

Asking young people to reflect on and talk about their purpose in life can have lasting psychological benefits, including increased goal directedness and greater life satisfaction.

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The benefits of reflecting on and discussing purpose in life in emerging adulthood

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ONCE THE EXCLUSIVE purview of philosophy and religion, purpose in life has been a topic of burgeoning interest in the field of psychology. However, from the psychological perspective, the question has little to do with what *the* purpose of life is; instead, the focus is more on what each person understands the purpose of his or her own life to be and how this understanding and the pursuit of one's purpose affect and are affected by other psychological and behavioral constructs. Though people may have more than one purpose, for simplicity's sake "purpose" will be used here in the singular form to denote the presence of one or more purposes. Indeed, there have been many recent theoretical and empirical advances in understanding the role of purpose in human thought and behavior.¹

Purpose in life has been studied at various developmental stages across the life span, from early adolescence through old age,

though recently youth purpose and purpose in college have garnered particular attention.² The developmentally adaptive role of purpose has been demonstrated in investigations of youth across the adolescent years.³ Emerging adulthood, commonly understood to encompass the years between late adolescence and early adulthood (roughly, ages eighteen to twenty-five), typically marked by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, revision of life priorities and goals, and possibilities, represents a singularly important life phase in the development of purpose.⁴ Identity development, an integral aspect of establishing a life purpose, is ongoing and formative in these years.⁵ What and who one wants to be is particularly salient as young people navigate the normative transition from bearing few significant life commitments and responsibilities in high school or college to the shouldering of many, such as starting a career, getting married, and having children.⁶

Definitional issues

Although conceptualizations of purpose have commonly been rooted in the seminal philosophical writings of Viktor Frankl, scholars have offered varying conceptualizations.⁷ Some have focused on the degree to which one sees one's life as coherent and understandable; others attend more to the global sense that one's life is significant.⁸ Damon, Menon, and Bronk refer to purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self."⁹ This definition highlights the far-reaching, abstract life goal aspect of purpose, which has as "its necessary characteristic . . . not its concreteness but the sense of direction that it provides in creating an objective" to be pursued, which in turn organizes one's lower-level goals, decisions, and actions.¹⁰ Furthermore, it suggests a meaningful goal directedness, an orientation toward and pursuit of one's life goals. Similarly, Kashdan and McKnight have suggested that purpose is "a central, self-organizing life aim" that is a predominant component of one's identity,

provides a framework for one's goals and actions, and motivates one to allocate personal resources toward its actualization.¹¹ Notably, Damon and colleagues emphasize that purpose has a necessarily self-transcendent aim that motivates one to commit to and engage in prosocial, generative behaviors in adolescence and beyond.¹²

Relations with psychological health

The psychological research literature has shown links between purpose and a variety of indicators of positive mental health in adolescence through adulthood. Various measures of purpose in life have been found to be significantly correlated with well-being indicators such as personal growth, self-actualization, life satisfaction, and global measures of psychological well-being in populations ranging from college students to older adults.¹³ However, the "purpose" measures used in many of these studies often tap only into a general sense of meaning in life and do not specify a life goal component that has come to be accepted as central to contemporary definitions. Some investigations showing relations among purpose and indicators of psychological well-being have focused more explicitly on the goal-directedness component of purpose, while others highlight the degree to which one has identified a purpose for one's life.¹⁴

Intervention studies

In the subfield of positive psychology, intervention research has recently received much attention and has shown great promise.¹⁵ Areas of intervention that have demonstrated positive results in nonclinical samples include gratitude, happiness, and positive writing.¹⁶ However, research on ways in which purpose might be enhanced has been sparse.¹⁷

There has been some relevant intervention work involving constructs similar to purpose that provide encouragement. Harrist,

Carlozzi, McGovern, and Harrist have demonstrated in a sample of college students that talking about one's life goals can have short-term benefits for positive mood and physical health.¹⁸ MacLeod, Coates, and Hetherton showed that training focused on goal setting and future planning in a sample of mostly young adults led to increased life satisfaction three weeks later.¹⁹ Although the interventions were relevant to purpose, these studies assessed neither outcomes related to purpose nor whether the effects were lasting.

Present study

To address the gap in the literature regarding purpose interventions (namely, in the emerging adult years that are formative for purpose development), and to further explore relations among purpose and psychological well-being, the study I examine in this article endeavors to test whether deeply reflecting on and discussing one's purpose in life may have lasting effects toward contributing to both later purpose and later life satisfaction. Furthermore, I investigate whether any such benefits for later life satisfaction may be attributable, at least in part, to changes in purpose. The study posits the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life lead to benefits for the purpose-identification component of purpose.

