

Wish

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Abstract. This entry proposes a sociocultural approach to wishes and wish-making, distinct from existing psychoanalytical and cognitive discussions of this phenomenon. It considers wish-making as part and parcel of everyday life and one of the main ways we have to engage with the future and attempt to construct it according to our needs and desires. Wishes are not signs of intrinsic irrationality, nor markers of pathological functioning; instead, they are embedded in human action and connect us to the possible, to others, and to the world. The entry starts by reviewing research into different types of wishes before considering in more detail theories and studies of wish-fulfilment and wishful thinking. It concludes with a reinterpretation of wishes as having their own scope, rationality, and as deeply ethical.

Keywords: wish, wish fulfilment, wishful-thinking, sociocultural psychology, possibility

Wishes and wish-making are fundamental parts of a human type of existence, capturing something essential about our connection to the world not only as is, but as we would like it to be. Through the act of wishing, we express a human desire to making the world more hospitable, more appealing, to (re)organize it in ways that helps us grow and flourish. Everyday language is filled with expressions related to wish-making and wish-fulfilment, including ‘do as you wish’, ‘having a wish list’, ‘your wish is my command’, ‘wishing someone well’, or ‘careful what you wish for’. The last one points to the fact that there is always a gap and a point of tension between the wish as imagined and formulated and the wish as real or enacted. The latter has sometimes more unexpected and far-reaching consequences than the former. The wisdom needed to choose one’s wishes well is a common theme in stories, from the legends of Greek and Roman antiquity (e.g., the myth of Pygmalion) to medieval and more modern tales (e.g., the story of Snow White or the tale of Aladdin). Wishing on a shooting star, when blowing the candles on a birthday cake, or tossing a coin into a fountain are all small, everyday gestures related to wish-making.

This is how, today, we have in different fields of psychological science a rich vocabulary related to wishes, one that includes the inter-connected notions of need, drive, impulse, instinct, resistance, motive, and so on (Ghent, 2002). And yet, lay uses of the term are often over-extended, making ‘I wish’ become almost synonymous with ‘I want’. As such,

different authors have been eager to specify that wishes are not intentions (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985), desires (Wellman & Woolley, 1990), hopes (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010) or, indeed, needs (Ghent, 2002). This lack of clarity made especially those researchers following the behaviourist tradition determined to either specify wishes better (Watson, 1916) or to replace altogether this notion (e.g., with ‘demand’; Seeman & Buck, 1952). Even those working within the psychoanalytic orientation, whose conceptual system is premised partially on wishes and related concepts, expressed at times frustration with the term, proposing, for instance, to use instead the wider notion of ‘motivational systems’ (Ghent, 2002). These systems prepare the organism to adaptively respond to either appetitive or aversive stimulation, determining the course of learning (see Lang & Bradley, 2010).

The difficulty in defining what a wish is comes partially from a series of misconceptions regarding their nature, in particular the supposed dichotomies between wishes and reality, on the one hand, and wishes and reason, on the other. Wishful thinking, a topic that will be reviewed later on in this entry, is commonly assumed to distance us from reality, biasing our perceptions and leading us to potential errors in judgement. As George Orwell (1945) famously noted on the topic, people can foresee the future only when it coincides with their own wishes. But this doesn’t mean that wishes are actively disconnecting us from reality – on the contrary, they ‘grow’ out of it and respond to it, being at all times in a close interplay (Babad, Hills & O’Driscoll, 1992). Related to this first misconception is the often-implicit idea that wishes are driven by emotion and, as such, frequently irrational. For example, the topic of infantile wishes and fantasy are widely studied within psychoanalysis (Eagle, 1990), including the relation between wish-making and magical thinking (Vikan & Clausen, 1993). All of these ultimately bring the topic of wishes close to that of pathology and pathological functioning rather than ‘normal’, adaptive and mundane acts.

