

Purpose Among Youth From Low-Income Backgrounds: A Mixed Methods Investigation

Kendall Cotton Bronk , Caleb Mitchell, Brittany Hite, Sam Mehoke, and Ryan Cheung
Claremont Graduate University

Theoretical and empirical research lead to conflicting perspectives on whether youth from low-income backgrounds are likely to have access to lives of purpose. To explore this issue, this study used data collected during the 2016–2017 academic year from a sample of Southern California youth. Findings suggest (a) youth from low-income communities are as likely as youth from middle-income communities to report leading lives of purpose; (b) purpose among low-income youth is associated with many of the same indicators of positive development as it is among middle-income youth; and (c) youth from low-income backgrounds encounter personal hardships that, in the presence of familial support and other developmental assets, can inspire purpose. Implications for purpose-fostering interventions among low-income youth are discussed.

Committing to a purpose in life is an important developmental task of adolescence. During identity formation, young people experiment with roles and personalities to determine who they are and where they fit in the broader world (Erikson, 1980). According to Erikson (1980), the resolution of identity development yields fidelity, or a commitment to a set of personally meaningful values and beliefs. These far-horizon commitments can form the contours of a life purpose. In this way, committing to a purpose reflects healthy identity development and a central facet of positive youth development (Bronk, 2011; Damon, 2008; Erikson, 1980).

However, whether purpose is equally available to all young people is an open question (Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2018). In what ways might growing up in a low-income community present special challenges to purpose development? Research suggests socioeconomic status is likely to influence identity development and helping behaviors similar to purpose (Manstead, 2018); the question is how?

Some theoretical and empirical research suggests youth from low-income backgrounds may encounter additional challenges that hinder their pursuit of purpose. As Maslow's (1943) classic hierarchy of needs theory suggests, youth from low-income backgrounds are more likely than youth from

middle-income backgrounds to lack reliable access to safe homes and adequate food, and, therefore, the focus on obtaining these necessities may obfuscate attention to other domains of development, including the search for purpose. Similarly, the Family Stress Model (Conger & Elder, 1994) suggests economic hardship may undermine parents' mental health and parenting. Based on the bidirectional relationships among parenting health, parenting practice, and youth outcomes, we might expect to find the prevalence of purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds is lower than it is among youth from middle-income backgrounds. Some empirical research supports this possibility. For instance, research finds the presence of purpose is inversely related to the features of some low-income communities, including stress and anxiety (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001; Pinguart, 2002), and a recent study of purpose conducted with youth of color living in urban areas, determined that the stress associated with growing up in poverty could act as both a motivator and a barrier to purpose development (Gutowski, White, Liang, Diamonti, & Berado, 2018). Based on this small body of research, we might expect to find that growing up in a low-income community presents special challenges to the development of purpose.

On the other hand, positive youth development scholars argue that indicators of thriving, including purpose, should be available to all young people, including those from low-income backgrounds

This study was generously supported by a gift from the Hope-Lab, and we thank Steve Cole, Rachel Baumsteiger, and members of the Adolescent Moral Development Lab at the Claremont Graduate University for their help collecting data and reviewing drafts.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kendall C. Bronk, Quality of Life Research Center, Claremont Graduate University, 1227 N. Dartmouth Ave., Claremont, CA 91711. Electronic mail may be sent to kcbronk@cgu.edu.

© 2020 Society for Research in Child Development
All rights reserved. 0009-3920/2020/9106-0032
DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13434

(Benson, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004). In addition, Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1959) provided a particularly compelling example of someone who discovered purpose in an extremely under-resourced setting. Frankl spent 3 years as a concentration camp inmate, subjected to torture and near-starvation food rations, and yet during this time he thought deeply about his purpose and the significance of leading a life of purpose more generally. He noted that among his fellow inmates who had the opportunity to live, those who did were often similarly inspired by a purpose, such as returning to a hidden child or finishing a professional project. Upon being freed from the camp, Frankl (1959) wrote that all people, regardless of their economic or personal circumstances, could lead lives of purpose. Consistent with this theoretical perspective, a recent study concluded that youth of color, who are often over-represented in low-income communities, were two times more likely than White youth to describe having a clear intention, which is an important component of purpose (Moran, Bundick, Malin, & Reilly, 2012).

These diverging theoretical predictions and empirical findings suggest the experience and prevalence of purpose are likely to vary among youth based on family income level, but they do not specify how the prevalence, correlates, or the process of discovering purpose is likely to be shaped by socioeconomic status.

Garcia Coll et al. (1996) integrative model of child development suggests developmental outcomes, such as purpose, are likely to vary as a function of youths' social addresses, including their socioeconomic backgrounds. Framed by social stratification theory (Attewell & Fitzgerald, 1980), this model suggests that in the United States, socioeconomic status and ethnicity are important social position factors that shape development through experiences of racism, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and segregation. These experiences in turn shape the interactions' youth have with individuals and institutions in their proximal environments, including with families, friends, schools, and communities; these kinds of interactions have been found to influence purpose formation (Damon, 2008). Accordingly, as a result of discrimination associated with their socioeconomic status, youth may engage in conversations with their friends and family members that shape their sense of justice and inspire them to take a more active role in social and political change processes.

Similarly, Spencer, Dupree, and Hartman (1997) have argued that to understand key components of purpose, and meaning making more generally, we need to consider the individual in the larger micro and macrosystems and the environmental feedback youth receive as a result of their culture, ethnicity, and social class. With too few exceptions (e.g., Hart & Matsuba, 2009), researchers have neglected to explore the way low-resourced communities shape healthy youth development (Sumner et al., 2018), and this omission hampers our ability to effectively intervene to reduce the negative effects and strengthen the positive effects of these contexts. To enable all young people to thrive, an investigation of purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds is warranted.

This is an especially important issue to address since purpose may be particularly beneficial to youth from more impoverished backgrounds. For instance, a recent study concluded that the presence of purpose mitigated the effects of poverty on youths' antisocial activities, such as disobeying and bullying (Machell, Disabato, & Kashdan, 2016). Despite the many benefits of leading a life of purpose, much research on this topic—especially among individuals from low-income backgrounds—has relied on a deficit-reduction orientation, rather than a positive developmental perspective. For instance, studies have concluded that youth from low-income backgrounds with high purpose scores, compared to youth from low-income backgrounds with low purpose scores, report fewer sexual partners and are less likely to engage in violent acts (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994; DuRant, Getts, Cadenhead, Emans, & Woods, 1995). Another study concluded that individuals growing up in poverty often live in a constant state of stress (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996), and purpose and meaning are associated with positive coping and decreased stress (Ishida & Okada, 2006; Kass et al., 1991; Steger & Frazier, 2005), including decreased acculturative stress levels (Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008). These compelling findings further underscore the importance of studying purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds.

Definitional Matters

Purpose refers to a long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish personally meaningful aims that are of consequence to the broader world (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). This conception highlights three important features. First, purpose is

a goal-oriented intention. It is a far-horizon aim that provides one's life with an enduring and motivating sense of direction. Second, a purpose in life is personally meaningful, which is typically evidenced by the dedication of time, energy, and resources toward its pursuit. Finally, in addition to being significant to the self, a purpose in life is also of consequence to the world beyond-the-self. This dimension distinguishes the construct from meaning. Although any activity that is personally significant can be said to be meaningful, only those aims that are personally significant *and* inspired by a desire to make a difference in the broader world can be said to be purposeful (Damon et al., 2003). To the extent that individuals report having a long-term, personally meaningful intentions to accomplish aims that enable them to make a difference in the broader world, they can be said to lead lives of purpose. Accordingly, individuals can display more or fewer signs of purpose. Empirical studies find that about 20% of adolescents meet all the criteria for purpose, about 55% display some signs, and only about a quarter of adolescents show no indications of purpose, at least not yet (Damon, 2008).

