

## The Development of Purpose During Adolescence

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*The field of psychology has been slow to recognize the importance of purpose for positive youth development. Until recently, purpose was understood, if at all, as a means of adapting to threatening conditions rather than as a motivator of good deeds and galvanizer of character growth. Moreover, in most psychological studies, purpose has been conflated with personal meaning, a broader and more internally oriented construct. This article offers a new operational definition of purpose that distinguishes it from meaning in an internalistic sense, and it reviews the existing psychological studies pertinent to the development of purpose during youth. The article identifies a number of urgent questions concerning how—and whether—young people today are acquiring positive purposes to dedicate themselves to and, if so, what the nature of today's youth purposes might be.*

When Victor Frankl published the English edition of *Man's Search for Meaning* in 1959, the book's instant influence forced psychology to come to terms with the primary importance of high-level belief systems that had been considered derivative or epi-phenomenal by the major theories.<sup>1</sup> The notion that ethereal constructs such as "meaning" and "purpose" could make a difference—that they could motivate someone to do something, or even shape a person's basic choices about how to live—seemed impossibly soft-headed and sentimental to mainstream psychologists of that time. If the behaviorist and psychoanalytic schools (the two best-known bodies of psychological work at midcentury) agreed on anything at all, it was that meaning, purpose, and other such belief systems were the products of more fundamental drives; that they were dependant on the drives for their shape, substance, and very existence; and that meaning and purpose were no more than marginal factors in behavioral development.

To this entrenched materialist position, Frankl (1959) wrote (in the non-"degenderized" language of his day):

Man's search for meaning is a primary force in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are "nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations." But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my "defense mechanisms," nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my "reaction formations." Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values! (p. 121)

Frankl's vision was forged in the flames of Nazi cruelty. After the murder of his wife, parents, and grandparents, Frankl suffered through 3 years of slave labor, torture, starvation rations, and other harsh indignities, barely eking out an existence as concentration camp inmate #119104. (Frankl originally intended to publish his book under his inmate number alone, until friends persuaded him that the book's message about how to bear inhumane circumstances would be better promoted by a named authorship.) In light of the horrific experience that fueled Frankl's vision, it is understandable that his analysis would emphasize the ways in which high-level belief systems can enable people to endure life's hardships. Frankl put meaning and purpose on the psychological map by assigning them the place that his own heroic struggles had prepared him best to recognize: the sheltering fortress in a world of constant threat.

A recent shift in academy psychology, led by Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, and others in the "positive

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<sup>1</sup>The book's initial 1946 edition was published in German under the title *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager*—roughly translatable as "A psychologist experiences the concentration camp"—and was read more as a testimonial to surviving evil than a statement about psychology's best future direction. Gordon Allport's endorsement of the 1959 English edition helped make the book a force within both clinical and academic psychology, albeit to date more in the former than in the latter.

psychology” movement, has opened the doors of the discipline’s perception to proactive as well as reactive sources of human motivation (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Much like Frankl, positive psychologists reject the idea that people’s goals and values arise from basic drives such as hunger and sex, or from defense mechanisms such as sublimation and reaction formation. People can and do choose goals and values that promote higher purposes, such as purposes of creativity, morality, and spirituality. Yet in contrast to Frankl, today’s emerging positive psychology movement does not assume that survival through psychological adaptation need be the ultimate desired direction, or *telos*, of human life. Leaders of the positive psychology movement use constructs such as “authentic happiness” (Seligman, 2002), “creativity” and “optimal experience” or “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and “ultimate concerns” (Emmons, 1999) to capture the essence of our most lofty and enlightened desires.

The search for meaning and purpose is key to achieving the fortuitous ends envisioned by the positive psychology movement, such as authentic happiness, flow, and creativity. In normal circumstances, it is a search that takes an offensive rather than defensive posture, especially when it is linked to external activities or accomplishments. As we note later, we believe that of the two terms (*meaning* and *purpose*), the purpose construct is the one that directly conveys the externally oriented quest that we have in mind. Our interest in youth purpose is triggered by a conviction that it plays a powerfully generative role in development and, too, by our puzzlement over how seldom this role has been recognized in research or practice. For this reason, this article explores youth purpose, with special attention to its nature, significance, and developmental course.

