Researchers have argued that purpose supports healthy adolescent development. This study shows how youth purpose reinforces one aspect of healthy development: identity formation.

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The role of purpose in life in healthy identity formation: A grounded model

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EDUCATORS OFTEN BEMOAN the challenge of motivating secondary education students to excel in the classroom. Why is it so difficult to get some adolescents to want to learn? More and more, researchers are connecting a lack of motivation in the classroom with a lack of purpose among the students. Students who do not know why they need to master academic material are not particularly motivated to do so, but students who know what they want out of life and see how what they are learning in class can help them achieve their goals are likely to be highly motivated in the classroom. Educators therefore should focus on inspiring and supporting a meaningful sense of purpose in the lives of their students.

Beyond serving as a critical source of motivation, a purpose in life may also serve as an important component of healthy identity formation; however, this possibility has gone largely unexamined. Although theoretical research has linked purpose to

healthy identity development, empirical work on the topic is lacking.

Erikson was one of the earliest scholars to suggest that under optimal conditions, both a purpose in life and a clear sense of identity develop during adolescence and emerging adulthood.[1] More contemporary researchers have empirically established that youth explore and commit to purposes at the same time as they explore and commit to identities.[2] Not only do purpose and identity develop at roughly the same time, but they also share a focus on personally meaningful beliefs and aims. However, despite their concomitant appearance in the life span and their shared focus, purpose and identity are distinct constructs.

Identity describes personally meaningful aims and beliefs as they pertain to a consistent sense of who one is and who one hopes to become. According to Erikson, establishing a sense of identity results in "inner unity."[3] As individuals navigate adolescence, they determine who they are separate from their family of origin and as members of a wider society. Adolescents develop a philosophy of life and strive to establish a coherent, nuanced sense of career, moral, ethnic, religious, political, and sexual identity.

Purpose describes an enduring, personally meaningful commitment to what one hopes to accomplish or work toward in life. Although more specific definitions of *purpose* have varied in the past, there appears to be a growing consensus among researchers that a purpose represents a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self.[4]

This definition has three important dimensions. First, a purpose in life represents the thing that an individual is working toward in life. It is an intention to progress toward a personally meaningful ultimate aim.[5] Second, personal meaningfulness is evidenced by active engagement on the part of the individual who commits time, energy, knowledge, and resources to achieving his or her purpose in life. Finally, purpose features a central desire to act in the world

beyond the self or in pursuit of a larger cause. Purpose and meaning in life share an intention to see one's life as guided by an overarching aim; however, purpose is distinct from meaning in that a primary motivation for purpose is to have an impact on causes or individuals beyond the self.[6] Because action in the broader world can be prosocial, antisocial, or neutral in nature, a purpose in life can take any of these forms. The study we report here is concerned with noble, or at least neutral, purposes.

In sum, *identity* refers to the development of one's sense of self, and *purpose* refers to the development of what one hopes to accomplish in life. Furthermore, research finds that although all adolescents undergo identity development, only a small fraction undergoes purpose development. Empirical studies reveal that only about 20 percent of adolescents develop a clear sense of purpose in life.[7] This is problematic given that purpose has been identified as an important aspect of healthy identity formation.[8]

Although purpose and identity are distinguishable constructs, Erikson suggested they work in tandem.[9] For example, finding a purpose can help individuals resolve their identity crises by offering a meaningful aim toward which they can direct time, energy, and effort. Furthermore, successfully resolving identity crises can result in the development of new assets, capabilities, or talents, such as initiative and efficacy, that are likely to facilitate the growth of purpose. One of the primary benefits of identifying a purpose during adolescence may be that doing so promotes a positive, efficacious sense of identity that can facilitate the transition to adulthood.[10]

While Erikson and others have proposed that identity and purpose are related constructs, little research has focused on the way they function together.[11] This represents an important gap in the research since purpose has been determined to play an important role in healthy identity development and research finds that only a small portion of youth exhibit signs of purpose in their lives.[12] This study was designed to clarify the nature of the relationship between purpose and identity.