Research finds purpose is associated with indicators of positive development, at least for individuals from middle-income backgrounds. For instance, compared to others, individuals with purpose report being more grateful (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017), hopeful (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), and satisfied with their lives (Bronk et al., 2009; Gillham et al., 2011). Other studies, using a measure of purpose that assesses personal meaningfulness and goal orientation (but not a commitment to aims beyond-the-self), have concluded that purpose is associated with physical activity (Hooker & Masters, 2014), sleep quality (Turner, Smith, & Ong, 2017), physical safety (Rainey, 2014), and self-reported health (Hill, Edmonds, & Hampson, 2017). These findings are, by and large, correlational in nature, but recent research suggests that purpose may contribute to these beneficial outcomes. How people live their lives influences their genetic expression, and individuals with purpose lead lives that appear to contribute to favorable profiles of gene expression in immune cells (Fredrickson et al., 2015; Kitayama, Akutsu, Uchida, & Cole, 2016). In short, at least among individuals from middle-income backgrounds, the pursuit of purpose is closely associated with a variety of indicators of positive development. The extent to which purpose is related to these same positive outcomes for youth from low-income backgrounds remains unclear.

Present Study

Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), this study sought to examine purpose among samples of youth growing up in low- and middle-income communities. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design allows researchers to first conduct quantitative analyses (in this case to gauge the prevalence and positive developmental correlates of purpose) and subsequently to employ qualitative research methods (in this case to determine how youth from low-income neighborhoods discover purpose). Neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone would have provided the comprehensive insight we sought regarding purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds. Accordingly, a mixed methods design was warranted.

This study featured two samples of adolescents from neighboring communities. One sample of youth was from a low-income community and the other from a near-by middle-income community. Although we were primarily interested in exploring the prevalence and nature of purpose among youth from low-income backgrounds, we included a middle-income sample to provide context to our findings. We hope to avoid the impression that youth from middle-income backgrounds are the standard against which other groups of youth should be compared. However, in this study they provided a useful point of comparison, without which scores from the low-income sample would have been difficult to interpret. Three related research questions guided this investigation. First, how prevalent is purpose among youth from low-income communities? Second, which indicators of positive youth development are related to purpose among youth from low-income communities? Third, how do youth from low-income communities discover purpose?

Method

Participants and Procedure

To address these questions, data were collected during the 2016–2017 academic year, and participants ($N = 307$) included youth from low-income ($n = 164$) and middle-income ($n = 143$) backgrounds from two neighboring communities in Southern California. Students from low-income backgrounds reportedly qualified for free or reduced-price lunches through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and students from middle-income

backgrounds reportedly did not qualify for this program. At one of the two high schools, nearly three-quarters of the students qualified (74.3%; California Department of Education, 2016), and at the other high school only a little more than a quarter did (27.8%). Accordingly, students unsure of their eligibility were categorized based on the school they attended. Sixty-seven students were unsure of their NSLP eligibility; of those, some were categorized as middle-income ($n = 38$) and others as low-income ($n = 29$) based on the demographic characteristics at their school. None of the statistical relationships differed significantly when excluding “unsure” students from analyses, so these data were included to maintain statistical power.

An announcement about the study was made at both high schools, and following the protocol approved by our Institutional Review Board, interested students logged in online to complete surveys and consent procedures, including parental consent. In addition to soliciting demographic information, surveys asked students to provide their email addresses, so we could invite them to participate in interviews, if selected. Students were compensated \$5 for completing surveys and \$20 for participating in interviews. Both public high schools serve ethnically diverse student bodies; however, the ethnic composition of the two schools differed in important ways. A complete report of demographics can be found in Table 1.

To enable a person by context investigation that takes into account sociocultural contexts, including social class, qualitative research methods were employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although this study was primarily concerned with understanding

how socioeconomic status shaped purpose development, we recognize that social class and ethnicity are often overlapping constructs for U.S. youth (Garcia Coll et al., 1996), and a qualitative investigation enabled us to explore the interaction of social class, culture, and ethnicity in purpose development. Following a criterion sampling approach (Patton, 2014), a subset of students from both socioeconomic backgrounds, specifically those who scored in the top one-third on the survey of purpose, were invited to participate in approximately 60-min interviews ($N = 46$; participants from low-income background $n = 26$; participants from middle-income background $n = 20$). Interviewees from low-income backgrounds had a mean age of 16.7 ($SD = 0.5$), were 54% female, and included Latinx (58%), multiracial (19%), Asian (15%), Middle Eastern (4%), and European American (4%) students. Interviewees from middle-income backgrounds had a mean age of 16.8 ($SD = 0.6$), were 62% female, and included European American (43%), Latinx (24%), multiracial (19%), Asian (10%), and Middle Eastern (5%) students.

Measures

Claremont Purpose Scale

An early version of the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS) was administered to gauge the presence of purpose. The scale has since been shortened (Bronk, Riches, & Mangan, 2018). Consistent with the definition of purpose (Damon et al., 2003), the CPS assesses the three correlated dimensions of purpose (e.g., personal meaningfulness, goal orientation, and a beyond-the-self orientation). Data using this version of the CPS were internally consistent ($\alpha = .89$), and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with these data confirmed its three-factor structure ($\chi^2[df = 87] = 129.27$, $p < .001$, χ^2/df ratio = 1.49; comparative fit index = .96; root mean square error of approximation = .06, 90% CI [.03, .08]; SRMR = .05). The CFA revealed that factors loaded on the proper dimensions (e.g., meaning items loaded on the meaning factor, etc.), and the three latent factors loaded onto the second-order latent factor of purpose. This measure assesses purpose as a continuous variable, where high scores indicate individuals meet all the criteria for purpose, mid-range scores indicate they meet some criteria, and low scores indicate they meet only one or none of the criteria. Five items assess each dimension, including, “I have long-term goals I am working toward” (goal-directedness), “I have discovered a

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Low- ($n = 164$) and Middle-Income ($n = 143$) Samples

	Low-income	Middle-income
African American	2%	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	12%	11%
European American	7%	34%
Latinx	66%	22%
Multiracial	12%	24%
Other	1%	6%
Female	52%	55%
Age (SD)	16.7 (0.62)	16.5 (0.75)
Age range	15–18	14–18

Note. “Other” ethnicity includes Arab/Middle Eastern, American Indian, and self-identified Other. Two-percent identified as another gender among low-income sample.

satisfying life purpose" (personal meaningfulness), and "I think it is important that every person in the world be treated equally" (beyond-the-self orientation). Responses were measured using a Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and scores were averaged across subscales to yield a composite purpose score. Evidencing its convergent validity, purpose scores on this measure correlated positively with life satisfaction and negatively with depression, in this sample and in previous research (Bronk, Riches, et al., 2018). This measure has been administered to youth from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Baumsteiger, Mangan, Bronk, & Bono, 2019; Bronk, Leontopoulou, & McConchie, 2018; Bronk, Riches, et al., 2018; Bronk et al., 2019).

Multiple measures were administered to assess the relationship between purpose and the positive development of youth from low-income backgrounds. Measures of hope, life satisfaction, prosocial intentions, peer support, positive affect, and depression were administered to assess important aspects of psychological well-being, and measures of self-reported general health, feelings of safety, sleep quality, stress, and exercise were administered to assess relevant dimensions of physical well-being. Table 2 features a brief review of the scales administered and relevant descriptive statistics. Some measures were adapted to reduce the overall number of items. Unless otherwise noted, response endpoints were anchored on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*definitely would not/never/strongly disagree*) to 7 (*definitely would/very often/strongly agree*). Scores were averaged, and higher scores indicated a greater presence of each construct. Internal consistency for all measures was acceptable (all α s > .65).