### Studies of Youth Purpose

Youth is a formative period for cultivating a sense of purpose. Identity theorists, from Erikson (1968) to Loevinger (1976), have marked adolescence as the period in the life-span when people first begin to dedicate themselves to systems of belief that reflect compelling purposes. Of course, this does not always happen: Some people never find anything to believe in beyond self-preservation or self-advancement. The clinical observations of Erikson and his followers demonstrate that, when young people find nothing to dedicate themselves to while growing up, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to acquire motivating belief systems later in life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). The result is a sense of “drift” that can lead to personal as well as social pathologies. Research has shown that the personal effects of purposelessness may include self-absorption, depression, addictions, and a variety of psy-

cho-somatic ailments, and the social effects may include deviant and destructive behavior, a lack of productivity, and an inability to sustain stable interpersonal relations (Damon, 1995).

On the positive side, it is likely that purpose during youth leads to a number of desired outcomes, such as prosocial behavior, moral commitment, achievement, and high self-esteem. Theory and research on the emergence of moral identity during adolescence is consistent with this hypothesis (Damon & Gregory, 1997). However, direct evidence remains scarce because the necessary studies have not yet been done. We do know that some young people begin to define themselves in moral terms during the adolescent years, and in doing so they often refer to grand belief systems (Damon, 1983; Damon & Hart, 1992; Hart & Damon, 1988). It seems likely that purpose would play a role in the moral quest, but this possibility has not been investigated empirically.

In fact, much like psychology in general, the field of child and adolescent development has been slow to recognize the importance of purpose. Youth behavior, according to the major theories, has been seen to be driven by a combination of factors of the following sort: genetic disposition; gender; congenital and birth effects; macrolevel social, historical, and economic conditions; cultural practices; early experiences with caregivers; birth order; sibling and peer relations; neighborhood and community composition; and schooling.

Theories differ in the weight that they give to each of these factors and in how they characterize the interactions among them. However, virtually all major theories portray young people as adapting to these “fact of life” (or “markers”) variables through low-level emotional or behavioral responses such as anxiety and stress avoidance, aggression, attachment and affiliation, popularity and status-seeking, shame and guilt, and achievement motivation for narrowly defined tasks such as school tests. There have been exceptions to this line of theorizing, although these have tended to be rare and limited in scope. Nevertheless, these exceptions provide a useful starting point for an examination of purpose in youth. Next we offer a brief survey of the relatively scarce research to date.

### Definitional Matters

First, and not surprisingly for emerging areas of study, research on purpose has not always used the construct in similar ways. Indeed, many times this term has been used differently within the same work, and no one has attempted to draw boundaries between the related terms *purpose* and *meaning*. As a prelude to reviewing the research, we propose a definition of purpose that contains important distinctions between it and meaning, distinctions that have been

implicit in the way that researchers have used the two terms and that also are consistent with our common-language understanding of these terms.

Frankl (1959) himself used meaning and purpose interchangeably. He refers to purpose as “inner strength” (p. 76), as that which is ultimately responsible for the state of one’s inner self, as that which has an “inner hold” (p. 78) on the moral and spiritual self and as the “why” (p. 88) or reason for living, that motivates a person’s life. In Frankl’s theory, all these claims apply in the same way to meaning, so Frankl introduces no operational distinction in using the term purpose. Similarly, many of the lines of research that we review next begin with a virtual equation of meaning and purpose. Ryff and Singer (1998), for example, stated that having purpose in life means “feeling that there is meaning in one’s present and past life” (p. 707).

Still, some researchers use the term purpose in a special way that does distinguish it from the broader concept of meaning. In this common but unarticulated usage, purpose is seen to be one subset of meaning. Baumeister’s discussion of purpose or “purposiveness” for example, considered it to be one of the “four needs of meaning,” alongside value, efficacy, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991): Purpose is therefore one piece of the bigger picture of meaning. Similarly, Reker and Wong (1988) used purpose as one of the three descriptors of personal meaning. They see purpose as a side of a triangle of factors that constitute personal meaning, in which meaning is defined as “the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 221).

