

## THE MULTIFACETED BENEFITS OF PURPOSE IN LIFE

*Gabrielle N. Pfund and Patrick L. Hill*

*Abstract: The current review systematically addresses our ongoing research into the impact of finding purpose, considering its importance from a developmental lens. Regarding psychological well-being, our past work has shown that higher sense of purpose levels relates to greater life satisfaction, positive affect, grit, and hope. When considering health, we have found that a higher sense of purpose relates to fewer negative daily symptoms, predicts greater longevity, and predicts more beneficial cognitive outcomes. Sense of purpose also appears connected to greater comfort with and openness to diversity. Finally, having a higher sense of purpose level also predicts both greater net worth and income over time. In each section, directions for future research are discussed, specifically emphasizing purpose exploration and commitment from a lifespan perspective.*

Purpose in life can be defined by a commitment to a clear set of aims or causes that direct actions while also leading to the sense that life is meaningful (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff, 1989). Purpose in life can be understood as having three main components: a) its scope, or the reach a purpose has throughout all aspects of life, b) strength, or the power with which purpose influences those aforementioned life aspects, and c) awareness, or a person's ability to explain their purpose (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). As one heads toward their purpose in life, purpose simultaneously shapes the path they follow and the way they follow it. Purpose, however, is not always where people place their focus, as for instance, individuals often instead focus on the pursuit of happiness. Ironically, the search for happiness can sometimes have contradictory effects where people searching for happiness may end up being less happy (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011).

Before discussing the various benefits of sensing a purpose in life, it is worth distinguishing sense of purpose from an associated construct, namely



subjective well-being. Subjective well-being, defined with respect to life satisfaction, happiness, and/or positive affect, is consistently found to be correlated with purpose (Hill, Sin, Turiano, Burrow, & Almeida, 2018; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015), but purpose can exist without a positive well-being and positive well-being can exist without purpose (Baumeister & Vohs, 2013). In fact, scales have been intentionally developed to assess purpose without confounding it with life satisfaction or contentment (Scheier et al., 2006). Moreover, recent work has demonstrated that bi-factor models can distinguish the variance unique to purpose from that specific to life satisfaction (Hill, Schultz, Jackson, & Andrews, in press). As such, it is important to consider the evidence for sense of purpose as a promoter of adaptive development, rather than simply considering it as synonymous with the existing support for promoting subjective well-being.

### **Psychological Benefits of Purpose**

Purpose and its pursuit have important implications for mental health and well-being. One important developmental context for studying purpose development is during emerging adulthood and university, when individuals often begin to explore their broad life aims. From the identity development literature, exploration can be defined as “re-thinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans” while commitment can be defined as “the degree of personal investment the individual expressed in a course of action or belief” (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, pp. 33-34). In one study of emerging adults, purpose exploration and commitment were evaluated in regard to life satisfaction and affect (Sumner et al., 2015). Within that sample, purpose commitment was positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect and negatively associated with negative affect. Another study also found that purpose commitment was found to be positively associated with life satisfaction in adolescents, emerging adults, and adults (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009).

When understanding the importance of purpose for adolescents and emerging adults, it is worth considering how being committed to a purpose may associate with higher levels of grit. Grit is defined as not only a passion for one’s goal, but a perseverance to continue to pursue one’s passion (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelley, 2007). In one study investigating the predictors of grit over a period of time, initial levels of purpose predicted changes in grit across the semester (Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016), even when accounting for students’ positive affect. Paired with work with adults showing that purposeful individuals exhibit more adaptive

responses to daily stressors (Hill, Sin, Turiano, Burrow, & Almeida, 2018), people who have a greater sense of purpose may recognize that small daily frustrations will happen, but they are less fazed and more perseverant in overcoming them.