Revised Youth Purpose Interview

In addition to the surveys, we administered the Revised Youth Purpose Interview (Andrews et al., 2006), a semistructured interview protocol designed to explore the presence of purpose, the processes through which purposes are discovered, and supports and obstacles for purpose formation. More specifically, the first third of the interview features questions that encourage participants to reflect on and identify possible sources of purpose by posing questions such as, "What matters most to you? What are you hoping to accomplish in your life?" To gauge the extent to which these intentions meet the criteria for purpose, the second third of the interview explores the degree to which these aims are personally meaningful (e.g., "How much do

you care about this aim, relative to other aims in your life?", the degree to which the young person is actively involved in pursuing these aims (e.g., "Are you doing anything today to make progress toward this aim? If so, what?"), and the degree to which these aims are motivated by a desire to make a difference in the broader world (e.g., "Why is this aim so important to you?") The final third of the protocol probes the discovery, pursuit, and experience of participants' purposes. For instance, questions ask, "How did you discover your purpose in life? Who helped you find your purpose?" Interviews were conducted by members of the research team, all of whom underwent extensive training, and they were conducted in school libraries during and immediately after school. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and identifying information was removed.

Data Analysis

To address the first two research questions, regarding the prevalence of purpose and the relationship between purpose and indicators of positive development, we compared survey responses from the two groups and conducted three analyses. First, we ran correlations on the relationships among all variables for the complete sample to assess whether variables related to one another in expected ways. Second, we compared mean levels of purpose between the two groups to determine whether youth from the low- and middle-income communities differed in the extent to which they had identified a purpose for their lives. Third, we calculated correlations and compared them to determine whether purpose was differentially associated with indicators of positive development across samples. Correlations were calculated separately on data from the low- and middle-income sample.

To address the third research question, regarding the way youth from low-income communities discovered purpose, we conducted interviews. Two members of the research team read through each transcript at least three times. The first time they read and coded the manuscripts following the conventions of the Revised Youth Purpose codebook (Malin et al., 2008) to ensure youth displayed at least signs of purpose. Among both the low- and middle-income samples, all youth displayed at least some signs of purpose, meaning they clearly demonstrated at least two of the three dimensions of the construct (e.g., goal directedness, personal meaningfulness, beyond-the-self orientation) and most ($n = 36$ of 46 total; $n = 20$ of 26 low-income

Table 2
Measures of Positive Development

Scale name	Description	N	α	Sample item(s)	M (SD)
The Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991)	Assesses two dimensions of hope, pathways and will	8	.85	"I can think of many ways to get myself out of a jam." (Pathways) "I meet the goals that I set for myself." (Agency)	5.15 (0.92)
Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985)	Global life satisfaction measure	5	.80	"The conditions of my life are excellent."	4.56 (1.28)
Prosocial Behavior Intentions Scale (Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019)	Assesses how likely one is to act on opportunities to help others	5	.72	"Comfort someone I know after they experienced difficult times."	6.01 (0.85)
Peer Support Scale (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987)	Gauges quality of friendships with peers	4	.84	"If my friends know something is bothering me, they ask me about it."	5.68 (1.21)
Trait Positive Adjective Questionnaire (Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Alper, & Skoner, 2003)	Indicates how accurately the adjective describes one generally	7	.84	"Lively," "happy," "calm"	4.69 (1.03)
PHQ-9 Depression Screener (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001) ^a	Asks how many times one was bothered with certain problems over a 2-week period	9	.86	"Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down"	17.14 (5.71)
Self-Rated Health ^b	One question about subjective rating of one's own health	1	N/A	"In general, how is your health? Would you say . . ."	5.43 (1.29)
Physical Activity ^c	Two questions about whether they engage in organized and non-organized exercise	2	.05 ^d	"Do you engage in nonorganized exercise at least once a week (such as, gardening, running, bike riding, etc.)?"	0.58 (0.49)/ 0.69 (0.46)
Contextual Safety	Three questions about feeling unsafe in home, school, and neighborhoods contexts	3	.65	"How often do you feel afraid walking around your neighborhood?"	5.63 (1.53)
Sleep Quality Scale (Short, Gradisar, Lack, Wright, & Chatburn, 2013) ^b	Two questions about subjective sleep quality	2	.70 ^d	"In the past 2 weeks, how often have you had a good night's sleep?"	3.67 (1.46)
Short-Form Perceived Stress Scale-4 (Warttig, Forshaw, South, & White, 2013)	Four questions about ability to cope with stressors in daily life over 1 month	4	.69	"In the last month, how often have you felt you were unable to control the important things in your life?"	3.77 (1.13)

Note. N refers to the number of items in each scale. α refers to Cronbach's α . Means and SDs are for the total sample.

^aScores are summed with a potential range from 9 (lowest) to 36 (highest), and endpoints anchored from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*nearly every day*). ^bEndpoints anchored from 1 (*poor/no days*) to 7 (*excellent/everyday*). ^cEndpoints anchored from 0 (*no*) to 1 (*yes*). ^dCorrelation between the two items, not Cronbach's α .

sample; $n = 16$ of 20 middle-income sample) displayed a clear purpose in life, meaning they demonstrated all three dimensions. For all analyses, coders used a consensual approach to reach agreement, whereby the two coders compared their emerging codes with one another and vetted them with a third member of the research team who served as an auditor (e.g., Hill et al., 2005). The

second time coders read through the transcripts, they looked for evidence of the process through which youth discovered purpose. Here our coding process reflected a thematic analysis utilizing the constant comparative approach to develop codes (Given, 2008; Glaser, 1965). Thematic analysis is a largely descriptive approach to analyzing qualitative data. Consistent with this approach, we

reviewed transcripts to identify themes that helped explain how youth from low-income communities discovered their purposes in life. As each new theme emerged, we looked for evidence of it in subsequent transcripts. Along the way we edited, omitted, and extended themes to ensure they best fit the data. What we were left with was a set of thematic codes that helped explain purpose development. Consistent with an inductive investigation, we did not have a priori hypotheses; however, existing research on purpose development served as sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2003). Sensitizing concepts provide a general sense of “reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Although definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). In particular, as a result of the literature, we were attentive to the role ethnic minority status, social support, and opportunities for engagement might have played in purpose formation (e.g., Gutowski et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2012; Sumner et al., 2018). Once the coding scheme was established, all transcripts were re-read and re-coded a third time to determine the prevalence of themes across participants. Only those codes that appeared across at least three individuals were retained.

Among the low-income sample, a number of interesting themes emerged, but two were particularly relevant to the purpose formation process: the presence of personal hardships—including financial challenges, racism and sexism, and health issues—and the presence of developmental supports—including familial support, like-minded peers, and a religious belief system.

Findings from this part of the study are reported and should be interpreted in light of the qualitative methods used. For instance, we report that emergent themes apply to many or most (14 or more), some (7–13), or a few (3–6) individuals in the low-income sample ($n = 26$) and many or most (11 or more), some (6–10), or a few (3–5) individuals in the middle-income sample ($n = 20$). Providing more accurate numbers or percentages would be inappropriate given the purposeful, nonrandom nature of the sample.

Results

Quantitative Results

Correlational Analyses

Preliminary analyses indicated most constructs were correlated with purpose in the expected

directions, suggesting data generated by these survey items were valid. Table 3 reports intercorrelations.

Presence of Purpose

The first research question concerned the prevalence of purpose across low- and middle-income groups. Mean purpose scores were compared between groups to assess whether the groups reported similar scores. Results indicated the two groups did not differ in the prevalence of purpose overall, nor were there significant differences between groups across the dimensions of purpose (see Table 4).

Indicators of Positive Development

To address the second research question, assessing the relationships among purpose and indicators of positive development, we ran correlations for both samples. Given the number of tests conducted, Holm-adjusted p -values were computed to control family wise error rates (Holm, 1979). The adjustment is similar to the Bonferroni correction but retains greater statistical power (Aickin & Gensler, 1996). Fisher z -transformation tests of the differences between correlations were also calculated. Confidence intervals around the correlations are reported to increase confidence we are not making Type II errors (e.g., false-negative). Greater overlap of the confidence intervals indicates a lower likelihood of making a Type II error. The lack of a significant z -value indicates the relationship was similar between the two groups. This approach (e.g., comparing correlations) was more reasonable than running regressions with interaction terms, given the difficulties in detecting significant interactions, particularly with prospective causal-comparative designs, such as this one (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012; Schenker & Rumrill, 2004). Most variables were significantly associated with purpose and relationships trended in the expected direction (e.g., life satisfaction and self-rated health positively correlated with purpose).