This entry will strongly argue for the latter and against the former by proposing a sociocultural (rather than psychoanalytical) account of wishes. This account starts from the basic observation that wish-making is part and parcel of everyday life and one of the main ways we have to engage with the future and attempt to construct it according to our needs and desires. This is not an irrational or pathological type of activity, even when (as we will see), wishful thinking can indeed bias our perceptions and, at times, lead to deception or failure. Wishes dwell in the space between motives, emotions and the imagination, as well as that between self and others. Indeed, as I will argue towards the end, while wish-making opens up a new horizon of possibility in our lives, this horizon is very much influenced by societal norms, cultural conventions and power relations. In other words, what is experienced as a

highly personal act of wish-making is, at once, a psychological and sociocultural activity. Wishes, I argue, are not as general as desires or needs and yet not as specific as intentions or goals. By occupying this ‘in-between’ space, they both orient our thinking about a possible future and allow it to be flexible and, thus, to build futures rather than singular visions of what could or should be. Last but not least, wished futures tend to be more or less likely, sometimes very close to what is achievable, other times explicitly impossible (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). Either way, wish-making remains motivating for the person, infused by affect and forged within the (inter)actions that make up our social and cultural existence.

The entry starts with a brief review of types of wishes that are commonly studied in psychology and related disciplines, before discussing wish-fulfilment as the cornerstone of the psychoanalytic approach to dreams, motivation, and the functioning of the psychic. Wishful thinking is discussed next, an area of research informed much more by cognitive and neuroscience theories and methods and, as such, ‘biased’ towards discovering errors and biases in our (wishful) engagement with the world. I end by arguing that the latter should be considered as much more than a sign of biased or irrational thinking and, drawing on Aristotle, show that wish-making is a social and ethical form of anticipating the future.

Wish research

Over the past decades there has been increasing research into wishes and wish-making, underpinned by various conceptual frameworks and covering a wider range of processes and domains. In this section, I will review three main areas covered by ‘wish researchers’, namely development and the life course, mental-health, and society. It is important to note from the start, though, that oftentimes the notion of wish is used as a synonym for desire, need or intention and, as such, many of the papers reviewed below lack a proper reflection on the nature and functions of wishes beyond specific cases.

When it comes to human development, a variety of wishes are assumed to play an important part in our lives from birth to old age. As I briefly mentioned above, infantile wishes are an area of study in its own right, one we will return to in our next section. For the moment, we can focus on other wishes that have developmental effects, for example the wishful identification of young children and teenagers with different role models. Konijn, Nije Bijvank and Bushman (2007) considered the ‘darker’ sides of these processes when they chose to study wishes and identification in relation to violent video games and their consequences for aggression in adolescent boys. Unsurprisingly, this study showed that subsequent acts of aggression were more intense for the boys who not only played violent

games, but wished to become like the characters they played. And this when game exposure, trait aggressiveness, and sensations seeking were all controlled for. Remaining within the same general stage of development, Parker, Thoemmes, Duineveld and Salmela-Aro (2015) studied the psychological and academic outcomes of wishing (or not) to take a gap year (i.e., a year of break or exploration between the end of school and university enrolment). Existing theories and research point, in this context, to both positive and negative consequences of this. The study referred to, conducted in two different contexts (Finland and Australia), showed no differences between students who wish and don't wish to take such a year in terms of a variety of outcomes (e.g., goal commitment, effort, expectations of attainment and strain, actual university enrolment, career prospects, life satisfaction). But it did interestingly show that gap-year students were more likely to drop out of a university degree.

Moving to the adult age, considerable research has focused on the wish for a child for some decades. For instance, Jeker, Micioni, Ruspa, Zeeb and Campana (1988) examined this wish and its relation to infertility in the case of 116 couples. Starting from the assumption that infertile parents may present emotional conflicts when it comes to wishing to have a child, the authors carried out psychodynamic interviews and found, indeed, severe conflicts especially in female participants with no clinically defined organic infertility factors (a relationship less evident in their male partners). Another population under investigation is represented by undergraduate students who are feminists and their wish for a child. Gerson (1984) found, in this regard, that feminism was negatively related to the motivation for motherhood and made salient mostly the costs rather than benefits of parenthood. Of course, such results need to be placed in context, in view of society's changing conceptions of gender roles. Finally, another 'adult' wish under investigations is that of continuing to work or stopping, again in view of changing conceptions about the meaning of work. Harpaz (2002) found, in the Israeli context, that the vast majority of people expressed a wish to continue working even if they won a big lottery prize and that key factors in wishing not to work anymore were, among others, a strong instrumental orientation, low work centrality, organizational obligation, and low occupational satisfaction.

