

Knabe, Andreas

**Book Review — Published Version**

[Rezension] Carol Graham: the power of hope, 200 pages.  
Princeton University Press, 2023. \$ 30.00

Journal of Economics

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Springer Nature

*Suggested Citation:* Knabe, Andreas (2024) : [Rezension] Carol Graham: the power of hope, 200 pages. Princeton University Press, 2023. \$ 30.00, Journal of Economics, ISSN 1617-7134, Springer Vienna, Vienna, Vol. 143, Iss. 3, pp. 307-310,  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00712-024-00884-9>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/315060>

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## Carol Graham: the power of hope, 200 pages. Princeton University Press, 2023. \$ 30.00

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Published online: 9 September 2024  
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Over the past decades, two significant developments, suggesting that Western societies are grappling with profound pressures, have emerged. First, the so-called “deaths of despair” - deaths caused by suicide, drug overdoses, and alcohol abuse - have risen dramatically in the United States. In 2023, more than 200,000 people died from these causes in the U.S., about three times as many as twenty years earlier. While such deaths of despair were initially particularly prevalent among middle-aged White Americans without a college degree, they have also recently spread to other demographic groups. Second, right-wing populism has gained strength in both the U.S. and Europe, as evidenced by the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the rise of populist parties such as the AfD in Germany and the Rassemblement National in France. These developments reflect a deep personal discontent many people in these countries are experiencing.

Of course, there was no dearth of crises in the last two decades. The global financial crises of 2007/2008, the European sovereign debt crisis after 2010, the Covid pandemic as well as high energy costs and inflation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine all posed or still pose economic challenges. Yet, economic factors cannot easily explain the aforementioned adverse developments on their own. The actual economic situation is objectively not as bad as widely perceived. Unemployment rates in the U.S. and the EU remain on historically low levels, whilst real GDP per capita is higher than ever in these regions.

To understand the divergence between individual well-being and economic progress, one has to look “beyond GDP.” Correspondingly, a new field of research has emerged that aims at complementing economic indicators with other measures of well-being. Interdisciplinary research has shown that measures of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction or emotional experiences, can be reliably measured and contain economically meaningful information. Subjective well-being is now reg-

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ularly measured in many countries (increasingly even by official statistical agencies) and communicated to policymakers and the public.

Carol Graham is one of the leading scholars in this field and a pioneer of the economics of well-being. She has made highly influential contributions to questions of inequality and social justice, focusing not only on developed countries but extending her research to developing countries as well. In earlier works, she has provided strong evidence that social inequalities not only manifest themselves within differences in material consumption, but that material poverty is also accompanied by stress, uncertainty, and lower life satisfaction. Poverty could result in a vicious cycle, as living under these conditions could lead to unfavorable economic decisions perpetuating these dire economic circumstances.

In her new book, *The Power of Hope*, Carol Graham builds on this research and argues forcefully that the scope of commonly used subjective well-being indicators should be extended by another critical dimension – hope. In her research, she has found that among various well-being markers, hope is the one that exhibits the largest differences between different demographic groups. In line with their higher affectedness by deaths of despair, she finds that poor White Americans, in particular, exhibit lower degrees of hope than other groups. Hopelessness could thus be an early-warning indicator for looming social problems. Since hope seems to be such an essential prerequisite for many important outcomes, Graham advocates for measuring it routinely and comprehensively and for reorienting public policy by prioritizing society's well-being in addition to economic objectives.

In the first chapters of the book, Carol Graham provides an easy-to-read, comprehensive, and systematic overview of existing research on the biological, social, and economic determinants of hopefulness. She stresses that there is a difference between hope and optimism. In her definition, “optimism is a general belief that things will turn out all right; hope is a conviction that one can act to make things better in some way.” (p. 21) Contrary to naïve optimism, hope has future-oriented agentic properties. The combination of positive future expectations and a sense of agency creates the link between hope and advantageous future economic decisions. Without agency, there would be no reason to exert any effort in trying to improve one's situation. However, without a generally positive outlook on the future, one might also not want to exert effort or incur costs today. Optimism and agency are the complementary components that form hope and generate its positive behavioral impact.