The relationships between purpose and indicators of positive development, which are displayed in Table 5, were largely observed across the two samples. For instance, among the low-income sample, purpose was positively associated with hope, life satisfaction, prosocial intentions, peer support, and positive affect, and it was negatively associated with depression. Purpose was also positively associated with self-rated health, feeling safe, and sleep

Table 3
Zero-Order Correlations for All Variables, Total Sample

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 CPS	—												
2 Hope	.66	—											
3 SWL	.47	.53	—										
4 ProSoc.	.27	.25	.16	—									
5 Peer	.33	.25	.22	.26	—								
6 TAQ	.47	.49	.42	.19	.30	—							
7 PHQ9	-.28	-.31	-.47	-.08	-.28	-.37	—						
8 Health	.30	.42	.38	.13	.21	.26	-.39	—					
9 Sport	.07	.08	.15	.02	-.01	.12	-.15	.27	—				
10 Exerc.	.09	.14	.08	.09	.09	.09	-.20	.16	.05	—			
11 Safety	.22	.23	.29	.24	.16	.23	-.33	.24	.05	-.07	—		
12 Sleep	.18	.21	.31	.06	.19	.28	-.40	.32	.19	.19	.13	—	
13 Stress	-.24	-.29	-.45	-.04	-.26	-.36	.61	-.27	-.09	-.08	-.36	-.30	—

Note. Bolded correlations are significant at $p < .05$. All variables were normally distributed (i.e., skewness and kurtosis $< |1|$). CPS = Claremont Purpose Scale; SLW = satisfaction with life; ProSoc = prosocial intentions; Peer = peer acceptance; TAQ = trait positive affect; PHQ9 = depression screener; Health = self-rated health; Sport = organized sports participation; Exerc = nonorganized exercise; Safety = contextual safety; Sleep = sleep quality.

Table 4
Means, SDs, and Difference Tests for Purpose Dimensions Across Samples

	Low-income	Middle-income	t-Value
CPS composite	5.51 (0.87)	5.54 (0.89)	-.34
Meaning	4.76 (1.43)	4.64 (1.54)	.72
Goal-orientation	5.72 (1.05)	5.90 (1.04)	-1.45
Beyond-the-self	6.04 (0.76)	6.07 (0.82)	-.36

Note. No p -values were significant (all $ps > .147$). Degrees of freedom on all tests was 305. SDs are in parentheses next to means.

quality. It was negatively associated with stress and unrelated to exercise (see Table 5). Among the middle-income sample, purpose was positively associated with hope, life satisfaction, prosocial intentions, peer support, and positive affect. It was not associated with depression, which was surprising. However, this was likely due to the more conservative alpha region for rejection (e.g., $p < .008$ rather than $< .05$, given the Holm adjustment) for the p -value for this correlation. Purpose was positively associated with self-rated health but was unrelated to feeling safe, sleep, stress, sports, and

Table 5
Comparison of Correlations Between Indicators of Positive Development and Purpose Among Low- and Middle-Income Samples

	Low-income	95% CI	Middle-income	95% CI	ΔFisher's Z
Hope	.62***	[.51, .70]	.70***	[.61, .78]	1.62
Life satisfaction	.42***	[.29, .54]	.54***	[.41, .65]	1.56
Prosocial intentions	.25**	[.10, .39]	.29**	[.14, .43]	0.38
Peer support	.35***	[.21, .48]	.30**	[.14, .44]	0.37
Positive affect	.49***	[.37, .60]	.46***	[.32, .58]	0.33
Depression	-.34***	[-.47, -.19]	-.22	[-.37, -.05]	1.18
Health	.33***	[.18, .46]	.28**	[.12, .42]	0.07
Safety	.24*	[.09, .38]	.20	[.04, .35]	0.23
Sleep	.19*	[.04, .33]	-.02	[-.19, .14]	1.48
Stress	-.30**	[-.44, -.16]	-.17	[-.33, -.01]	0.90
Sports ^a	-.01	[-.16, .15]	.16	[-.01, .31]	1.29
Exercise ^a	.05	[-.11, .20]	.13	[-.03, .29]	0.67

Note. Holm-adjusted p values are reported.
^aDummy-coded: 0 = no, 1 = yes. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

exercise. No correlations differed significantly between the two groups, indicating the relationship between purpose and these indicators was similar across the two samples from different socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table 5).

Qualitative Findings

To explore the third research question, regarding how youth from low-income communities discovered purpose, we turned to the interviews. Findings here suggested that youth in this sample discovered purpose in a variety of ways. For instance, a 17-year-old multiethnic female reportedly found purpose in her faith, and she credited her commitment to serving God, to her Dad, who was a pastor (ID 147). A 17-year-old Latinx male found purpose in enacting social and political change, and he pointed to national and international issues as inspiring his commitment to this aim (ID 40). These pathways to purpose were each particular to one or two individuals.

However, across slightly more than half the low-income sample, a fairly consistent purpose-discovery process, which was reflected in two themes, emerged. The first theme suggested that personal hardships served as catalysts for purpose development, under certain conditions. Most youth from the low-income community talked about encountering personal hardships (e.g., financial hardships, racial and gender bias, health issues, etc.), but only some of these hardships inspired purpose. In some cases, youth experienced hardships that did not inspire purposes. For instance, a Latinx 16-year-old female from the low-income community noted that she wanted to do more to support “justice and equality” in the world (ID 104). “I want a future where everybody is equal,” she told us. Her Mom left Mexico in hopes of finding greater equality, but she continued to experience discrimination—albeit to a lesser degree, she told us—in the US.

[My Mom] always fought through everything like working, climbing up the ladder in her work, to get more money, so she can help me out, for my future and everything. Just having equality is a reason why she stayed here.

When asked what she was doing to help promote greater equality, the young woman said, “I don’t know. It’s kind of hard, like what can I do to change things? I don’t know what I could do. I guess, like talking to people, maybe? I don’t know.

I don’t know.” This young woman provides a compelling negative case. She experienced a challenge which inspired a potential purpose around supporting social change, but she did not know how to take productive action. Perhaps, if she had had access to an institution or individual who could have directed her or better supported her, this interest may have taken root and bloomed as a purpose.

As is clear from this negative case, personal hardships were only likely to inspire purpose when supportive individuals and/ or institutions were also available. In other words, youth who experienced personal hardships *and* had access to developmental assets, most commonly familial support, like-minded peers, and religious belief systems, tended to develop a purpose in life. The second theme suggested access to developmental assets provided critical support that encouraged youth to take action to address the personal hardships in ways that benefited not only themselves, but others as well. In this way, access to developmental assets enabled youth to connect personal hardships in the past to opportunities for meaningful action in the future, and, in so doing, to discover purpose. It is noteworthy that the interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to probe supports and obstacles to purpose formation, but it did not ask about any of the specific personal hardships or developmental assets that emerged. In other words, references to personal hardships, including financial hardships, racial and sexual bias, and health issues, along with references to developmental assets, including familial support, like-minded peers, and religious belief systems, emerged spontaneously.