As we discuss in the following, the notion of purpose also has been linked to other psychological processes in ways that the broader term meaning has not, again implying a special role for this particular component of meaning. In Emmons’s (1999) discussion of goals, motivations, and strivings, for instance, he claimed that goals that serve as a source of personal meaning can provide “unity and purpose” (p. 147) to peoples’ lives. Other researchers have linked purpose to identity development and future orientation, again in ways that go beyond claims about the role of meaning per se (see later). Benard (1991) pointed to a number of psychological outcomes specific to purpose, including goal-directedness, achievement, motivation, educational aspirations, healthy expectations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a compelling future. We take this list as a preliminary yet telling indicator that purpose indeed has a special developmental role not captured by the more inclusive, diffuse, and pluralistic concept of meaning.

For our own operational definition of purpose, we offer the following: Purpose is 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. We choose this definition because it highlights the following points:

1. Purpose is a goal of sorts, but it is more stable and far-reaching than low-level goals such as “to get to the movie on time” or “to find a parking place in town today.”
2. Purpose is a part of one’s personal search for meaning, but it also has an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self.
3. Unlike meaning alone (which may or may not be oriented towards a defined end), purpose is always directed at an accomplishment towards which one can make progress.

This accomplishment may be material or nonmaterial, external or internal, reachable or nonreachable: Its necessary characteristic is not its concreteness but the sense of direction that it provides in creating an objective for purpose.

### Methods for Assessing Purpose and Its Development

Despite the relative scarcity of studies on this topic, methodological approaches used to study youth purpose and related constructs have been marked by great diversity. Approaches have ranged from qualitative explorations of young peoples’ diaries and other spontaneously written statements to more structured responses to researchers’ specific questions and interviews. Because most instruments have been designed with adult, not adolescent, subjects in mind, and also because most do not operationalize purpose in the way that we do (or with any precision or even clarity), we have found that none of these measures captures all of the essential facets of purpose that we are interested in. Still, many of them have proven useful for particular aims; and, in the aggregate, they offer a valuable starting point for a more comprehensive methodology.

One early method was the use of private diaries to examine adolescent musings on purpose. Using the “fantasy life of adolescents, found in the diaries,” “essays not written for public consumption,” and other “intimate documents” Inhelder and Piaget (1958, pp. 340–345) found that adolescents reflected on purpose without any prompting. The diary data were originally collected for a different research effort. Although this technique offers an effective way of seeing if young people contemplate purpose, the approach has limita-

tions in that comments about purpose arise merely by chance and follow-up questions cannot be posed.

Crumbaugh and Maholick (1967) designed one of the most influential tools for evaluating purpose, or “the ontological significance of life from the point of view of the experiencing individual” (p. 184). Their instrument, the Purpose in Life (PIL) test,<sup>2</sup> is a 20-item scale that uses the terms purpose and meaning synonymously. The PIL has served as the foundation for many instruments designed subsequently to assess purpose in various populations. For example, modified versions of the PIL have been administered to Chinese (Shek, 1993), geriatric (Hutzell, 1995), adult (Reker & Peacock, 1981), and adolescent populations (Hutzell & Finck, 1994; Jeffries, 1995).

The PIL, and the measures based on it, have limited applicability for our use. Based on the instruments, it appears as though life satisfaction is an important aspect of Crumbaugh and Maholick’s (1967) definition of purpose. Including statements or questions in the measures that relate to the concept provide evidence for this assumption. For example, the PIL states, “Life to me seems - (1) *completely routine* - (7) *always exciting*” and “I am usually - (1) *completely bored* - (7) *enthusiastic, exuberant*” (cited in Sayles, 1994, pp. 119–123). Similarly, modified versions of the PIL ask, “In general my life seems dull (agree/disagree)” (Hutzell, 1995, p. 65) and “My life is running over with exciting good things - (1) *strongly agree* - (7) *strongly disagree*” (Reker & Peacock, 1981, pp. 266–267). These examples also demonstrate how closely measures designed subsequent to the PIL resemble the original survey. The concept of life satisfaction is not a requisite component of our definition of purpose. Further, an other-orientation, or a concern for the world beyond oneself, is an essential part of our conception of purpose but is not a consideration of these instruments. Accordingly, none of these tools is designed to capture such a distinction.