Finally, in old age what has been mostly investigated are wishes to move (especially their abandonment in forced immobility) and the wish to die. The former, explored in a research by Coulter (2013), showed that the risk of abandoning the wish to move raises considerably with age, "suggesting that the well-documented residential rootedness of older people is not solely volitional" (p. 1944). In addition, it is not only age but ethnicity and income level that are strongly linked to fulfilling a moving wish. The wish to die or suicidal

ideation is unfortunately common in people who get to a very old age. Barnow and Linden (2002) studied this phenomenon in a German sample and found co-occurrence with major depression or other psychiatric disorders, high age, being a woman, and negative life conditions (e.g., living in a nursing home and being unable to move out).

These studies connect well to the second main area of research – mental health. In this field, Tiggemann, Gardiner and Slater (2000) explored the wish to be thinner in adolescent girls and concluded, based on focus groups, that sociocultural influences, especially the media, exert the strongest pressures to be thin. But, importantly, young girls also show an unexpected level of sophistication in how they understand the role of the media on body image and self-understandings. In other words, wishing to be thinner doesn't necessarily mean being dissatisfied with one's body, at least upon further reflection. Related to the above, dieting wishes have been researched by Johannessen Oettingen and Mayer (2012), who showed that mentally contrasting this wish with present reality and constraints promotes a commitment to feasible goals, while mentally indulging in a desired future does not (i.e., in the former condition, participants reported having eaten fewer calories overall and fewer high-calorie foods, as well as being more physically active). Thus, the need to account for present obstacles in order to better define our wishes and increase their chance of fulfilment.

Other mental health concerns relate to the wish to be held and the wish to die. The first one, studied by Stein and Sanfilipo (1985), is especially present in people with high levels of depression and in women. However, it is to be noted that both sexes reported such wishes but, if for women this wish is an invariant across levels of depression, only males who described themselves as more depressed (than other males) expressed feelings of dependency and, as a consequence, a more intense wish to be held. Finally, the wish to live and to die has been mainly studied in cases of suicide. Brown, Steer, Henriques and Beck (2005) discussed these two wishes as engaging in an internal struggle whose outcomes have a determining effect when it comes to suicidal behaviour. And yet, having such an internal struggle relates already to lower suicidal intent scores than a unidirectional drive towards death alone (see Kovacs & Beck, 1977), showing the importance of a heterogeneous motivational stance.

Last but not least, most research on wish-making and society relate to votes, politics, and the prediction of election outcomes (a topic we will return to in the section on wishful thinking). To give just one example, Babad and Yacobos (1993) focused on wishful thinking in Israeli voters in the 1988 election and showed substantial effects of this kind of thinking. Ultimately, predictions of election outcomes as well as the interpretation of events depended greatly on political wishes and preferences. At the same time, political allegiance did nuance

the intensity of wishful thinking, suggesting again that community and identity variables play a role in what and how we wish for, including in politics. And this holds also for those wishes that go counter to expectation. For instance, Leshem (2017) studied the wish for peace in an intractable conflict like the Israeli-Palestinian one. Focusing only on the Jewish-Israeli side, he found that, while hopes for peace are low but found across different definitions of peace, wishes for peace are more dynamic, higher and, for right-wingers, dependent on what kind of peace was proposed (the most concrete definition, the less right-wings wished for it). Wishes, ultimately, are both shaped by and continuously shape one's political orientation.