We looked for evidence of this same purpose-discovery process among youth in the middle-income sample, and we only found one instance where it applied. Most youth from both samples reported access to developmental assets, but, whereas most youth from the low-income sample discussed encountering personal hardships, only a few from the middle-income sample did. Interestingly, as evident in some of the quotations in Table 6, youth from both samples discussed many of the same hardships (e.g., financial issues, racial and sexual bias, health issues, etc.), but youth in the low-income sample were more likely to experience these issues as *personal* hardships. For instance, youth from both samples talked about racism, but youth in the low-income sample talked about it as a personal hardship, whereas youth in the middle-income sample talked about it as a societal problem. Table 6 includes representative quotations and indications of prevalence for each of the themes

Table 6
Emergent Themes, Subthemes, and Prevalence of Themes Across Samples

Hardships	Low-income sample Most participants reported hardships	Middle-income sample Few reported hardships
Financial difficulties	<p><i>My biggest concerns are money . . . Like if I'm not able to pay for stuff. Or like becoming homeless . . . That's all I really think about is if I'm not able to pay. Since like right now, my mom's struggling with money . . . I was just starting to think, oh, what if this happens to me? (ID 11, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p> <p><i>I've always wanted to be a pathologist and study infectious disease, but, the bottom-line is, I don't have money to get me there . . . to do that, you have to be in school like 10–12 years, and I can't afford that. And I can't expect my family to help. I can't put them through that. (ID 89, 16-year-old Latinx male)</i></p>	<p><i>*[Stocks] have fascinated me since I was young. I remember when I bought my first stock I was 15 . . . Stocks are cool . . . I like to have a safety net of money, and I hate dipping into it . . . It gives me anxiety. (ID 128, 17-year-old Middle Eastern male)</i></p> <p><i>I was asking [myself], "How can you survive in the music industry these days?" . . . It's a pretty tough one to make money from, but, if it's done the right way, you could probably pull it off, but it's hard to do. (ID 154, 17-year-old White male)</i></p>
Racism/sexism	<p><i>I was with [my dad] when he was fighting for his papers . . . I come from immigrant parents. Well, my Dad has his papers already, but my Grandma . . . that concerns me a lot. Like if [the government] is really going to take everyone away. (ID 54, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p> <p><i>People like to undermine women, mostly men. But [my mom] always fought through everything like working, climbing up the ladder in her work, to get more money, so she can help me out, for my future . . . Having equality is a reason why she stayed here. "Cause she came here from Mexico . . ." (ID 104, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p>	<p><i>*I'm 6'1"; light skin, because that's all you hear on the news, when they try to identify people . . . [Society] is still racist, but it's not that racist. I'm not worried about being Mexican in America . . . I'm not concerned about racial tensions, really. (ID 13, 17-year-old Latinx male)</i></p> <p><i>*If I wanna play the race card, I feel like I could face some racial discrimination. But aside from that, in terms of business, you . . . just like fashion, you could fail at any given moment, but it's whether or not you work to recover. (ID 128, 17-year-old Middle Eastern male)</i></p>
Health	<p><i>Becoming an oncologist. It's the one goal that I've had since my brother got diagnosed. Then, before my brother passed away, I promised him I was gonna be an oncologist. So, I'm determined, 'cause I never break a promise. (ID 54, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p> <p><i>I've taken therapy like three times . . . This one time they sent me to the [psychiatric hospital] . . . My sister, she drew a picture of me coming out of the hospital, and she's like, "I love you. I miss you. Come back," . . . And I just started changing, started progressing. (ID 11, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p>	<p><i>I tore my hamstring in a soccer game, and I went through the process of going through all the physical therapy, the check-ups, and it's something that interests me . . . All the muscles and the bones. It's always interested me since I was in seventh grade. (ID 254, 16-year-old White male)</i></p> <p><i>I was depressed . . . in high school . . . thinking about, "Man, this is never going to get better," but, whenever my mom took me to the doctor . . . my mom was like "I know you can get better." (ID 121, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p>
Developmental assets	Most reported assets	Most reported assets
Familial support	<p><i>I do it for my parents because they came over here and they're really hard working and it motivates me to be hard working. (ID 77, 17-year-old Latinx male)</i></p> <p><i>You should always watch over family before you think about anything else, because in the end, they are the ones that are always there for you . . . I'm one of the people that can go home, and it'll be fine because it's not just a house, it's a home for me. (ID 105, 17-year-old Latinx female)</i></p>	<p><i>I have a lot of great family that's surrounding me and important people in my life that have made it worth living, and I don't feel like that's gonna change or go away. (ID 112, 17-year-old, White female)</i></p> <p><i>Being able to work with my family has helped me to be more confident, helped me to learn how to advise people better . . . My mom's always been really good at giving advice and very good at giving her opinion. (ID 39, 17-year-old White female)</i></p>

Table Table 6
Continued

Developmental assets	Most reported assets	Most reported assets
Religious/faith	Well, [God]’s helped me through all the stuff I’ve been through growing up as a kid. He helped my whole family get back up when my brother passed away. (ID 54, 17-year-old Latinx female)	It’s joyful. Like the whole—at least prayer and worship, specifically, is like the joyful factor . . . It’s just the unison factor of all the people doing this and then serving God and worshipping God. And then the fact that tons and tons of people all around the world are doing the exact same thing. (ID 27, 17-year-old multiethnic female)
	Religion is like a motivation . . . They teach us how he went through so much struggle and still pushed through. And I just think of it that way, even though I’m struggling, he’s always going to be there for me; he’s going to help me. (ID 11, 17-year-old Latinx female)	Just having faith in God . . . [Without that] I kind of realized that my life will never be fully complete. I’ll never totally feel 100% happiness, but, if I just don’t put my faith in material things, I know I’ll eventually reach that, and I’ll be happier. (ID 73, 15-year-old Latinx female)
Like-minded peers	I want to surround myself with like-minded individuals who can inspire me to go further beyond my comfort zone and push for greater things. But if I’m hanging around people who don’t have the drive or aren’t really intelligent, then I don’t want to really surround myself with them. (ID 89, 16-year-old Latinx male)	Important to me would probably be my friends at school. I feel like, if you get a good set of friends, they’ll push you to do your best. (ID 21, 17-year-old White male)
	Probably friends. I like whoever really comes around, and who has the same mindset. Like, education’s important to them. They’re not gonna just joke around. I don’t associate with people like that, “cause I need people who are gonna make me better.” (ID 59, 16-year-old Asian American female)	Friends—I really value my friends and hanging out with friends, and how I can help them, and how they can help me, and, just, friendships in general. (ID 118, 17-year-old White female)
Purpose-hardship process	Most demonstrated evidence of the hardship purpose-discovery process	Only one demonstrated evidence of the hardship purpose-discovery process

*Indicates that a youth from the middle-income sample discussed the same topic as youth from the low-income sample, but they identified the issue as a societal rather than a personal hardship. Only a few youth from the middle-income community identified personal hardships.

and sub-themes that emerged. To provide a rich and detailed description of what these themes looked like in this sample, we include three brief case studies in the following section. Cases were selected to illustrate some of the different purposes, hardships, and developmental assets that emerged and to provide a rich and detailed picture of the purpose-discovery process.

The first, a 17-year-old Latinx male from the low-income sample, found purpose in creating movies that move people or teach them a lesson. “I’m a huge movie fanatic, movie buff, that’s what I wanna pursue as a career. I’m gonna go into filming and directing. My school I want, my three choices, USC, UCLA and NYU because they have really excellent film” (ID 134). Dreams of directing and filming pervaded his daily thoughts and filled his spare time: “I listen to music and I think, ‘Oh that’d go well with this cool scene,’ and then I

develop characters [for] that scene and build a story around it. . . .And yes, that’s free time.”

His commitment to creating films derived from a desire to influence others. “I just grew up loving movies, and I think it’s so cool ‘cause movies can do so much for everyone’.” He said he wanted to make movies that provided important “social commentary,” but also “inspiring movies, just fun movies, funny movies, scary movies.” His commitment to creating movies that influence others came through in his interview. “I definitely wanna make movies with a purpose rather than just making money.” He felt strongly that movies could effect important changes in viewers. “Movies don’t have to be the thing that changes the world, but I think they definitely can, if you try.”

When asked why he loved movies so much, he pointed to his past. He reported that he grew up “really, really poor.” In and out of shelters and

living with friends and extended family members, he developed a love of movies:

The only thing I could afford really growing up was this dollar theatre that was next to my apartment. So, every Tuesday my mom would take me to the dollar theatre because it was only a dollar or \$2 for us.

Poverty could have derailed his pursuit of purpose. "There's always the issue of money." But, instead, it forged it. He pointed to his Mom's support as critical to his purpose-discovery.

[My Mom] always had big dreams, but she didn't get the support from her parents, and, because of that, it sort of infringed upon her ability to achieve them. And then she had me, and I had no Dad. She had to take care of me, work three jobs at once. She's never really had an opportunity to chase her dreams. So, she's very much about, 'if you're not doing what you love, what's the point?' . . . And that's what I've learned from her—it's that your dreams are achievable. It's just a matter of how far you're willing to go to get them. So, she's very supportive in me being a director.