Francis and colleagues, interested in adolescent purpose, have explored purpose with a 1-item scale that asks adolescent participants to agree or disagree to some degree with the following statement: “I feel my life has a sense of purpose” (Francis, 2000; Francis & Burton, 1994; Francis & Evans, 1996; Robbins & Francis, 2000). Recognizing the shortcomings of a single-item measure, Francis and colleagues later tried to use Crumbaugh and Maholick’s (1967) PIL test but found it unsuitable to working with adolescents. Consequently, they developed their own instrument, the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS; Robbins &

Francis, 2000). Unfortunately, neither the 1-item test nor the PILS test includes a concern for the external world in its conception of purpose.

Another group of research methods focuses on the broad construct of meaning. Reker and Wong (1988) constructed an instrument, the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP), to measure the sources and degree of personal meaning in one’s life at different ages. Ten years later, through a series of studies, Wong (1998) developed the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) which aimed to gauge meaningfulness in life in general.<sup>3</sup> De Vogler and Ebersole (1980) explored meaning through their Meaning Essay Document, a questionnaire that asked participants to describe and rank their three most important meanings and to list a concrete experience associated with each. Each of these methods, the PMP, the SOMP, and the Meaning Essay Document, are useful guides for us, but they measure meaning not purpose. Meaning, as described previously, encompasses a larger sphere of important life aspirations, whereas purpose denotes only those goals that touch the lives of others.

Another cluster of instruments, although looking at purpose in somewhat distinct ways, all point to a connection between psychological health and purpose. For example, Antonovsky (1987) developed the Sense of Coherence construct in an attempt to understand why some people are less likely to be adversely affected by stressful environments than others. This construct addresses an individual’s perceptions of the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of his or her environment and is based at least partly on the idea that those who find meaning in life or in an event are both psychologically and physically healthier than those who do not. To measure the construct, Antonovsky developed the Orientation to Life Questionnaire, which can be administered in a number of forms. Battista and Almond (1973) also included an aspect of well-being in their vision of purpose. According to Battista and Almond, a meaningful life, or a positive life regard, is “an individual’s belief that he is fulfilling his life as it is understood in terms of his highly valued life-framework of life-goals” (p. 413). In a critique of Battista and Almond’s study by Debats (1998), scores were found to correlate positively with happiness and self-esteem and negatively with psychological distress. Shortly thereafter, Debats created the Life Regard Index–Revised version (LRI–R), which changed some of the wording and the response mechanism. Carol Ryff’s (1989) research regarded purpose as an indicator of psychological well-being. Ryff developed the Scales of Psychological Well-Being intended to measure well-being in middle-aged popula-

<sup>2</sup>The PIL test can be found in Sayles, M. L. (1994). Adolescents’ purpose in life and engagement in risky behaviors: differences by gender and ethnicity. (Doctoral Dissertation. University of North Carolina at Greensboro.) *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 55, 09A 2727.

<sup>3</sup>The SOMP can be found in Prager, E. (1998). Observations of personal meaning in sources for Israeli age cohorts. *Aging and Mental Health*, 2, 2, 128–136.



tions. Her instrument can be administered in a variety of forms.

Three chief problems exist with using this group of tools to gauge youth purpose. First, purpose need not be necessarily associated with psychological well-being. Although we may surmise that purposeful people will often be psychologically healthy, it is not a necessary condition, according to our definition. Second, the conception of purpose espoused by these measures does not always include the orientation toward the external world that our definition does. Finally, these scales are designed with adult participants in mind, not adolescents, and some statements, although not entirely irrelevant to youth, are not as appropriate for younger participants as for older ones.

Instruments designed for younger populations do exist. Two are used in conjunction with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) work on the seven vectors of college student development and are geared for 17- to 25-year-old college students. According to Chickering and Reisser, the seven vectors of development map identity development during the college years with each vector representing a series of developmental tasks and desired outcomes. The vector most relevant to our work is one that focuses on developing purpose. Two instruments exist to measure the extent to which college students have embraced a life purpose. The first one, The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment is designed to assess three developmental tasks including establishing and clarifying purpose, developing autonomy, and developing mature interpersonal relationships (Winston, Miller, & Cooper, 1999). The second instrument, the Developing Purpose Inventory, was created by Barratt in 1977 to assess three distinct aspects of purpose: vocational recreational interests, vocational interests, and life style. For our purposes, these instruments' focus on adolescents is useful, however, they were designed for use in universities to assess student growth; not as tools for scholarly research. Further, both are inherently inwardly looking. Neither probes the degree to which participants demonstrate a concern for others.