In Chaps. 3 and 4, Carol Graham presents two of her recent studies in detail. In the first study, she surveys adolescents in Peru. In a short panel study (with two time points, 2017 and early 2020), she first records the participants' aspirations concerning education, occupation, and mobility and then observes actual outcomes at the second time point. Even though hope is not measured directly, Graham argues that aspirations capture the adolescents' hope or ambition of achieving something positive. One important finding of the study is that, despite the fact that most participants have parents with relatively little education and simple jobs, their aspirations for higher levels of education and higher-status occupations (and the reported confidence to achieve them) are quite high. Some subgroup differences, however, do exist. Adolescents who are particularly poor, already married, or already parents express lower educational aspirations. Furthermore, there is a negative correlation between impatience

and educational, occupational, and migration aspirations. On the inverse, the belief that hard work will get one ahead and those aforementioned aspirations are correlated positively. Another main finding is that higher aspirations in the first period are associated with better outcomes (e.g., more education and less engagement in risky health behavior such as smoking or having unsafe sex) three years later. Graham concludes that aspirations are a critical lever to improve overall well-being as well as long-term outcomes and proposes interventions that might successfully raise aspirations and hope, including the provision of information about the returns to education.

The second study resembles the one conducted in Peru but surveys low-income young adults in the United States. At the time of writing the book, the study was still running, so only a few responses could be analyzed. There are noticeable differences between Black and White adolescents from similarly disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Blacks are found to be more hopeful, more likely to trust others, and more likely to have a parent who supports their educational aspirations. They also evaluate their life circumstances more positively and are more optimistic about their future quality of life than White respondents. Whites, on the other hand, have a stronger internal locus of control but receive little support from their families, have a less active social life, and exhibit low aspirations overall. A key difference between the two groups seems to be that African American participants are more likely to have a mentor who encourages their school efforts, which appears to be essential for young people's educational success.

The two studies are impressive accounts of the relationship between positive perspectives on one's future, social support, and subsequent personal success in disadvantaged populations. The findings are certainly in line with Graham's claim that hope can improve people's life outcomes. Nevertheless, these studies should be seen more as a starting point for further research than as conclusive evidence. First, there is the obvious problem of causality, which Graham herself addresses openly. Some adolescents might know they have a greater chance of achieving higher education or getting better jobs (because of previous successes or their network). They might then report higher aspirations and achieve them later. This is correlational. It is much less clear that creating more hope, *ceteris paribus*, would also have such a strong positive impact.

Another problem is the operationalization of hope as an empirical construct. Graham stresses that hope is more than just naïve optimism and also requires a sense of agency. In her main study, however, hope is not directly measured. Instead, the survey asks about educational and occupational aspirations and various personality traits, among them the belief that hard work will get one ahead and a measure of optimism (unfortunately, the exact questions used in the questionnaire are not reported in the book). Correlation analyses indicate that aspirations are positively associated with the belief in hard work, supporting the claim that agency matters. But there is no correlation between aspirations and optimism. Does this imply that a positive outlook on the future does not matter? What does this mean for the relevance of hope as a central driver of behavior? A third critical aspect concerns the differential policy relevance of optimism and agency as the two components of hope. In some life domains, agency might be more important than optimism. As the Peruvian study suggests, that seems to be the case for educational aspirations and later professional success.

It is not explicitly discussed in the book, but one might suspect that for other areas, e.g., deaths of despair or the rise of right-wing populism, optimism could be more important than agency. Even naïve optimism could provide a reason for wanting to stay alive or might induce one to support political parties that want to keep things as they are. Pessimism could reduce the support for existing political systems and, when combined with feelings of agency, might lead to radicalization and extremist behavior. The empirical analyses presented in the book raise many questions about the precise relationship between agency, optimism, and hope as well as their implications for behavior and well-being. The fact that the book does not answer all of them does not reduce its value. Quite to the contrary, it is Carol Graham's merit to point a broader audience to the benefits of analyzing the determinants and consequences of hope and hopelessness and to highlight the necessity of conducting more research in this area.

In the final two chapters, Graham builds on her empirical insights and outlines how to make individuals and communities more hopeful. She discusses evidence that hopefulness is not a personality trait that necessarily remains fixed throughout people's lives. Instead, it can be influenced by factors such as family stability, education, and opportunities. To restore hope where it has been lost, it is important to reestablish individuals' confidence, self-efficacy, and trust in others. Graham presents evidence from various intervention studies that fighting loneliness and encouraging contact between people can increase their happiness and optimism. Older people can be supported through opportunities to volunteer, participate in the arts, or spend time in nature. Mentors in the family or community can help young people and encourage them to aspire to higher goals. Graham also strongly supports more monitoring and regular reporting of the various facets of well-being in official government statistics. This could serve policymakers as an early-warning indicator and increase the visibility of these measures among the general public.

Carol Graham has produced a thoughtful and inspiring book. It contains important insights and stimulating ideas for researchers and policymakers alike. The *Power of Hope* is a powerful book that gives hope that the pressing challenges of despair, distrust, and political radicalization can be overcome.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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