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## **“My Life Purpose is...” Assessment of Youth Purpose in Context**

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## “My Life Purpose Is...”: Assessment of Youth Purpose in Context

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In the introduction to this special issue on youth purpose, the authors discuss the challenges in assessing purpose in adolescents; purpose is a concept that has more often been studied in adults but not in youth. First, the authors discuss how purpose has been defined in the literature. The authors then situate purpose in the context of a host of related constructs, such as intentional self-regulation, future orientation, goal setting, and identity. Additionally, the authors discuss the importance of accurately measuring youth purpose, as well as in what contexts the assessment of purpose is useful, such as for positive youth development researchers, as well as practitioners and evaluators of youth development programs.

All civil societies share a common interest in promoting the development of responsible, global citizens (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). For societies to flourish, their citizens must demonstrate good character and a moral commitment to improving their own well-being as well as that of their communities and, more broadly, civil society. As Brown (2009) asserted

if the moral and social development of our children are not as worthy of attention as our drive for academic success in the service of economic productivity, we will foster the kind of cultural impoverishment and ethical misconduct that undermines our ability to thrive as a nation. (p. 131)

Youth purpose has been conceived as one of many virtues that constitutes moral character (Damon & Colby, 2015). Beneficial *purpose* has been defined as a will to accomplish tasks that are meaningful to the self and affect the broader world (beyond the self; Damon, 2008). Virtues such as purpose set the foundation for youth to thrive and can serve as a buffer against potential negative life events such as stress and trauma (Park & Peterson, 2008). Moral competence and good character are linked with an adolescent's sense of purpose in life; without the development of good character, adolescents will not be able to distinguish right from wrong (Park & Peterson, 2006).

During adolescence, youth begin to develop a sense of moral competence. They better identify themselves through a moral lens and exhibit an increased understanding of a noble purpose not only for their own life, but with morality and empathic understanding as a notable

part of their identity (Bowers et al., 2010). This noble and moral component of their identity can inspire adolescents to contribute in positive ways to society.

The development of sense of purpose is a key accomplishment for adolescents. Having a sense of purpose shapes adolescents' sense of direction and meaning in their lives as they progress toward young adulthood; a sense of purpose can become part of their adult identity and help them connect with the world around them (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Oftentimes, a sense of purpose is connected with long-term goals (such as future family, educational, or career objectives; Emmons, 1999), which can give meaning to short-term goals (in adolescence, short term goals can include getting good grades, making a sports team, or joining a new friend group). A sense of purpose frames these short term goals, putting them in context and helping adolescents connect short term goals to long term goals.

Despite the importance of the development of purpose and other virtues during adolescence, there is a lack of good measures of virtues in general, and sense of purpose in particular (Card, 2016, July). To begin to address this vacuum, in 2013 the John Templeton Foundation announced a request for proposals to develop new assessments and measures of character virtues. Part of the measurement challenge is a lack of an agreed upon definition of purpose.

## DEFINITION OF PURPOSE

Human purpose has a long history in the academic literature, often stemming from philosophy and psychology; partly due to a multidisciplinary exploration of purpose, there is not one uniformly agreed-upon definition (Dik, Steger, Gibson, & Peisner, 2011). Philosophers have defined *purpose* as having a deeper reason for living, including a fundamental intention behind a person's goals and life's ultimate aim (Frankl, 1959; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). When goal pursuit and activity engagement leads to greater connection to and benefit for others and the larger world, these actions are likely to yield a sense of meaning; this beyond-the-self (BTS) connection and the resultant sense of fulfillment has been termed "eudaimonic well-being" (Weinstein, Ryan, & Deci, 2012). Psychologists have defined *purpose* as a source of motivation that provides a sense of direction to achieve a deeper meaning in one's pursuits (Damon, 2008; Ryff, 1989). A common thread in these definitions is the idea that a person's goals extend outside of the individual (BTS) and have a connection to the broader world. Although BTS goals can have malicious intent, the majority of those with BTS goals aspire to do good (Damon, 2008).

## RELATION OF PURPOSE TO SIMILAR CONSTRUCTS

Purpose in adolescence has been linked with other positive youth outcomes. For example, sense of purpose is associated with greater psychological maturity (Hill & Burrow, 2012), intentional self regulation (Freund & Baltes, 2002), and academic self regulation (Yeager et al., 2014). In addition, sense of purpose has been found to be associated with a sense of hopefulness about the future (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), as well as future orientation (Stoddard & Pierce, 2015). Other researchers have documented a link between sense of purpose and an increased sense that schoolwork is meaningful (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). For late adolescents at the cusp of adulthood, talking about and reflecting

upon one's sense of purpose was positively connected with the development of goals (Bundick, 2011).