A cluster of instruments designed to explore a desire to positively impact others has emerged around the issue of generativity. The Loyola Generativity Scale, the Generativity Behavior Checklist, and the Life Course Interview are three tools designed to assess the level of generativity in adults (McAdams, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). The Loyola Generativity Scale includes a list of 20 statements that participants either identify as personally relevant or not. The Generativity Behavior Checklist is a list of activities from which participants identify the ones they perform. Finally, the Life Story Interview is an in-depth interview in which the participant weaves a life narrative complete with chapters, characters, and themes.

The interviewee is asked to "play the role of the storyteller" (McAdams, 1995b) and share his or her past, present, and future in story form with the interviewer.

Although the three forms of generativity instruments may be applicable to research on youth purpose, there are conspicuous problems with using these particular measures. These instruments were designed for adults in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, not adolescents in their teens and 20s (McAdams, 2001). Generativity defines Erikson's seventh stage of psychosocial development, appropriate for the former age range. However, adolescents are typically still working out issues of identity and intimacy, and an instrument designed to capture youth purpose would have to be designed with the appropriate developmental stage in mind. Additionally, these instruments are constructed to measure generativity, not purpose. Although similarities exist, the terms are not synonymous. Generativity describes adults' concerns for leaving behind a positive legacy and for making contributions that will outlive themselves. For example, one could reflect on her role as a mother as a generative act. In this way generativity is backward looking whereas purpose is forward looking. Questions designed to survey purpose need to focus on issues of future orientation, goals, and guiding forces that direct a young person through life.

### **Empirical Research on the Development of Purpose in Youth**

The research that we review below most often follows the same pattern as Frankl's original treatise in emphasizing the *defensive* and *healing* roles of purpose. So, for example, Benard's (1991) observations about research on psychological attributes related to purpose are in the context of her program of research on youth "resiliency." This assumes a background of danger, stress, and deficit in young people's lives, all of which must be overcome by the development of a personal resiliency borne of protective factors such as purpose. By the same logic, Erikson (1968) pointed to purpose as an effective means of helping to resolve a young person's identity "crisis." Again, the basic vision is that of a youngster "up against it," in danger of falling into the swamp of "identity diffusion," with the acquisition of purpose offering one lifeline out. Similarly, Inhelder and Piaget (1958) concluded that the expressions of lofty aspirations, which they had observed in adolescents—such as becoming great thinkers, world leaders, and solution-finders for humanity's deepest philosophical and societal problems—were merely manifestations of youths' "ego-

tism,” or a “sophisticated game of compensation functions” (pp. 344–345).

Accordingly, although we find much value in the insights of the writers whom we review, we note here their pervasive negative bias towards the situations and capacities of young people. Possibly such a bias is natural for an initial psychological foray into unexplored territory, but it clearly is a bias that needs to be corrected by future studies that reflect a more positive view of young people and a vision of purpose’s proactive as well as defensive roles in behavioral development.

Studies of youth purpose have been scattered across inquiries into cognitive, emotional, moral, motivational, and religious development. What we know about purpose comes to us from findings provided by application of the various measures discussed. They provide some insight into its possible variations across age, gender, ethnicity, and other variables and show that purpose is not an illusory feature of youth development but really exists and can be probed for.

Fry (1998) observed that purpose, as interpreted as nonselfish and other-oriented, is salient for youth. Fry’s interviews revealed that most youths’ “valuation systems,” although biased toward self-enrichment, combined with concerns of cooperation with others outside of themselves. Of course, most researchers do not identify purpose primarily with intentions that transcend the self as Fry and we do. Two better-documented exceptions have been carried out with adults, however, and are worth mentioning because they give us some insight into how nonselfish intentions and commitments might affect youth. In an examination of the postadolescent years, a study by Daloz, Keens, Keens, Parks, and Parks (1996) traced the lives of individuals who committed themselves to the common good and concluded that it is important for self-development in all phases of life for people to dedicate themselves to causes greater than the self. The finding is in accord with an earlier study by Colby and Damon (1992) that looked at adults with high levels of moral commitment.

