, Harry Potter seems to be naturally imbued with variety as well. As each Harry Potter book can be thought of as a positive intervention on its own, the series offers variety simply by having seven different books to choose from. Moreover, Bettelheim's (1976) work highlights how simply rereading fairy tales can enhance variety; indeed, individuals who encounter fairy tales again typically replace old meanings with new meanings or expand on old meanings even further. Since Harry Potter can be viewed as a fairytale, simply rereading the Harry Potter books can activate variety if individuals adopt new meanings or appreciate new things along the way (Bettelheim, 1976; Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014). The variety of the Harry Potter series speaks to its sustainability as a positive intervention and indicates that Harry Potter can be continually leveraged during the ongoing process of cultivating well-being. More specifically, because variety entails experiencing a wider range of positive emotions (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014), it is highly likely that, with all the possibilities presented, Harry Potter readers will also experience greater hope in their lives.

Harry Potter appears to be a positive intervention that enhances key aspects of well-being in a number of ways. From activating positive emotions and enjoyment, enhancing achievement, and influencing how kids feel about reading to enhancing youth engagement and social support in the therapeutic healing process, it seems apt to meet individual needs, create immediate and

lasting impact, and offer ample opportunities for variety. Given this evidence, Harry Potter appears to be an incredibly effective positive intervention that serves as a promising vehicle of accessing hope.

“The last words Albus Dumbledore spoke to the pair of us?”

“Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him,” said Lupin calmly.

-J.K. Rowling (2007, p.72), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

### **Tying it all together: Harry Potter and Hope**

Harry Potter’s positive impact across situations illustrates the many ways through which it is a positive intervention that may offer its readers hope. Indeed, the evidence indicates that Harry Potter offers its readers hope in a more two-dimensional sense: 1) first, it offers hope in a more transactional way, as many kids feel that in reading the books, they have done something challenging, perhaps leaving them more hopeful that they can do more challenging things in the future; 2) second, it offers readers hope in a more relational and engaging way, through its imperfect characters, magical content and themes. With regards to the more transactional element of hope, Dempster and colleagues (2016) indicate that even reading just one Harry Potter book encourages kids to seek out more challenging books at a later time. Since high-hope individuals are more inclined to select stretch goals that are slightly harder than goals achieved prior (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015), this suggests that reading Harry Potter may facilitate higher levels of hope in children that directly influence their future actions. In fact, reading each ascending Harry Potter book in order may create natural stretch goals for kids, as the books tend to get bulkier and more mature in content and language as they go on. Indeed, children who read all seven books reported positive effects on both their reading ability and confidence as a result,

demonstrating that they were aware of their growth and *knew* that they had benefited from the experience (Dempster et al., 2016); this is important in that positive change in individuals is considered to be an important facilitator of hope (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015).

Harry Potter also provides hope through the ease with which its readers seem to be able to connect with and engage with the characters, content, and themes of the novels. Indeed, fMRI experiments mentioned throughout the paper illustrate how Harry Potter can engage readers, activate empathy, and elicit feelings of surprise and pleasure (Hsu et al., 2015a; Hsu et al., 2015b). This second, more relational element of hope is especially evident in the psychotherapeutic process for youth struggling with mental illness that Noctor (2006) describes. For instance, group members were able to express their fears through relating what shapes each of their *boggarts*, dark magical creatures that take the form of whatever one fears most, would take; this discussion bolstered the sense of support in the group as members helped each other think of ways to make their fears seem less scary (Noctor, 2006). Not only is this an example of how Harry Potter content can spark pathways thinking in youth, an important facet of hope theory, but it illustrates how Harry Potter can help facilitate the more supportive environment that is required of therapeutic settings if individuals are to develop hope (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Moreover, this illustrates how Harry Potter as a positive intervention can be incorporated into the therapeutic process in an engaging and creative manner in which individuals may be better able to heal. Taken together, positive psychology and psychology as we typically know it, can function better (Rashid, Howes, & Loudon, 2017) and may be better able to offer those they seek to help more hope that they will be able to find it.