Wish-fulfilment

The topic of wish-fulfilment deserves its own separate section given, on the one hand, its old historical roots (arguably it marks some of the first scientific studies of wishes) and, on the other, the distinct theoretical underpinning of these studies. If the research referred to above drew on multiple conceptual frameworks, from clinical and individual differences to social and political, wish-fulfilment is firmly grounded in psychoanalytic or psychodynamic thinking. This has its origin in Freud's famous study of dreams and his assumptions that dreams – one of the 'royal' ways to our unconscious – are a form of wish-fulfilment. In his words, "the content of the dream is thus the fulfilment of a wish; its motive is a wish" (Freud, 1900, p. 20). According to Freud, this is easier to recognize in the case of some dreams that directly respond to a wish we remember when aware, and more difficult for others, especially anxiety-dreams. And yet, the latter are some of the most fruitful ones for a psychoanalyst given that "there is always the possibility that even our painful and terrifying dreams may, upon interpretation, prove to be wish-fulfilments" (p. 33). As such, a painful or terrifying dream, instead of invalidating the hypothesis of wish-fulfilment, makes us wonder even more as to what kind of wish is being met by feeling sad or frightened. "Wherever a wish-fulfilment is unrecognisable and disguised there must be present a tendency to defend oneself against this wish, and in consequence of this defence the wish is unable to express itself save in a distorted form" (p. 37). In fact, for Freud, dreams play two main roles. Because of the hallucinatory fulfilment of oftentimes unconscious wishes, they provide our psychic a 'safety valve', discharging instinctual energies. And, because they also preserve our desire to sleep by transforming sleep disturbing stimuli, dreams are equally the guardians of sleep.

Freud intuited from 1900 that children's dreams, often simpler, give the best examples of wish-fulfilment, an assumption that received empirical support more than a century later in studies such as the one by Colace (2013). He traced not only the frequency and types of wish-

fulfilment in the dreams of young children, but also the daytime experiences these dreams most probably referred to. The findings clearly show that children's dreams most often fulfil a recent, daytime wish, especially when associated with an intense affective state. In fact, dreams seemed to resolve the affective state, something that Colace formulated as the 'affective-reestablishment hypothesis'. Combining psychoanalytic insight with neuroscience research shows greater activity during dreaming in areas of the brain involved in the reactivation of affective components and memories. As such, dreams and the wishes embedded within them dissipate the emotional charge accumulated during daytime and reduce next-day subjective emotionality. According to Colace:

“Through the elaboration of daytime affective experience, the dream allows the child to obtain emotional restoration and to continue sleeping undisturbed. In other words, wish-fulfillment dreams resolve an affective state and provide ‘affective reestablishment.’ In accordance with this interpretation, we note that the children often appeared calm and serene while reporting these wish-fulfillment dreams” (p. 167).

Just to note before the end that wish-fulfilment research doesn't only relate to dreams or draw on Freudian notions. There is another strand of studies that consider the actual fulfilment of wishes and its role, especially the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses who are made true by parents or charities (see Ewing, 2009; Darlington, Heule & Passchier, 2013; Galinsky, 2014). These studies point to an interesting set of findings, for example the fact that the fulfilment of a special wish might provide the child with a sense of the future and can ease suffering and sorrow both for the child and the family (especially when receiving support by professionals, given that the wish also signifies the seriousness of the illness). Overall, these studies indicate the importance of empathy and of nurturing dreams and hopes in those who suffer. But is such wishful kind of thinking always positive?

Wishful thinking

Wishful thinking is perhaps the topic that has been studied most extensively, at least within the cognitive tradition. In simple terms, it designates “a desirability effect as the inflation of the judged probability of desirable events or the diminution of the judged probability of undesirable events” (Bar-Hillel & Budescu, 1995, p. 71). Even more briefly, it is “people's tendency to believe what they wish to be true” (Trope, Gervy & Liberman, 1997, p. 105). Different authors tried to specify this concept further, by distinguishing it from motivated

reasoning (Krizan & Windschitl, 2009) and self-deception (Szabados, 1973). When it comes to being overly optimistic, Vosgerau (2010), clarifies that wishful thinking refers to overoptimism about future events that are unrelated to the person's performance (in contrast to what we call overconfidence). In any case, it is widely assumed that wishful thinking encompasses a broad range of phenomena and that, while it participates in some forms of pathology, it is certainly not limited to the mentally ill (Trope, Gervy & Liberman, 1997). In fact, for some, all thinking is wishful thinking (Kruglanski, Jasko & Friston, 2020), by which they mean all thinking is motivated, while others see it as more restricted in scope, arguing that people can be both overly optimistic and pessimistic about the future (Vosgerau, 2010).