Purpose is expressed differently by young people than it is by adults. Inhelder and Piaget’s (1958) work showed how adolescents express their other-oriented aspirations in grandiose and intense manners, much the way a child with a new physical skill parades it flamboyantly for all to view. It is likely that with further development comes both a more balanced perspective on the skill during one’s youth and a declining need to show it off. They also state that sometimes the life programs that youth adopt have “a real influence on the individual’s later growth, and it may even be that a person discovers in his adolescent jottings an outline of some ideas which he has really fulfilled since” (pp. 334–335). This conclusion was supported by Erikson’s (1968) observations on the developmental significance of belief systems for ado-

lescent identity formation and the life choices that follow.

The most common work on purpose is a variety of studies that utilize Crumbaugh and Maholick’s (1967) PIL. In the original study conducted by the authors, results revealed that the PIL distinguishes significantly between psychiatric patient and nonpatient populations. A consistent progression of scores was found, with graduate students scoring highest and hospitalized patients scoring lowest. This was the beginning of a trend that looked at the relation between purpose and a number of maladaptive behaviors and outcomes. For example, studies suggest a relation between lower scores on the PIL and drug involvement (Noblejas de la Flor, 1997; Padelford, 1974), young peoples’ participation in risky and antisocial behaviors, (Sappington & Kelly, 1995; Sayles, 1994), and alcoholism (Schlesinger, Susman, & Koenigsberg, 1990; Waisberg & Porter, 1994). On the more positive side, the PIL has been related to young people’s commitment to social action (Butler, 1968) and is a mediating factor between religiosity and happiness (French & Joseph, 1999). Thus a sense of purpose is connected to health and productive behaviors in all their manifestations—psychologically, socially, and physically.

This finding tends to be confirmed by other measures too, although its finer details need to be revisited given that these measures differ in their approaches and frequency of use. Although seldom used, Hutzell’s Life Purpose Questionnaire (Hutzell, 1995; Hutzell & Finck, 1994) shows that purpose is negatively correlated with psychopathology (Kish & Moddy, 1989): Higher scores on McAdam’s (2001) three complementary scales of “generativity” are associated with better parenting, as well as higher levels of social activity and political activism, higher life satisfaction, happiness, self esteem, less depression, and greater well-being; and work using Carol Ryff’s (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002) Scales of Well-Being associates a subjective sense of well-being with psychological well-being, the latter which includes purpose. Using the Chinese Purpose in Life questionnaire (C-PIL), Shek, Ma, and Cheung (1994) discovered that youth with lower purpose more frequently engage in antisocial behaviors and are more aggressive. Shek (1993) found in another study that high scores on the C-PIL were predictive of psychological well-being in Chinese undergraduates. Battista and Almond’s (1973) Life Regard Index suggested that experienced meaning in life correlates with self esteem, although it has been observed that results with this scale and its revised form (Debats, 1998) are uncertain (Harris & Standard, 2001). Antonovsky’s (1987) Orientation to Life Questionnaire has also generally found associations between coherence or purpose and physical and psychological health.

Studies have also investigated age, gender, socioeconomic and cultural differences in purpose, but findings in these areas suggest that much work is still needed. Findings are also ambiguous when they are compared with studies using other measures. Whether there are gender differences in purpose for example, is uncertain. Some studies using the PIL, generativity scales, and the Developing Purpose Inventory suggest gender differences (Barrat, 1977; Coffield & Buckalew, 1986; McAdams, 2001; Schlesinger, Susman & Koenigsberg, 1990), whereas other studies using the PIL and the Life Attitude Profile do not show differences (Meier & Edwards, 1974; Reker & Peacock, 1981; Sayles, 1994). Similarly, it is generally observed that older participants score higher on the PIL than do younger participants (Meier & Edwards, 1974; Sato & Tanaka, 1974), yet Ryff's Well-Being Scales report age differences in the opposite direction (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Cultural and ethnic differences in purpose are also difficult to determine with great certainty from current research. One study suggests that young people across cultures develop similar levels of meaning and coherence (Bowman, 1996). Different measures and definitions of purpose make it difficult to determine cultural and ethnic differences for the most part. If there are differences in purpose across cultures, future work will need to determine just exactly where and why these differences exist.