In addition to his Mom, this young man also pointed to his faith as playing a key role in helping him find purpose in making movies. One important lesson he hoped to convey through movies was the importance of forgiveness. "If you hold onto the anger, it's gonna start bleeding through your actions and those actions define who you are." He told us he had seen this in his own life, but forgiveness was also something he learned through his faith.

Growing up poor meant movies were one of the few indulgences in his life. He witnessed the power of movies to alter people's emotional states and help them see things in a new light, and he found purpose in working to pursue a career in film. In this way, financial hardship, which could have interfered with his pursuit of purpose, instead provided a pathway for meaningful action. However, he might not have had the courage to follow this path had it not been for the support he received from his mother and the direction he derived from his faith.

In addition to financial challenges, racism and sexism also emerged as personal hardships some of the youth in the low-income sample experienced. A 17-year-old Latinx female talked about how being a victim of racial and sexual bias inspired her to find purpose in promoting social change.

Fighting sexism, breaking those barriers for women. Of course, there's just so much racism in the world, police brutality, and it's just sad. All those things you hear on the news. Like even if people claim that it's exaggerated, it's not. It's actually happening. And I understand that, especially being a minority, and being a woman, I see it happen. Personally, upfront. Yeah, big things that I wish to change. (ID 87)

She found purpose in working to correct these injustices for others. "Being from an immigrant family, and being Mexican, and being a woman. That'll be a priority in my career, if I ever actually become what I wanna be, which is a lawyer, [I'll] just fight back." She had specific plans for her law degree; she spoke at length about wanting to become a politician to effect political change.

I hope to major in political science, and then get my law degree, and then just work my way up. . . Kind of like Kamala Harris? Yeah, so her career path. Honestly, my long-term goal is becoming a senator. . . It's how I feel I can bring change.

Support from her friends and family helped this young woman find meaning in using the challenges she experienced as catalysts to improve circumstances for others. She described her parents as "supportive" of her plans, and her like-minded peers in the service-oriented Key Club as helping her learn how she could take action. She noted that one of her fears was "being a woman, and being a minority, I'm gonna have a lot of doors shut in my face." When she was asked how she would remain dedicated to her aim despite these challenges, she said, "Yeah, that is very real, but, like with Key Club, you surround yourself by people who are socially aware and more conscious of that. There are ways to help yourself." In this way, she pointed to supportive family members and like-minded friends as playing a key role in helping her pursue her purpose, which was carved from personal encounters with racism and sexism.

The third example is a 16-year-old Asian male from the low-income sample who found purpose in becoming a band director. He talked about how he was "really into band drumline," and how "music is a really big part" of his life (ID 48). As a musician, he played bass, saxophone, viola, and piano. When asked what his purpose was, he said without hesitation, "to help people." He explained that he hoped to do this by becoming a high school band

director. When we asked why this career path appealed to him, he said:

I would do a high school band, 'cause high school band's more fun, to be honest. 'Cause you have a lot of younger kids who like music, who are actually into it. And also, it's a place for people to escape to, out of the drama from high school. . . . That's what I do . . . High school is just stupid, to be honest. . . . Everyone goes through the same struggle in high school, so it'd be cool to help these kids go through it.

Inspired by the social challenges he experienced in high school, he found purpose in becoming a high school band director who could provide to others the same safe haven band provided him.

Support from his family, faith, and band teacher enabled him to find purpose in a personal hardship that might otherwise have curtailed it. For him, faith and family were interconnected. "Our church also has family events too, so we always go to that, too. Because we always have time for our family. Every week we always watch a movie or something like that." He identified his parents as important mentors, and when asked to describe what his future was likely to entail, in addition to citing his role as a band director, he said, "My parents will still be there, and my brother." He pointed to his drum captain as someone who pushed him.

[The drum captain] is really outgoing and he yells at us, but it's coming from a good place, and he actually wants us to become a drumline, a good one. 'Cause I like what he says, 'You see all the other drum lines?' He says, 'F them', 'cause you guys are what are important to me, and I want you guys to get better'. Which, I'm like, 'Okay, that's cool'.

Without these interpersonal and spiritual supports, it seems unlikely the social hardships this young man experienced would have yielded an inspiring sense of purpose.

Although in these three cases purposes culminated in specific career plans, other youth in this sample found purpose in faith, family, and volunteer work, and they demonstrated this same purpose-discovery process. For instance, a Latinx female from the low-income community (ID 54) found purpose in supporting her family. Her commitment to this aim was spurred by the loss of her brother and supported by a deep religious conviction.

Discussion

Because purpose is reflected in an aspiration to have a meaningful role in the broader world, like other indicators of positive youth development, it takes shape through bidirectional interactions between individuals and their contexts, and for youth from ethnic minority and low-income communities, it may be shaped by experiences of racism, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and segregation. This study examined purpose development in light of individuals' sociocultural contexts. More specifically, this study explored purpose, a key component of youth thriving (Benson, 2006; Damon, 2008), among samples of youth from low- and middle-income communities. Qualitative and quantitative methods enabled us to explore the role of social class in purpose formation.

The study was guided by three related research questions. First, *how prevalent is purpose among youth from low-income communities?* In support of leading theories of positive youth development (Benson, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005), purpose scores from youth in the low- and middle-income samples did not significantly differ. This conclusion was not entirely anticipated based on existing theoretical frameworks. For instance, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs suggests individuals are less likely to be motivated to search for self-actualizing aims, such as purpose, until more immediate ones, such as food, shelter, and safety, have been secured. This runs counter to our findings, which suggest purpose may be a more fundamental need than Maslow envisioned. This finding would be consistent with Frankl's (1959) assessment of the construct's critical role in human survival and thriving.

Second, *which indicators of positive development are related to purpose among youth from low-income communities?* Results suggest that among youth from low-income backgrounds, purpose is positively related to hope, life satisfaction, prosocial intentions, peer support, and positive affect, and it is negatively related to depression. Similarly, purpose is positively associated with self-reported health, feeling safe, and sleep, and it is negatively associated with stress. In short, purpose appears to be related to many of the same indicators of positive development among youth from low-income backgrounds as it is among youth from middle-income backgrounds.

Finally, *how do youth from low-income backgrounds discover purpose?* Although youth reportedly discovered purposes in different ways, we found

evidence of a fairly consistent purpose-discovery process among many of the youth in this sample. Youth from the low-income sample tended to encounter personal hardships that in the presence of developmental assets inspired purpose. This process emerged among most of the youth in the low-income sample but only among one young person in the middle-income sample. Although most youth in both samples identified developmental assets, youth in the low-income sample were more likely to point to personal hardships and discuss the role of such hardships in their purpose formation process. A few studies have yielded findings that align with our emerging theory. First, Moran et al. (2012) determined that familial support, including emotional, cognitive, and monetary support, was critical to purpose development. The authors also concluded that ethnic minority youth tended to identify purposes drawn from their experiences straddling two cultures. Second, a recent qualitative study noted that the stress associated with growing up as an ethnic minority adolescent in a low-income, urban community served as both a potential obstacle to as well as a potential motivator for purpose development (Gutowski et al., 2018). In short, empirical research provides some support for our proposed purpose-formation process for low-income youth.

Personal hardships emerged as central to purpose discovery for youth in the low-income sample. Interestingly, whereas most youth in the low-income sample identified at least one personal hardship, only a few in the middle-income sample did. This study did not include an appropriate sample to make claims about the prevalence of hardship based on socioeconomic status, but a relatively large body of research finds that indeed young people growing up in low-income communities experience a disproportionate number of personal hardships (e.g., Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012; Ridge, 2011; Wade, Shea, Rubin, & Wood, 2014). What is less clear is exactly *how* the presence of hardships forged purpose. In several cases, the hardship presented a problem in the broader world that needed to be addressed, and that could be addressed—at least potentially—in a personally meaningful way to benefit others or society at large. In short, personal hardships provided opportunities for purposeful action.