One of the typical assumptions of a cognitive approach to wishes and wishful thinking is that they can easily bias us, inclining individuals to wrongly estimate the likelihood of a desired future, i.e., overestimate the probability of favourable outcomes and underestimate the one of unfavourable outcomes. In this way, an association is made between wishful thinking and irrationality or, at the very least, the assumption that wish-making can distort reality. However, not everyone supports this view; for instance, Neuman, Rafferty and Griffiths (2014) make the point that, actually wishful thinking can help us sometimes make better decisions, especially when we have limited cognitive resources to evaluate the future. Through simulations of decision-making processes, they demonstrate how including a bias towards wishful thinking can lead to better performance across a range of decision-making environments. This is because, in fact, calculating the probabilities of everything that is possible is computationally intractable and wishful thinking compensates for this. This outcome, of course, depends on time and resource constraints. "As the horizon that the agent can consider increases, the gain for an optimistic policy decreases, and optimism eventually becomes detrimental to performance" (p. 1214). Overall, though, instead of an error, wishful thinking seems more to be an adaptive strategy we all use, at least once in a while.

How does this 'strategy' develop? Vikan and Clausen (1993), based on previous research, assumed that children between the ages of 4 and 6 believe that people can be controlled either by wishful thinking or magic, on the one hand, and more realistic means (like rewards and punishments) on the other. What they found in their study is that magical behaviour was considered more efficient than wishing, and that emotion could influence more than thinking. This is, once more, seen as a bias leading to inaccurate conclusions. For instance, it is known that pre-schoolers typically overestimate their own performance across a wide range of tasks. Schneider (1998) showed that, actually, over-predictions are rather due to wishful thinking than poor metacognition, and that they were more frequent for unfamiliar

compared to familiar tasks. Research on adults is even wider in scope. Gordon, Franklin and Beck (2005), for example, demonstrated a relation between wishful thinking and memory in that people have a bias to attribute desirable predictions to reliable sources and undesirable ones to unreliable sources. Also, that wishful thinking effects depend on retrieval processes and that wishes concerning one event can produce a source memory error for others. Similar effects have been found in social research, for instance, where the likelihood of in-group members to be better in a competition is judged higher than the likelihood of competitors (Price, 2000). Finally, there is as well some neuroscience research into wishful thinking, ‘locating’ it in the activity [comprising parts](#) of the [left inferior occipital and fusiform gyri](#) cluster [with functional connectivities of this cluster with the human reward system](#) (Aue, Nusbaum & Cacioppo, 2012). [This interesting MRI study asked participants to predict the likelihood of their favourite and least favourite team winning a football game.](#)

In terms of domains, wishful thinking has been documented in a variety of fields, oftentimes with problematic effects. Seybert and Bloomfield (2009) documented wishful betting in financial markets, within a laboratory setting. They also showed that market interaction increases rather than decrease wishful thinking, leading often to contagion. Babad and Katz (1991) had already evidenced that favourable outcomes are considered more likely for preferred teams, for example in soccer stadiums and at betting stations (see also Babad, 1987). Moreover, explicit instructions to be objective did not reduce wishful thinking, fans often betting emotionally and against their financial interest. Elections have also been researched in view of the same phenomenon, and findings here show that, indeed, there is a strong link between preference (wish) and expectation (prediction) (see Uhlaner & Grofman, 1986; Babad Hills & O’Driscoll, 1992; Babad, 1997; Krizan, Miller & Johar, 2010). Once more, this was often maintained even when the instruction to be as objective as possible was formulated and when financial rewards were promised for an accurate prediction. More mundane phenomena, such as procrastination, seem to be related to wishful thinking as well. Wishful thinkers procrastinated when expecting an unpleasant, but not a pleasant task while low wishful thinkers did not procrastinate (Sigall, Kruglanski & Fyock, 2000).