Socioeconomic and social-status differences could also influence meaning and purpose, at least indirectly. Zeitchik (2000) used the PIL and found that having a higher income and being married correlated with a higher sense of purpose or meaning. The LRI is also strongly associated with marital status, a finding that makes sense considering that relationships is a frequently cited category in the literature (Debats, 1999; Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995; Debats, Van Der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993).

Another question about purpose is what kinds of intentions in life do people—including youth—express? This has led to some findings about categories of meaning and purpose. The PMP (Wong, 1998) has generally found that people have a wide range of experiences when asked to describe an “ideally meaningful life.” These categories of experience included goals, relatedness, and experiences like self-transcendence. The SOMP reveals that people of all ages agree that personal relationships, personal growth, meeting basic needs, participation in leisure activities, and the preservation of values and ideals are some common sources of personal meaning (Prager, 1996, 1998).

An even more extensive effort to address categories of purpose is the research program of De Vogler and Ebersole (1980, 1981, 1983). In their initial study (De Vogler & Ebersole, 1980), the investigators asked college students to describe in writing the three most meaningful things in their lives and to rank these in or-

der of importance. The eight categories within which most young people's meanings could be classified were relationships, service, growth, belief, existential-hedonistic, obtaining, expression, and understanding. Thirteen and 14-year-olds also discussed meaning in life significantly when completing De Vogler and Ebersole's (1983) tasks, and this group mentioned three new categories: activities, school, and appearance, and rarely mentioned the category of belief. Earlier, De Vogler and Ebersole's (1981) research on adults' categories of meaning added the categories of health and life work, and although the authors claimed that systematic comparison of this sample with their younger groups is not possible because of these new categories, it is evident that relationships is the most frequently mentioned category across age groups. Also, all age groups studied were similar in that they did not find significant meaning in materialism, momentary pleasures or understanding for its own sake (p. 89). Showalter and Wagener (2000) replicated DeVogler and Ebersole's 1983 study with a group of youth from a Christian summer camp in order to find out whether belief would be more important for religious youth. Consequently, they hypothesized correctly that for their group of youth, belief was a more outstanding category of meaning.

Values and beliefs, both religious and otherwise, affect scores on the PIL. Religiosity and spirituality predict higher scores on the PIL (Molcar & Stuempfig, 1988; Paloutzian, 1981; Zeitchik, 2000), yet the ways in which religiosity is viewed and applied differs somewhat across studies. Students scoring low on the PIL are likely to have more investment in hedonistic values such as personal pleasure, excitement, and comfort (Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975), as well as happiness, mature love, and freedom (Paloutzian, 1981), and apparently, students with religious beliefs also score higher on the C-PIL. The work of Francis and his colleagues show a connection between behavioral counterparts of religious beliefs and values. Francis and Burton (1994), for example, found that perceived purpose in life tends to increase with frequency of both church attendance and personal prayer—behaviors that reflect religious beliefs. Francis and Evans (1996) found similar variable relations when they analyzed the responses of youth in the United Kingdom, and Francis (2000) found positive relations between purpose in life and religiosity.

### **Looking Forward: What We Need to Know About Youth Purpose and Its Development**

Our review of the prior research on youth meaning and purpose demonstrates that, despite the elusive-

ness of these concepts, valid measurement not only is possible but has been in some part realized, at least to explore certain limited and preliminary questions. Also, the studies indicate that meaning and purpose are robust components of youth psychology: They are easy to elicit, even in open-ended research in which they are not the main focus and in studies in which the two constructs are loosely defined and distinguished from one another, and operationalized by the most cursory of instruments (including, in one set of studies, a one-item indicator).

As for the findings, they confirm the centrality of meaning and purpose in adolescent lives. Moreover—and of special significance for our own thesis—the findings legitimize the special focus that we have placed on purpose, as distinct from the broader construct of personal meaning. Young people who express purpose, in the sense of a dedication to causes greater than the self, show high degrees of religiosity, consolidated identities, and deeper senses of meaning than those who do not experience purpose. In addition, the value of purpose to the self continues well beyond the adolescent period—indeed, throughout the rest of the life-span. All of this suggests that purpose plays a positive role in self development as well as a generative one for the person's contributions to society.