Interestingly, a range of hardships appeared to spur the growth of purpose among youth in the low-income sample. Although these hardships could have derailed purpose development, they instead forged it when—through support and

guidance from developmental assets—youth found meaning in addressing these hardships for others. Financial issues, experiences with racism and sexism, and health issues emerged as the most common hardships youth in this sample experienced, but social and family issues, as well as a lack of safety, also surfaced. Although more research is needed, in line with existing research (e.g., Gutowski et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2012), this study suggests the immediate and direct nature of personal hardships was significant for the development of purpose. Future research should explore the range of personal hardships that foster purpose and the prevalence with which hardships are associated with purpose development among youth from low-income backgrounds.

In addition to identifying personal hardships as central to purpose formation, youth in the low-income sample also pointed to a host of developmental assets that supported their purpose development. The 40 developmental assets Benson (2006) identified include both internal characteristics and external features of one's environment that support healthy development. Consistent with existing research that consistently finds that assets are associated with thriving, this study offers some insight into how developmental assets can support the formation of purpose among youth from low-income communities. A small body of existing research lends support to the proposed role of developmental assets in encouraging purpose development for low-income and ethnic minority youth (e.g., Elsaesser, Heath, Kim, & Bouris, 2018; Liang et al., 2017; Moran et al., 2012; Regnerus & Elder, 2003).

Familial support emerged as an important developmental asset among both samples. However, existing research finds that families play a particularly important role in the lives of youth of color growing up in low-income communities (see Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Given that most youth in the low-income sample identified as Latinx and that family plays a significant role in the Latinx culture (Campos, Ullman, Aguilera, & Schetter, 2014), it made sense that family emerged as an important source of support. Existing research also finds families are integral to the purpose formation process, at least for youth who have access to caring families (Damon, 2008; Liang et al., 2017; Moran et al., 2012). Most references to familial support in this study focused on the role parents played, but future studies should also investigate the role siblings and extended family members have in supporting the development of purpose.

In addition to familial support, like-minded peers also emerged as important supports for the purpose-discovery process. Existing literature focuses on how youth end up in like-minded peer groups; socialization and selection are important in this process (Brown & Larson, 2009). However, little research has explored the role of supportive, like-minded peers in either positive youth development more generally or purpose formation more specifically. That said, at least a couple of studies have similarly concluded that like-minded peers and supportive friends can facilitate youths' pursuit of purpose (Bronk, 2012; Gutowski et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2012). Religious belief systems, caring teachers, and mentors were yet other developmental assets that emerged as significant supports for the purpose formation process.

Findings from this study have significant implications for basic and applied research. From a basic research perspective, they yield important insights into the prevalence, correlates, and formation of purpose among a sample of low-income youth. This study provides important empirical support for the largely theoretical claims of positive developmental scientists regarding the potential for all youth to lead lives of purpose (e.g., Benson, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004). From an applied perspective, findings provide empirical evidence for the way youth from low-income backgrounds discovers productive purposes in life. These findings, coupled with knowledge that purpose can serve as an important source of resiliency for youth living in poverty (Machell et al., 2016), provide direction to extracurricular, in-school, and other programs that seek to foster purpose among young people. More specifically, findings from this study suggest that rather than trying to ignore or avoid potential obstacles to purpose formation, effective purpose-fostering programs should help youth identify meaningful ways of addressing the hardships in their lives. This suggestion is underscored by recent research that identifies other significant pathways, including social support, passion identification, and faith, to supporting the development of purpose among young people living in poverty (Liang et al., 2017). Furthermore, learning that purpose is most likely to blossom in the presence not only of hardships but also of contextual nutrients further highlights the need to build developmental assets in underserved communities.

Although this study yielded some important and novel findings, it is not without its limitations. For instance, some youth in our low-income sample viewed challenges as meaningful opportunities for

future action, but others did not; our qualitative methodology precludes us from making predictions regarding how commonly personal hardships contribute to purpose development. Furthermore, this study sought to investigate the nature of purpose, a developmental construct that by definition extends across time, and yet it relied on a one-time (or two-time, per the exploratory sequential design) data collection effort. Youths' intentions need to be maintained over time to constitute purposes, and without following the youth, we cannot know for sure that the things they identified as such truly became enduring purposes. Future research should investigate purpose among low-income youth using longitudinal methods.

Conclusion

Limitations withstanding, this study responds to Garcia Coll et al. (1996) call for research that advances our understanding of normative developmental processes among youth from low-income communities. More specifically, this study highlights the complex role socioeconomic status plays in purpose development and provides a rich and detailed picture of the way youth from low-income communities discover purpose. Findings suggest socioeconomic status does not influence the prevalence or positive developmental correlates of purpose but may shape the process of purpose discovery in important ways. In particular, the youth in this study from low-income backgrounds encountered personal hardships that could have derailed their pursuit of purpose but instead inspired it when coupled with developmental supports. Supportive families, like-minded peers, religious beliefs, and other developmental assets enabled the youth in this study to find purpose in working to improve for others the conditions that challenged them. It seems likely that the tendency of youth from low-income communities to draw on their developmental assets and re-envision their personal hardships as opportunities for purposeful action represents a key competency in this population (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Future research should continue to investigate this promising possibility.

References

- Aickin, M., & Gensler, H. (1996). Adjusting for multiple testing when reporting research results: The Bonferroni vs Holm methods. *American Journal of Public Health, 86*, 726-728. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.86.5.726>

- Andrews, M., Bundick, M., Jones, A., Bronk, K. C., Mariano, J. M., & Damon, W. (2006). *Revised Youth Purpose Interview*. Unpublished instrument, Stanford Center on Adolescence, Stanford, CA.
- Aneshensel, C. S., & Sucoff, C. A. (1996). The neighborhood context of adolescent mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 37*, 293–310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137258>
- Armsden, G. C., & Greenberg, M. T. (1987). The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment: Individual differences and their relationship to psychological well-being in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 16*, 427–454. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02202939>
- Attewell, P., & Fitzgerald, R. (1980). Comparing stratification theories. *American Sociological Review, 45*, 325–328. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095129>
- Baumsteiger, R., Mangan, S., Bronk, K. C., & Bono, G. (2019). An integrative intervention for cultivating gratitude among adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 14*, 807–819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2019.1579356>
- Baumsteiger, R., & Siegel, J. (2019). Measuring prosociality: The development of a prosocial behavioral intentions scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 101*, 305–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2017.1411918>
- Benson, P. L. (2006). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bigler, M., Neimeyer, G. J., & Brown, E. (2001). The divided self revisited: Effects of self-concept clarity and self-concept differentiation on psychological adjustment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 20*, 396–415. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.20.3.396.22302>
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory? *American Sociological Review, 18*, 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088165>
- Bronk, K. C. (2011). Portraits of purpose: The role of purpose in identity formation. *New Directions in Youth Development, 132*, 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.426>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012). A grounded theory of youth purpose. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 27*, 78–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411412958>
- Bronk, K. C., Baumsteiger, R., Mangan, S., Riches, B., Dubon, V., Benavides, C., & Bono, G. (2019). Fostering purpose among adolescents: Effective online interventions. *Journal of Character Education, 15*(2), 21–38.
- Bronk, K. C., Hill, P. L., Lapsley, D. K., Talib, T., & Finch, W. H. (2009). Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*, 500–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271439>
- Bronk, K. C., Leontopoulou, S., & McConchie, J. (2018). Youth purpose during the great recession: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 14*, 405–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2018.1484942>
- Bronk, K. C., Riches, B., & Mangan, S. (2018). Claremont Purpose Scale: A measure that assesses the three dimensions of purpose among adolescents. *Research in Human Development, 15*, 101–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2018.1441577>
- Brown, B. B., & Larson, J. (2009). Peer relationships in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology, Vol. 2: Contextual influences on adolescent development* (3rd ed., pp. 74–103). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- California Department of Education. (2016). *Ed data: Educational data partnership*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed-data.org>
- Campos, B., Ullman, J. B., Aguilera, A., & Schetter, C. D. (2014). Familism and psychological health: The intervening role of closeness and social support. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*, 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034094>
- Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies for qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 249–291). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chou, T., Asnaani, A., & Hofmann, S. G. (2012). Perception of racial discrimination and psychopathology across three U.S. ethnic minority groups. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 18*, 74–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025432>
- Cohen, S., Doyle, W. J., Turner, R. B., Alper, C. N., & Skoner, D. P. (2003). Emotional style and susceptibility to the common cold. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 65*, 652–657. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.PSY.0000077508.57784.DA>
- Conger, R. D., & Elder, G. H. (1994). *Families in troubled times: Adapting to change in rural America*. New York, NY: Aldine.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*, 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260092>
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*, 119–128. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_2
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*, 71–75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13
- DuRant, R. H., Cadenhead, C., Pendergast, R. A., Slavens, G., & Linder, C. W. (1994). Factors associated with the use of violence among urban Black adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health, 84*, 612–617. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.84.4.612>
- DuRant, R. H., Getts, A., Cadenhead, C., Emans, S. J., & Woods, E. R. (1995). Exposure to violence and