Wishes and possibility

Regardless of the fact that psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches are highly distinct from each other, they do seem to converge when it comes to specific assumptions about wishes and wish-making. In both literatures, wish fulfilment and wishful thinking seem to be driven by irrational rather than rational forces. However, while psychoanalysis sees wish fulfilment,

including through dreams, as part of ‘normal’ functioning, cognitivists are by and large inclined to consider wishful thinking a bias that leads to inaccuracies and errors.

The sociocultural account proposed at the start rejects both the irrationality of wish-making and its relation to errors. While it might well be the case that, in specific contexts, wishful thinking doesn’t help us predict outcomes realistically, this doesn’t mean that its function is to mislead us. Instead of dichotomising our understanding of wishes along the lines of reality – fantasy, normality – pathology, and accuracy – error, it would be more useful to return to the core of what wishes ‘accomplish’, which is relate us to the future and to the possible. And this engagement is never reduced to thinking processes or emotional reactions alone. It is part and parcel of our actions in and on the world, and the outcomes we envision for such actions. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, addressed this issue when he related human action to choice, deliberation, and wish (see Mele, 1984). For him, the origin of action is choice and choice, in turn, depends on desire (wish) and on reasoning with a view to an end (deliberation). While choice and deliberation received considerable attention in unpacking the Aristotelian ethics, wishing has not. Mele (1984) considers this a serious shortcoming, given that wishes relate to autonomy, a property that is essential for any theory of human action. Even more important, for Aristotle wishing was related to rationality and goodness given that ‘we wish only for that we think to be good’ and that ‘wish is the only form of desire found in the rational part of the soul’ (pp. 139-140). This is clearly distinct from what psychoanalysts and especially cognitivists made of wishes and wish-makers. It is because wishes are desires which the person identifies and, as such, reflect at least in part the kind of person he or she would like to be. In this way, for Aristotle, wish-making is a form of action that involves the ethical as it directs us to possible futures we construct as good.

A direct link to possibility was also made by Miceli and Castelfranchi (2010) in their discussion of hope and wish. For the two authors, hope includes a “belief of possibility about an event p , together with a goal or wish that p occurs” (p. 255); in other words, wishes are an integral part of hoping and, in some ways, reduced to an expectation. As we have discussed before, however, wishes are much more than goals – they are orientations towards the future that is, at once, open and imagined as hospitable or favourable. Hope and wish can co-occur in building this kind of imagination, but they can also remain separate. Miceli and Castelfranchi interestingly bring in the notion of uncertainty to qualify hope, uncertainty both about the positive outcome and one’s self-efficacy in bringing it about. The fact that imagined futures are never fully under our control has a big part to play in wish-making as well, where uncertainty might in fact increase rather than decrease the intensity of one’s

wish. This is not ‘illogical’ wishful thinking, but a fundamentally human act of dwelling within the future and the possible. “As soon as some wish arises in our mind, the sea of possibilities comes to the forefront, together with a sea of consequent hopes” (p. 259).

In the end, it is important to note as well that, according to the sociocultural approach, society and its institutions also play a determining role in what we wish and hope for. From an early age, fairy tales shape our imagination of what is possible, allowed, and what kind of wishes can find fulfilment (Rikxin & White, 1913). Play and games further specify the universe of what is possible to think about and to wish for. The ‘sea of possibilities’ mentioned just above is, for some people and in some circumstances, extremely narrow, even inexistent. And yet, the possibility of wishing things to be different is always present. Even when we don’t exactly have the means and resources to fully understand what this different future might involve, we can still wish for change. This is the ‘hidden’ energy behind most social movements and forms of activism and it is also a valuable source of transformation for the self, within everyday life. Wishes might not always come true but the act of wishing, in and of itself, reflects the power to envision the world differently than it is. And this capacity is essential for our existence as agentic, social, and ethical beings.

Cross-references: activism, agency, counterfactual thinking, culture, emotion, hope, imagination, possible in psychology, uncertainty.

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