Hypothesis 1b: Deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life lead to benefits for the goal-directedness component of purpose.

Hypothesis 1c: Deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life lead to benefits for life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2a: The benefits of deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life toward life satisfaction are attributable to changes in purpose identification.

Hypothesis 2b: The benefits of deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life toward life satisfaction are attributable to changes in goal-directedness.

Method

The study employed a subsample of a larger study of youth purpose.²⁰ The study participants were 102 students from two institutions of higher education in northern California (one large state university and one large community college) who completed a survey in March and April 2007 (the pretest) and again in December 2007 (the posttest). Thirty-eight of these participants were randomly selected to participate in a follow-up interview within two weeks of completing the pretest survey. Although the primary purpose of this interview was for data collection for the larger study, it was believed that (and the study presented here investigates whether) engaging in the interview would serve as an intervention toward increasing purpose.

The interview was conducted one-on-one and in person with a trained interviewer, typically in a casual setting such as on a bench on campus or at a local coffee shop and on average lasted approximately forty-five minutes.²¹ The interview was designed to induce reflection and deep thought about one's purpose in life, core values, and most important life goals. After the participant shared these goals, the interviewer invited him or her to explore the reasons behind them, discuss ways in which the person is currently pursuing or has future plans to pursue these goals, and consider how these goals are related to other aspects of his or her life. The protocol included probes to ensure that the interviewee was genuinely considering and engaging in deep thought about the questions. Though it may seem surprising that a forty-five-minute one-time interview could have important and lasting effects as hypothesized here, the efficacy of many similar small social-psychological interventions has been demonstrated across a number of studies.²²

The mean age of these participants at the time of the pretest survey collection was 21.2 years ($SD = 0.5$ years). Participants were 64 percent female and racially/ethnically diverse: Caucasian (39 percent), Asian American (26 percent), Hispanic/Latino (16 percent), Pacific Islander (9 percent), African American (3 percent), and Native American (2 percent). Approximately 4 percent of the sample self-identified as multiethnic.

Measures

Purpose identification

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire—Presence subscale (MLQ-P), a five-item Likert scale, was used to operationalize purpose identification.²³ Although a popular measure of global meaning in life, the item content of the scale is primarily geared toward assessing the degree to which one has identified a purposeful life goal (a sample item is, “I have found a satisfying life purpose”). The MLQ-P has been shown to be psychometrically sound and has demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity.²⁴ Reliabilities at both pretest and posttest were high ($\alpha_{\text{pre}} = .90$, $\alpha_{\text{post}} = .89$).

Goal directedness

A short version of the Purpose in Life subscale of Ryff’s Psychological Well-Being measure was used to operationalize goal directedness.²⁵ It is a nine-item Likert scale designed to assess the degree to which one “has goals, intentions, and a sense of direction” in life.²⁶ It has been shown to be psychometrically sound and has demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity (a sample item is, “Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them”). Reliabilities at both pretest and posttest were high ($\alpha_{\text{pre}} = .87$, $\alpha_{\text{post}} = .88$).

Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale is a five-item questionnaire designed to measure people's cognitive judgments of their global life satisfaction.²⁷ Its psychometric properties are well documented, and it has been validated in a wide variety of populations.²⁸ Reliabilities at both pretest and posttest were high ($\alpha_{\text{pre}} = .87$, $\alpha_{\text{post}} = .84$).

Results

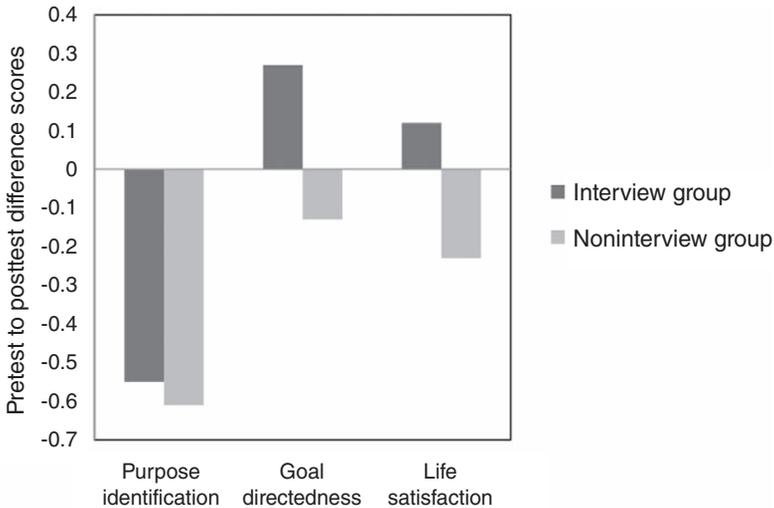
Mean scores for the interview group and the noninterview group on each of the pretest and posttest measures are shown in Table 6.1. Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c predicted that the purpose interview would provide benefits to the interviewees relative to the noninterviewees. To test these hypotheses, *t*-tests were run on difference scores (posttest scores minus pretest scores) for each of the three outcome variables (see Figure 6.1). For the purpose identification measure, there was no statistical difference between the mean difference scores for the interview group and the noninterview group ($t(100) = 0.23$, Cohen's $d = 0.05$, $p = 0.41$, one-tailed test). For goal directedness, the difference between the group