Methods

Sample

In order to understand how purpose is related to identity development, this study relied on data from three waves of in-depth, case study–style interviews conducted with eight adolescent exemplars of purpose. At time 1, participants were between twelve and twenty-two years old. The author wishes to keep this as "of age" (mean age = 17.25; $SD = 3.06$). Interviews were conducted approximately two and a half years later and again two years after that. The sample was intentionally broad, including both adolescents and emerging adults, because this study sought to explore the range of ways in which developing a purpose in life may influence identity development. This age range roughly corresponds to the years in which identity formation is particularly central to human development. Participants were Caucasian (63 percent), African American (13 percent), Asian (13 percent), and Hispanic (13 percent) and balanced for gender (50 percent female).

A case study–style exemplar methodology was appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, purpose and identity are both multifaceted constructs, featuring intention, engagement, and motivational components, and a case study–style methodology allowed researchers to gather highly detailed data, which were required to clarify the developmental process of such complex constructs. Second, adolescent purpose exemplars were included because viewing a construct in its most intense form is often the clearest way of discerning what that construct looks like in practice.[13] Echoing this advantage of exemplar research, Aristotle noted in *Nicomachean Ethics*, "We approach the subject of practical wisdom by studying the persons to whom we attribute it."[14] Similarly, Maslow argued that if we want to learn about ultimate human potential, we should study highly functional and enlightened individuals.[15]

Nomination criteria used to qualify purpose exemplars were derived primarily from the definition of purpose. The adolescent purpose exemplars:

1. Demonstrated enduring commitments to personally meaning-
   ful, long-term aims
2. Were actively engaged in working toward their aims and had
   plans for continuing to do so in the future
3. Were committed to these aims largely because pursuing
   them allowed the youth to have a positive impact on the
   broader world, including groups of people, causes, and artistic
   endeavors

These criteria were shared with expert nominators, including
youth practitioners in a variety of fields (for example, high school
teachers, music teachers, and youth ministers), who used them to
identify the exemplars.

The exemplars' purposes varied widely. Five of the eight youth
were dedicated to social causes: raising money to build wells in
Africa, supporting cancer research, curbing gun violence, promot-
ing adolescent health, and preserving the environment. The other
three youth were devoted to domain-specific aims: creating jazz
music, promoting conservative political ideals, and serving God.

Data collection and analysis

The purpose exemplars were interviewed for approximately three
hours every other year for five years using a semistructured, case
study–style interview protocol. The youth purpose interview pro-
tocol, which asked participants about the things that mattered
most to them, was administered at time 1.[16] Data from times 2 and
3 were collected using the revised youth purpose interview proto-
col, which asked participants what had changed regarding their
commitments to, reasons behind, and involvement in the things
that mattered most to them since the prior interview.[17] Participants
reflected on their reasons for becoming and staying involved
in their various areas of interest. They agreed to participate
and, when appropriate, parents consented to having minors
participate.

The grounded theory method, initially developed by Glaser and
Strauss and elaborated on by Strauss and Corbin, provided the

framework for this study.[18] This methodology is useful for inductively deriving rich theoretical understandings directly from the data. As such, findings presented in this study should be viewed in light of that aim.

Means of carrying out grounded theory research vary. This study employed the constant comparison method, which represents a process of continually redesigning the research in light of emerging codes, concepts, and relationships among the variables.[19] Members of the research team read through transcripts noting themes and patterns that emerged first within participants and later across them. These trends and patterns served as the basis for code generation. Emerging codes were applied to each transcript, and elaborations, refinements, and omissions were made as needed in order to ensure that the codes accurately described the data. Codes were then grouped into concepts, and concepts were linked to one another to develop a model of the way that purpose and identity develop.

Results

Purpose helped foster identity formation

The adolescent purpose exemplars pointed to a variety of experiences in which having established a meaningful purpose in life facilitated identity formation. In particular, having a purpose in life influenced the way the purpose exemplars viewed themselves with regard to the broader social world both in relation to the people they came into regular contact with and over time. Cote and Levine refer to these varied perspectives on self as individuals' social, personal, and ego identities, respectively. Purpose helped foster the development of both social and ego identities.[20]

First, through their purposeful commitments, the exemplars began to see how they fit into the broader world, and through this process they began to establish a social identity. For example, as a result of being involved in the American Cancer Society, the eighteen-year-old cancer researcher said, "You see sort of your place in

the world. You see how you're not just lost in the sea of things, how you actually can contribute and how you can somehow affect someone else's life in any regard and I think that that's necessary. We're not isolated people." At age sixteen, the environmentalist said:

[Pursuing my environmental interests has allowed me to find] my place in the world.... To have found where I feel like I'm doing something for the place that I live, which is my world. Feeling like this is where I'm supposed to be, this is the job I'm supposed to be performing, and I'm benefiting these people . . . in the work I do. I'm helping someone else because of the abilities that I have. ... There are things that I have to offer to this world.