All in all, Harry Potter seems to intersect well with hope theory, the broaden and build theory of positive emotions, and research on character strengths. Indeed, it appears to help



readers set new goals for reading and motivate them to move towards their goals, broaden social and intellectual resources within individuals and boost their resilience, and help readers practice building their character strength of hope by sparking pathways thinking. Before Dumbledore dies, he tells the Order of the Phoenix members fighting against Lord Voldemort, “Harry is the best hope we have. Trust him” (Dumbledore, 2007, p. 72). Notably, the phoenix as a symbol of hope is not only represented in the name of the resistance movement against Voldemort, “The Order of the Phoenix,” but it serves as a symbol of hope throughout the books; twice, in fact, it saves Harry’s life and helps bring him back to safety (Rowling, 1998; Rowling, 2000). In the fourth book, for instance, Harry recalls how Dumbledore’s pet phoenix, Fawkes, “had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost” in the chamber of secrets (Rowling, 2000, p. 583). The phoenix then helps Harry escape Voldemort for a second time at the end of the fourth book, as illustrated earlier in the paper (see “Hope Broadens-and-Builds” section), (Rowling, 2000):

“And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air...It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song. It was the sound of hope to Harry...the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life...He felt as though the song were inside of him instead of just around him...It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear...*Don't break the connection* [...] He concentrated every particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed...and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way...and it was Voldemort’s wand that was vibrating extra hard now...Voldemort who looked astonished, almost fearful...” (pp. 664-665)

Just as hope saves Harry in the form of the phoenix throughout the series, hope saves the broader wizarding world as symbolized by Harry, as his existence inspires people to keep fighting against Voldemort. Likewise, “Harry [may be one of] the best hope[s] we have” (Rowling, 2007, p.72) in the non-wizarding world when it comes to positive interventions as well.

"We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better."

- J.K. Rowling, Harvard Commencement Address, June 5, 2008

### **Applying it: Hope Spotting and Harry Potter**

Research suggests that looking at Harry Potter through the lens of hope would serve as a promising positive intervention. Niemiec (2017) posits that intentionally spotting strengths in fictional characters can help individuals build the same qualities within themselves. Perhaps Harry Potter readers can more intentionally cultivate the strength of hope within themselves by asking questions based off of Niemiec’s (2017) work as they read along, such as: 1) “How does Harry (or any character) keep his hope up throughout the series?”; and 2) “How does hope help Harry (or any character) in challenging times?”. Readers can then ask these same questions about themselves: 1) “What helps me maintain my hope levels?”; and 2) “How has hope helped me through difficult times?” Bruce Smith, a positive psychology professor at the University of New Mexico, also suggests asking students what characters they relate to most and how they see them using their strengths (B. Smith, personal communication, February 22, 2017). Furthermore, he has students complete the “best possible self” exercise, which is an intervention for increasing hope, at the end of his course, but he specifically has his students imagine what fictional characters of their choosing might say to them in constructing their best possible future. For

instance, Harry Potter readers could ask themselves, “What would Dumbledore tell me about hope?” or “What would Harry tell me is the most important thing when considering the future?” Based on Smith’s (personal communication, February, 22, 2017) suggestions, another possible question that Harry Potter readers might ask would be: “What is most important to Harry (or any character), and how does hope help him get there?” Again, they can then apply this same question personally: “What is most important to me and how can hope help me get there?” (B. Smith, personal communication, February 22, 2017). While it is important for readers to answer these questions for themselves, J.K. Rowling (2005) offers some explicit examples of how hope can play out in this way throughout the series. For instance, at the end of the sixth book, Ginny explains to Harry how she always had hope that he might return her affections: “I never really gave up on you,” she said. “Not really...I always hoped” (Rowling, 2005, p. 647). This suggests the power of hope in helping us move towards what we most desire in life. Reading Harry Potter through the lens of hope can give it a new edge and appeal that it may not have had before. Indeed, researchers have conducted studies suggesting that this is possible. Harry Potter offers one more place to do so and serves as one giant hope spotting opportunity.