Table 6.1. Pretest and posttest means and standard deviations for each variable and condition

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Pretest Mean</i>	<i>Posttest Mean</i>
Interview group		
Purpose identification	5.17 (1.30)	4.62 (1.03)
Goal directedness	5.27 (1.13)	5.54 (1.04)
Life satisfaction	4.57 (1.29)	4.69 (1.25)
Noninterview group		
Purpose identification	4.94 (1.33)	4.33 (0.92)
Goal directedness	5.17 (1.09)	5.04 (1.20)
Life satisfaction	4.46 (1.38)	4.23 (1.30)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Figure 6.1. Changes in purpose identification, goal directedness, and life satisfaction from pretest to posttest, by group



mean difference scores was statistically significant in the hypothesized direction ($t(100) = 2.36$, Cohen's $d = 0.47$, $p \leq 0.01$, one-tailed test). For life satisfaction, the difference between the group mean difference scores was also statistically significant in the hypothesized direction ($t(100) = 2.36$, Cohen's $d = 0.36$, $p \leq 0.05$, one-tailed test).

Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted that the benefits of the interview for life satisfaction would be at least in part attributable to changes in purpose identification and goal directedness. That is, lasting benefits in life satisfaction for the interviewees may not have been entirely a direct result of engaging in the interview; instead, they may have been indirect, stemming from the benefits in purpose identification or goal directedness, or both, which are known to be predictive of life satisfaction. This process, known as mediation, can be tested using a series of regression analyses.

Hypothesis 2a could not be tested because the interview did not show benefits for purpose identification (a prerequisite condition for mediation).²⁹ However, hypothesis 2b could be tested, as there

was evidence that the interview led to benefits for both goal directedness and life satisfaction. Additional regression analyses showed that change in goal directedness was significantly related to change in life satisfaction ($\beta = .28, p < .01$), which represents the third and final condition for testing mediation. Hypothesis 2b was tested using indirect effects analysis, which employs a specialized regression technique known as bootstrapping.³⁰ This analysis did provide evidence for mediation ($\beta = .12, SE = .08, 95$ percent CI = [0.01 – 0.33]), supporting hypothesis 2b. However, this result also suggests that only some of the effect of engaging in the interview on later life satisfaction was indirect; thus, the interview likely set other processes in motion that led to benefits in life satisfaction nine months later. Although these were not tested in the study, this may represent an area ripe for future research.

Discussion

The study presented here had two primary goals. First, it investigated whether engaging in a one-time session of reflection on and discussion about one's purpose in life (in the context of an interview) could lead to benefits for both purpose and life satisfaction nine months later. Second, it explored whether any benefits of engaging in such an exercise toward later life satisfaction might be at least partially attributable to changes in purpose. The findings provide some, though not uniform, support for the hypotheses.

Regarding hypothesis 1a, there was no support for the contention that deep reflection on and discussion of one's purpose in life increases the degree to which one believes one has found a purpose in life nine months later. However, such reflection and discussion was found to lead on average to benefits for the goal-directedness component of purpose nine months later (hypothesis 1b). Specifically, the purpose discussion may have buffered against what appears to be a normative decline in goal directedness in the emerging adult years. Similarly, the results provide evidence for the contention that reflection on and discussion of one's purpose

may buffer against an apparent normative decline in life satisfaction over the same time span (hypothesis 1c). This finding builds on previous work showing the benefits of discussing one's life goals, and extends these findings well beyond the short-term benefits previously uncovered.

Since purpose identification was not affected by engaging in reflection on and discussion of one's purpose, hypothesis 2a could not be tested. However, the results do provide some evidence for hypothesis 2b that changes in goal directedness partially mediate the benefits of engaging in reflection on and discussion of one's purpose toward later life satisfaction. At the same time, some of the direct effect of the purpose discussion on life satisfaction remained.