Similarly, at twelve years of age, the well builder said, "The world is like a huge puzzle, and we have to try to figure out where our pieces fit. I figured out when I was six years old that I wanted to do something about the water crisis." In other words, establishing a purpose in life helped the well builder and the other exemplars better understand how they fit into the social world around them.

Second, having a purpose in life contributed to identity development, as adolescent purpose exemplars established an enduring sense of self, or an ego identity, rooted in their various purposes in life. *Ego identity* refers to a "vital sense of one's continuity and sameness."[21] Whereas a social identity refers to the one's place in the broader world, ego identity refers to a consistent sense of who one is and encompasses personality and beliefs. Evidence of the central role of purpose in the establishment of an ego identity surfaced in the exemplars' quotations. For example, at sixteen years of age, the religious exemplar identified herself by her purpose: "I'm a Christian, because I'm dedicated to doing what God wants me to do." The conservative politician also defined himself by his purpose: "I did learn that I am passionate [about conservative politics], and I'm starting to kinda come to terms with that, to kinda be like, 'You know what? This is just you.'"

The health advocate's purpose in life provided a consistent strand of self-understanding for her developing identity. In considering her future, she knew that whatever she did, her life would revolve around her purpose: "It's becoming increasingly important to me to figure out my life trajectory. I've had direction from early on in terms of [knowing that I wanted to work on health-related issues], but there are a lot of different things you could do within that sphere." In other words, having a purpose in life provided a key sense of direction for her identity development. In sum, having a clear purpose helped the exemplars establish both social and ego identities.

Identity formation reinforced purposeful commitments

As the adolescents established identities based on their purposeful commitments, their identities reinforced their purposeful commitments. In other words, purpose led to identity development, and identity development reinforced commitments to purpose. As a result of establishing an identity based on their purposes in life, people close to the exemplars began to identify the exemplars by their purposes. These interactions with others influenced the purpose exemplars' personal identity development.[22] For instance, at eighteen years of age, the health advocate noted, "Most people can't have a conversation with me without [health-related] issues bubbling up to the surface, so I think it's very much a part of how I see things and how I frame things and what I think will work and what I don't think will work." Her purposeful commitment influenced the way others saw her, and this helped her establish a personal identity.

Having others identify the exemplars with their purposes reinforced the exemplars' commitments to purpose. In this way, establishing a personal identity helped solidify the adolescents' purposeful commitments.[23] For example, at twenty years of age, the gun control advocate identified himself as a "security guru" to his friends and colleagues, and at sixteen the environmentalist embraced the "tree hugger" label her friends gave her: "Environmental work is a big, big part of my life. ... We're the tree huggers

at school. We're the only environmental people who stand out, really, I guess. So we get called 'tree hugger' all the time." Recognizing that others associated her with her environmental work led her to invest further in this personally meaningful effort.

Similarly, when the musician began to take on a musical identity at eighteen years of age, he became more committed to pursuing his musical interests. Reflecting on the decision of which college to attend, an engineering school or a music school, he said:

The reason I went toward jazz is I was, compared to everybody else, I was special in jazz. ... A lot of people can get A's in calculus and could be engineers. ... [But] I didn't know anybody else who played jazz piano and took it as seriously as I did. ... I identified with it. "Oh, who's that guy?" "Oh, that's P. He plays jazz piano." I didn't get, "Oh that's P, he's good at math."

Being a musician allowed this young man to be interesting and eccentric, and he valued that sense of self: "I had always thought of music very seriously, and I always thought of academics very seriously, but academics was a more conventional thing. Lots of people were doing that. And that's one of the reasons I went away from it, because it was normal." Becoming a musician offered an appealing alternative identity and led him to make decisions that deepened his commitment to music. In this way, identity formation supported and even deepened his purpose commitment. As a result of interactions with those close to them, the exemplars identified themselves by their purposes, and this served to reinforce their commitments to purpose.