### **Parents and teachers can help kids build hope.**

Parents and teachers can merge Harry Potter with other established hope interventions to help their children build hope. Indeed, Harry Potter has blurred the edges between family-life and education (Dempster et al., 2016). Among its colossal following of adult readers are parents of school-age youth (Gupta, 2009), who often play a hand in launching their kids’ Potter journeys. Teachers further use the Harry Potter series to introduce archetypes and symbolism to their students (Kelley, 2013) because of its familiarity. Indeed, being the cultural phenomena that it is, Harry Potter serves as the ideal *cultural tool* (Vygotsky, 1978; Dempster et al., 2016), or

mechanism for sparking interaction, learning, and cognitive development. Especially given the evidence that the greater the familiarity with a cultural tool is, the greater the potential to learn from it is as well (Vygotsky, 1978), Harry Potter may serve as one of the most promising possibilities that we have in terms of cultivating hope in an accessible and practical manner.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although evidence indicates that the Harry Potter series can be thought of as a positive intervention that enhances hope in its readers, further research needs to be conducted in order to be confident in this speculation. Indeed, Bruno Bettelheim (1976) called for experiments to be conducted so as to empirically validate the benefits of engaging with fairytales as well. As Martin Seligman (personal communication, September 9, 2017) asserts, people put into practice and take seriously what is measured. Therefore, it is important to empirically validate the well-being benefits of reading Harry Potter if we are to encourage people to make use of this untapped tool as a positive intervention. In an effort to show that Harry Potter is a positive intervention and a pathway to hope, I believe that we need further research specifically investigating whether there is a direct arrow between reading Harry Potter and enhancing hope. We need to address the question “does reading Harry Potter help people become more hopeful?” through empirical means. Indeed, it is important to understand how Harry Potter may have impacted the well-being of millions of people worldwide and how it can continue to do so today. Moreover, it is important to understand how the books may inspire hope in people, as hope appears to be a fundamental agent of change in our efforts to improve both ourselves and the world at large. Some preliminary steps in this investigation could involve creating a survey on mturk in which adults can take the “Dispositional Hope Scale” (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015) as well as answer questions regarding the Harry Potter series such as: 1) “Have you ever read a Harry Potter

book?"; 2) "If yes, which ones have you read?" 3) "How old were you when you read it/them?"; and 3) "How many times have you read them?" Perhaps a simple survey like this would allow us to establish whether or not there is a correlation between reading Harry Potter and hope. With regards to conducting experiments, college campuses offer ample opportunities for this, and child development labs may allow researchers to include kids in this endeavor as well by using the "Children's Hope Scale" (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Indeed, an experimental group could read a chapter of a Harry Potter book in the lab and take the Dispositional Hope Scale, while a control group could simply perform the latter of the two. Researchers could also test whether focusing questions help build hope in individuals. Another experimental format could involve a control group simply reading a chapter of Harry Potter as compared with an experimental group reading the same chapter, but answering questions regarding hope in addition before taking the hope scale. It is important to leverage empirical investigation in considering the relationship between Harry Potter and hope if we truly want to be able to offer easily accessible and wide-scale interventions for society at large.

### **Conclusion**

There are several features indicating that reading Harry Potter not only qualifies as a positive intervention, but as a means of enhancing hope in its readers as well. Over the last 20 years, millions of people have read and enjoyed reading the books in the Harry Potter series, but may have never thought about or realized the personal benefits available to them. Now, with the benefit of looking at these books through a positive psychology lens, we have a better idea as to why reading this series may have contributed, even if only in a small way, to improving the wellbeing of those millions of readers.

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