The findings regarding the demonstrated benefits of a one-time intensive session of reflection on and discussion about one's purpose in life on goal directedness many months later might be explained at least in part by the idea that this purpose discussion might act as a triggering event. This triggering event could impel an emerging adult, who is likely in this life stage to be predisposed to identity exploration, to reflect on life beyond the interview and reconsider his or her life path.³¹ Graber and Brooks-Gunn suggested that life transitional periods, such as the transition from adolescence to adulthood, are times of "heightened sensitivity" for "transition-linked turning points."³² This trigger could thus function as an important life turning point.³³ The idea of turning points has been proposed as part of life course theory and narrative identity to refer to episodes that serve as catalysts for long-term behavioral change through a restructuring of identity and longer-term goals, and the short-term plans and daily activities in which one engages in pursuit of them.³⁴ McLean and Pratt note that turning points "are usually events in which one understands something new about oneself or faces decisions about different paths to take in life, [thus] the emphasis on self-reflection [is] particularly well suited to examine in relation to identity development."³⁵

The mediation results further extend previous research in that they suggest a directionality of effects from reflecting on and

discussing one's purpose in life to positive changes in goal directedness, which in turn predict benefits for life satisfaction. Much of the previous literature only suggests correlational relations among purpose and life satisfaction. However, directionality should be inferred from these data with caution, because the difference scores for goal directedness and life satisfaction are measurements taken at the same time point and thus do not represent temporal effects.

In addition, the findings of a direct effect of the purpose interview on life satisfaction, above and beyond that which may have occurred through goal directedness, suggest a process heretofore unexplored. Perhaps engaging in deep reflection on one's life goals provides an opportunity to integrate and assimilate one's goals, values, plans, and behaviors in ways that go beyond mere goal directedness; such integration and assimilation may permit greater alignment between one's goals and one's identity (such as greater self-concordance), which is likely to predict later well-being.³⁶ These processes may further increase the likelihood of short-term goal attainment, which can lead to increased happiness.³⁷ Future research in this area would surely benefit from integrating assessments of self-concordance, goal attainment, and identity development.

Limitations and future directions

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of certain limitations. The generalizability of the results may be limited, since all participants were in college. The college years are thought to afford a psychosocial moratorium during which greater identity exploration can take place; if the benefits of the purpose interview flow from the opportunity to engage more deeply in self-reflection, non-college-going emerging adults (who are more likely to be employed and have families) may not have the same luxury.³⁸ In addition, this study focused on only two components of purpose: purpose identification and goal directedness. According to Damon, Menon, and Bronk's definition, the self-transcendent nature of one's life goals was not assessed. It is possible that the

results may have been moderated by the content of one's life goals, such that they might be stronger for those who had primarily self-transcendent life goals relative to those who had primarily self-enhancing life goals.³⁹

Implications

Although this work may perhaps be just a first step in the direction of purpose interventions, it nevertheless presents exciting possibilities for practical applications within and outside educational contexts. Indeed, one of the most appealing aspects of using the purpose discussion to enhance goal directedness and life satisfaction is that it does not require any special tools, significant investment in any products, or even much time. Practically anyone—a teacher, youth worker, or parent—can initiate it. The only conditions that are necessary to be in place are about forty-five minutes of the young person's and adult's time and the willingness of the young person to talk about what is most important to him or her.

In this study, the interviewers had no prior affiliation with the participants, suggesting that the initiator of the purpose discussion need not be particularly close to the young person. The initiator need not even be an adult. Provided that the discussion follows the general guidelines of interviewing used here and the initiator of the discussion is capable of eliciting genuine reflection, such a discussion could be shared between two young people; indeed, properly structured, such a discussion could be bidirectional, and thus likely to have benefits for each young person.

In educational settings, the purpose discussion might be integrated into student affairs practice in colleges, such as in career counseling or academic advising sessions, which in many colleges happen at least once a year and can last from thirty to sixty minutes. In the high school setting, a shortened version of the purpose discussion could easily be introduced in a conversation between a student and a guidance counselor, or perhaps a teacher integrating opportunities for such reflection into class projects or assignments. Although it is likely that engaging in the purpose discussion just once will have benefits that last many months, it may be advisable

to arrange semiregular discussions of purpose so that the reflection process is ongoing.

Beyond the school setting, and likely of even greater potential impact, regular purpose-oriented conversations in the home, especially among young people and their parents, may engender significant benefits in terms of young people's goal directedness and satisfaction with their lives. Youth workers across domains, from community leaders to coaches, could regularly ask young people to reflect on their involvements and how they might be serving their longer-term goals. Ideally, the purposeful strivings of young people would be shared among all adults in a young person's life across domains, increasing the likelihood of targeted and sustained support for the young person's purposeful pursuits. While a one-time purpose discussion can have important long-term benefits, it may be that forming ecologies supportive of purpose discussion and reflection is even more likely to set young people on the path to their purpose.

Notes

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