Identity formation is a key task of adolescence (Côté & Levine, 2002). Erikson (1968) theorized that purpose is an element of identity development. Purpose, or the development of what an adolescent hopes to accomplish in life, is distinct from identity—the development of an adolescent's own sense of self. Purpose has been linked with a stronger sense of identity (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010). Bronk (2012) found identity development helped reinforce the development of purpose. That purpose has been linked with so many positive youth outcomes underscores the importance of the construct for positive youth development.

### MEASUREMENT OF PURPOSE

The measurement of purpose in adults has a deep history in positive psychology. Purpose in life has often been measured among adults, including young adults (Bundick, 2011), adults in midlife (Hill, Turiano, & Burrow, 2018), and older adults (Chippendale & Boltz, 2015). In the measurement of purpose, some researchers have confounded purpose with related constructs such as meaning (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008; Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015), whereas others have taken the opposite approach and worked intentionally to measure purpose as distinct from other constructs (Shuck & Rose, 2013). In one sense, purpose may be easier to measure in adults because a greater proportion of adults have achieved or articulated a sense of purpose in their lives compared to adolescents (Briggs & Shoffner, 2006). Researchers interested in measuring youth purpose have capitalized on the development of measures of adult purpose and extended and adapted these measures for adolescent populations.

Despite the extent of research on youth purpose, the measurement of youth purpose is not standardized and is not easily measured; for the most part, researchers tend to use interview questions with small samples of youth to assess this construct (Bronk, 2013). Some have adapted interview questions to surveys with mixed success (e.g., Chauveron, Linver, & Urban, 2015) or substituted similar constructs to measure components of or steps that lead to purpose (such as eudemonic goals; Han, 2015). The current volume includes two approaches to measurement of purpose: Bronk and colleagues (this issue) introduce a validated survey measure of youth purpose, and Linver and colleagues (this issue) offer a mixed-methods approach, triangulating data from both adolescents and teachers to measure youth purpose.

### CONTEXTS OF YOUTH PURPOSE (THE "PURPOSE" OF PURPOSE)

The current volume situates current research on youth squarely in a positive youth development space. Linver and colleagues (this issue) demonstrate links between purpose and intentional self regulation, and Johnson et al. (this issue) show how BTS goals are connected with character, caring, and volunteering, among other PYD outcomes. Bronk et al.'s (this issue) new survey measure of purpose will allow researchers to expand upon these findings with a construct that can be incorporated into large-scale studies examining other positive youth outcomes, and especially in large longitudinal studies that can cement our

understanding of the importance of youth purpose as adolescents grow into contributing members of society.

Youth purpose can be supported by many different categories of people who are important to adolescents, such as parents (Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2013), friends (Mariano, Going, Shrock, & Sweeting, 2011), and teachers (Damon, 2008). The environments where youth spend their time, such as school, community, and even work, are also important for supporting the development of purpose (Shamah, 2011). Given the relevance of contexts for the development of purpose, several youth interventions have incorporated purpose as a significant outcome (Chauveron et al., 2015; Dik et al., 2011; Yeager et al., 2014).

### “MY LIFE PURPOSE IS ...”: THE CURRENT ISSUE

The current volume begins with the discussion of a new measure of youth purpose (Bronk et al., this issue); until now, there has not been a widely used validated survey measure of youth purpose. This measure takes into account goal directedness, personal meaning, and BTS orientation and will be an important addition to youth purpose researchers' toolboxes. Next, Linver and colleagues examine the connection between adolescents' ability to develop and articulate goals with youth sense of purpose. This group used multiple sources of data including youth surveys and interviews, as well as teacher assessments. They employed an innovative mixed-methods technique that allowed qualitative interview data to underscore consistencies and disconnects with quantitative findings from teacher and adolescent surveys. Purpose was found to be connected with intentional self regulation, and strong consistencies between multiple measures of purpose were noted.

The third article in the issue, by Johnson et al. explores the development, antecedents, and outcomes of purpose (conceptualized as BTS goals) across five large-scale studies of adolescents and young adults. Their integrative data analysis technique enabled them to pool raw data from several studies and fit one model to the aggregated dataset. This research group identified categories of goal orientation using latent class analysis and found that goal development was linked with several positive youth development outcomes. For example, when the configuration of youth goals included several BTS ones, young people reported higher levels of character and caring. This special issue closes with a discussion of youth purpose research, and where we can go from here. Burrows, Hill, Ratner, and Sumner (this issue) lay out the specific deficits that are addressed by the articles in this issue, and how these articles can help drive the field forward in a positive, purposeful direction.

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