- victimization and depression, hopelessness, and purpose in life among adolescents living in and around public-housing. *Journal of Development and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 16, 233–237. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00004703-199508000-00004>
- Elsaesser, C., Heath, R. D., Kim, J. B., & Bouris, A. (2018). The long-term influence of social support on academic engagement among Latino adolescents: Analysis of between-person and within-person effects among Mexican and other Latino Youth. *Youth & Society*, 50, 1123–1144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X16656086>
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L., Grewen, K. M., Algoe, S. B., Firestone, A. M., Arevalo, J. M., Ma, J., & Cole, S. W. (2015). Psychological well-being and the human conserved transcriptional response to adversity. *PLoS One*, 10, e0121839. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0121839>
- Garcia Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Waskif, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67, 1891–1914. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131600>
- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2012). Causal-comparative research. In L. R. Gay, G. E. Mills, & P. W. Airasian (Eds.), *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and applications* (10th ed., pp. 226–247). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Gillham, J., Adams-Deutsch, Z., Werner, J., Reivich, K., Coulter-Heindl, V., Linkins, M., . . . Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). Character strengths predict subjective well-being during adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6, 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2010.536773>
- Given, L. (2008). *Thematic coding and analysis*. *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12, 436–445. <https://doi.org/10.2307/798843>
- Gutowski, E., White, A., Liang, B., Diamonti, A. J., & Berado, D. (2017). How stress influences purpose development: The importance of social support. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558417737754>
- Hart, D., & Matsuba, K. (2009). Urban neighborhoods as contexts for moral identity development. In D. Narvaez & D. K. Lapsley (Eds.), *Moral personality, identity and character: Explorations in moral psychology* (pp. 214–231). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, C. E., Knox, S., Thompson, B. J., Williams, E. N., Hess, S. A., & Ladany, N. (2005). Consensual qualitative research: An update. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 196–205. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.196>
- Hill, P. L., Edmonds, G. W., & Hampson, S. E. (2017). A purposeful lifestyle is a healthful lifestyle: Linking sense of purpose to self-rated health through multiple health behaviors. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 24, 1392–1400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105317708251>
- Holm, S. (1979). A simple sequentially rejective multiple test procedure. *Scandinavian Journal of Statistics*, 6, 65–70.
- Hooker, S. A., & Masters, K. S. (2014). Purpose in life is associated with physical activity measured by accelerometer. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 21, 962–971. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105314542822>
- Ishida, R., & Okada, M. (2006). Effects of a firm purpose in life on anxiety and sympathetic nervous activity caused by emotional stress: Assessment by psychophysiological method. *Stress and Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 22, 275–281. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.1095>
- Kass, J. D., Friedman, R., Leserman, J., Caudill, M., Zuttermeister, P. C., & Benson, H. (1991). An inventory of positive psychological attitudes with potential relevance to health outcomes: Validation and preliminary testing. *Behavioral Medicine*, 17, 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08964289.1991.9937555>
- Kitayama, S., Akutsu, S., Uchida, Y., & Cole, S. W. (2016). Work, meaning, and gene regulation: Findings from a Japanese information technology firm. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 72, 175–181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2016.07.004>
- Kronke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. W. (2001). The PHQ-9: Validity of a brief depression severity measure. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 16, 606–613. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1525-1497.2001.016009606.x>
- Lerner, R. M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development: A view of the issues. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25, 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211>
- Liang, B., White, A., Rhodes, H., Strodel, R., Gutowski, E., DeSilva, A. M., & Lund, T. J. (2017). Pathways to purpose among impoverished youth from the Guatemala City dump community. *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*, 3, 1–21.
- Machell, K. A., Disabato, D. J., & Kashdan, T. B. (2016). Buffering the negative impact of poverty on youth: The power of purpose in life. *Social Indicators Research*, 126, 845–861. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-015-0917-6>
- Malin, H., Liauw, I., & Damon, W. (2017). Purpose and character development in early adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46, 1200–1215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0642-3>
- Malin, H., Reilly, T. S., Yeager, D., Moran, S., Andrews, M., Bundick, M., & Damon, W. (2008). *Interview coding process for statuses of purpose determination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center on Adolescence.
- Manstead, A. S. R. (2018). The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thoughts, feelings, and behavior. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57, 267–291.

- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*, 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>
- Moran, S., Bundick, M. J., Malin, H., & Reilly, T. (2012). How supportive of their specific purposes do youth believe their family and friends are? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *28*, 348–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558412457816>
- Pan, J. Y., Wong, D. F. K., Joubert, L., & Chan, C. L. W. (2008). The protective function of meaning of life on life satisfaction among Chinese students in Australia and Hong Kong: A cross-cultural comparative study. *Journal of American College Health*, *57*, 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JACH.57.2.221-232>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pinquart, M. (2002). Creating and maintaining purpose in old age: A meta-analysis. *Ageing International*, *27*, 90–114.
- Rainey, L. (2014). *The search for purpose in life: An exploration of the purpose, the search process, and purpose anxiety*. Masters of Positive Psychology Capstone, University of Pennsylvania.
- Regnerus, M. D., & Elder, G. H. (2003). Religion and vulnerability among low-risk adolescents. *Social Science Research*, *32*, 633–658. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-089X\(03\)00027-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0049-089X(03)00027-9)
- Ridge, T. (2011). The everyday costs of poverty in childhood: A review of the qualitative research exploring the lives and experiences of low-income children in the UK. *Children & Society*, *25*, 73–84.
- Schenker, J. D., & Rumrill, P. D. (2004). Causal-comparative research designs. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, *21*, 117–121.
- Short, M. A., Gradisar, M., Lack, L. C., Wright, H. R., & Chatburn, A. (2013). Estimating adolescent sleep patterns: Parent reports versus adolescent self-report surveys, sleep diaries, and actigraphy. *Nature and Science of Sleep*, *(5)*, 23–26. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NSS.S38369>
- Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., . . . Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 570–585. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.4.570>
- Spencer, M. B., Dupree, D., & Hartman, T. (1997). A phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST): A self-organization perspective in context. *Development and Psychopathology*, *9*, 817–833.
- Steger, M., & Frazier, P. (2005). Meaning in life: One link in the chain from religiousness to well-being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*, 574–582. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.4.574>
- Sumner, R., Burrow, A., & Hill, P. (2018). The development of purpose in life among adolescents who experience marginalization: Potential opportunities and obstacles. *American Psychologist*, *73*, 740–752. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000249>
- Turner, A. D., Smith, C. E., & Ong, J. (2017). Is purpose in life associated with lower sleep disturbance in older adults? *Sleep Science and Practice*, *1*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41606-017-0015-6>
- Wade, R., Shea, J. A., Rubin, D., & Wood, J. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences of low-income urban youth. *Pediatrics*, *134*, e13–e20. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2475>
- Warttig, S. L., Forshaw, M. J., South, J., & White, A. K. (2013). New, normative, English-sample data for the Short Form Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4). *Journal of Health Psychology*, *18*, 1617–1628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105313508346>