Yet the existing research leaves most of the pressing questions unaddressed. The first of these is an essential one: What are the types of purpose that inspire young people today? This question is addressed by the “categories of purpose” research that we summarized in the prior section; however, as we noted in that summary, the findings thus far have been sketchy, inconclusive, and confounded with categories of the broader (and, we believe, less determinative) construct of personal meaning. Moreover, existing research on categories of purpose does not shed light on cultural, socioeconomic, or historical-cohort differences that might affect the kinds of purposes that young people resonate to. It is reasonable to expect, for example, that a Muslim-American girl of the 21st Century may find causes to dedicate herself to which might have seemed unfamiliar to the mid-20th Century Swiss youngsters whose diaries Inhelder and Piaget examined. Or, possibly, there are common purposes that would inspire all these youngsters. We simply do not know. For the sake of scientific understanding as well as educational and child-rearing practice, gaining knowledge about this matter is the first order of business. Among many reasons for this is that such understanding will help us provide realistic and psychologically useful guidance to young people who are having difficulty finding purpose in today's world.

A second order of business, especially urgent in our post-9/11 world, is answering the question of how to draw—and deal with—the crucial distinction between

purposes that promote the good and those that promote antisocial, inhumane, and destructive acts? As we know from recent world events, young people can be inspired by ignoble purposes—such as killing others and themselves in a spirit of hatred—just as they can be inspired by noble purposes. Any developmental analysis needs to distinguish between the two in order to establish a *telos* (or developmental direction) for processes such as moral identity (see Cairns, 1998, for the rationale behind an a priori definition of developmental direction). That is, to determine whether a young person is on track in developing a positive moral identity, we first must make clear the distinction between noble purposes that serve humanity and ignoble purposes that stem from a desire to destroy.

One means of making this distinction was offered in Colby and Damon (1992) in their study of moral commitment among living moral exemplars. In collaboration with 20 distinguished scholars representing a wide range of ideological, moral, and religious beliefs, Colby and Damon developed criteria for identifying moral, as opposed to nonmoral, commitment. Among the criteria were the use of moral means in the pursuit of moral ends (i.e., a refusal to commit a wrongful act in the service of a supposedly rightful cause); a sense of perspective about one's own limited capacity to know and do the right thing (i.e., the virtue of humility); and a dedication to the common good (i.e., a commitment to decent and humane behavior without discrimination). We suggest here that these criteria, and perhaps others in the same vein, can be used to distinguish ignoble from noble purposes, just as they can be used to weed out a Hitler or an Osama Bin Laden from those who legitimately can be called moral exemplars (Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa).

In the course of youth development, it may be that acquiring noble purposes discourages the acquisition of ignoble ones. For example, when a youngster is filled with a sense of purpose based on love, the youngster may become too well-centered to drift towards hatred. In contrast, a youngster without a noble purpose may be like a vacuum that can be filled with unwholesome elements of all kinds.

For this reason, it is important that we understand the processes and conditions responsible for cultivating noble purposes in the young. Among the questions that the scholarship needs to answer are as follows:

1. What noble purposes have inspired young people throughout the course of history?
2. How have young people traditionally been introduced to these purposes?
3. What kinds of noble purposes are inspiring today's young?
4. What kinds of noble purposes are youth today not responding to?



## 5. What kinds of noble purposes are today's educational institutions advancing?

Answers to these questions will provide guidance both for theory building and practice in the field of youth development. For example, the historical comparisons may reveal changing patterns of purpose that affect individual and societal development in ways that we may barely recognize at present. Traditional categories of youth purpose, such as family, community, faith, work, and country, may seem obsolete to today's young; moreover, major educational and media influences on the young may no longer support such purposes. If so, we would ask what, if any, purposes are replacing the traditional ones. If this is not the case then we need to determine which of the traditional categories still have resonance and why. Perhaps certain categories—patriotism and faith come to mind—retain their importance to some populations of youth but not for others, whereas categories such as work, community, and family continue to be more universally held. Until the research is done, we can only speculate about this central driving force of personal growth and social change.

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