Purpose and identity as overlapping constructs

Finally, in addition to being reinforcing constructs, purpose and identity were largely overlapping constructs in the lives of adolescent purpose exemplars. Individuals felt that who they were was synonymous with what they hoped to accomplish. For instance, at twenty years of age, the health advocate said, "I never feel like I've got to go spend some time on me, now, and go do something for me. It's like the stuff that I do with other people is for me too, so

there's not that dichotomy, and not that need to go disconnect from it all the time, because I feel like it's so much a part of me." Just as the health advocate identified herself by her purposeful commitments, so too did the musician: "I identified with [jazz]. ... I've found an identity. I've found something I enjoy doing. I have a love." At sixteen years old, the environmentalist described herself through her purpose: "[Recycling] is one of those things that's become habit to me. ... [Everyone knows] that I'm a person who recycles." When asked to describe what kind of person he was, the gun control advocate said, "[I'm someone who has] a really strong commitment to doing something to improve this world. ... I've been involved for many years in activism against gun violence." The adolescent purpose exemplars described who they were in large part by citing their various purposes in life.

Discussion

This study yielded at least three important and related findings with regard to the adolescent purpose exemplars:

1. The development of purpose facilitated identity formation.
2. Identity development reinforced the exemplars' commitments to purposes.
3. Purpose and identity appeared to be largely overlapping constructs.

As Erikson and others have proposed, establishing a purpose in life helped the exemplars establish a sense of identity.[24] Identity formation occurs largely as a result of being engaged in the environment in a meaningful way.[25] Findings from this study confirm that the exemplars' purposes helped them understand their place in the broader social world and over time. These findings suggest that one way that purpose may contribute to positive developmental outcomes such as happiness, resiliency, subjective well-being, psychological well-being, positive affect, and life satisfaction is

through its role as an identity-related resource.[26] The identity capital model suggests that tangible and intangible resources assist optimal identity formation and individualization.[27] Committing to a purpose in life may serve as an important intangible, identity-related resource, as finding a sense of purpose for their lives offered the exemplars a direction toward which to dedicate their energy and focus. In this way, having a purpose in life helped the exemplars develop in positive ways.

Second, not only did the development of purpose facilitate identity formation, but identity formation also supported the ongoing development of purpose. As Erikson noted, the development of purpose appears to precede the development of identity, so it is not surprising that this study found that identity formation did not spur purpose development but instead supported its ongoing development.[28] Bem's self-perception theory suggests that individuals infer their attitudes in part by observing their own behavior.[29] It seems likely that the exemplars' continued involvement led them to infer a deep connection to the activities in which they were involved. Individuals close to the exemplars confirmed this connection by identifying these young people with their involvement. In this way, the exemplars' developing sense of identity served to deepen their commitment to their purposeful interests.

Finally, the study proposed a model where purpose and identity not only reinforce one another but are also closely aligned. The model of purpose and identity may mirror the model of moral identity, in which for moral exemplars an individual's sense of self and moral concerns are closely aligned.[30] This model of moral identity further finds that when an individual's sense of self and his or her moral concerns are less well aligned, a weaker moral identity is evident. It seems likely that the same holds for purpose and identity. Research finds that youth can be divided into one of three categories: those who meet all the criteria for purpose, those who meet some of the criteria for purpose, and those who meet none of the criteria for purpose.[31] It seems logical that youth who meet only some of the criteria for purpose would demonstrate poorer

alignment between their sense of self and their emerging sense of purpose, as these youth presumably do not see their ultimate aims as central to who they are. Similarly, it seems logical that youth who do not demonstrate any signs of purpose are unlikely to have a sense of self that is not aligned at all with their ultimate aims, as they have not committed to any enduring aims. Empirical research is needed to test these two latter alternatives.

In sum, educators and policymakers alike should focus on supporting the development of purpose among young people for a variety of reasons. As young people commit to a purpose in life, they are likely to become more motivated students. Beyond this, as this study finds, fostering a sense of purpose among students is also likely to facilitate identity formation. By helping young people identify and foster the skills needed to work toward issues that inspire them, parents, educators, and others concerned about young people's welfare will also be helping them develop a positive identity, which is key to psychological well-being.

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