While the benefits of purpose commitment are clear, purpose exploration has conflicting results. For example, within adolescent samples, one study found that both purpose exploration and purpose commitment were positively associated with life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009) while another found no relation with positive affect (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010). In the latter study, four purpose exploration and commitment groups were created based on Marcia's (1980) identity model: (a) achieved, marked by high exploration and high commitment, (b) foreclosed, marked by low exploration and high commitment, (c) uncommitted, marked by high exploration and low commitment, and (d) diffused, marked by low exploration and low commitment. Using this classification, it appears that purpose exploration may hold different associations based on the individual's level of commitment (Burrow et al., 2010). For instance, the purpose achieved group reported significantly higher positive affect than both the uncommitted and disclosed groups. However, the uncommitted group had the lowest positive affect scores. Moreover, the foreclosed group actually had the second highest positive affect scores. As such, during adolescence, the associations between exploration and well-being remain unclear, which may reflect the fact that this period is one of profound exploration.

With respect to emerging adulthood, one study found that searching for purpose was positively associated with life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009), while another found that purpose exploration was negatively associated with life satisfaction, positively associated with negative affect, and unrelated to positive affect (Sumner et al., 2015). However, in an adult sample, purpose exploration also appears negatively associated with life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009). These studies point to important developmental differences in searching for purpose: adolescence may be a comfortable and encouraging time to search for purpose, searching for purpose during emerging adulthood can have mixed results, while having yet to be committed to a purpose during adulthood can harm one's satisfaction with their life. Dissimilarities within the purpose exploration and commitment process thus can be further understood by taking a lifespan perspective to purpose development.

One factor that shows distinct relationships when considering purpose exploration and purpose commitment is hope. Hope can be operationalized as having two components: pathways, which is the belief that there is a means

to reach one's goal, and agency, which is the belief that one has the necessary motivation to utilize those pathways to reach one's goal (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2005). When evaluating the associations between these constructs and purpose, research with adolescents and emerging adults showed similar correlations: purpose exploration and purpose commitment were both positively related to pathways and agency (Bronk et al., 2009). For the adult sample, purpose commitment shared these same positive relationships, but purpose exploration did not relate to pathways and it negatively related to agency. If one has reached adulthood, and has yet to develop a purpose, then they may not have the motivation to accomplish tasks set before them – especially if they do not have an ultimate aim toward which they are working. Furthermore, searching for purpose and pathways most likely do not relate since the individuals do not need pathways without an overarching goal to reach. Purpose exploration and purpose commitment both have unique connections to hope aspects at different developmental stages.

While having a purpose appears to hold consistent benefits for psychological health and well-being, moving forward, research should further evaluate the role of purpose exploration during adolescence and emerging adulthood considering the mixed implications. When considering the different developmental findings for purpose exploration (Bronk et al., 2009; Burrow et al., 2010; Sumner et al., 2015), we should take earlier advice to perceive purpose as a lifespan developmental construct (Hill, Turiano, Spiro, & Mroczek, 2015), and further delineate at which points during the lifespan purpose exploration and purpose commitment are more or less favorable for well-being. Moreover, the ways by which purpose brings about these psychological benefits is still not fully known. Toward this end, it may be valuable to consider some of the mechanisms recently addressed within the literature on purpose and physical health.

### **Physical Benefits of Purpose**

The role of purpose on health outcomes has been alluded to frequently, given the suggestion that having a purpose should help people deal better with stress and feel a greater sense of personal control (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Having a broader life direction and purpose to follow provides one with both a reason to continue forward and, accordingly, purpose has been defined with respect to greater life engagement (Scheier et al., 2006). Even if one's specific purpose is not health-focused, it should be

expected that having a purpose may benefit one with respect to promoting health relative to individuals who feel more aimless.

Purpose is valuable for health in the short- and long-term. In one study, adults who reported a higher sense of purpose also reported significantly fewer daily physical symptoms than those with a lower sense of purpose (Hill et al., 2018). Purpose also plays an important role across the lifespan. When observing young, middle-aged, and older adults, greater initial levels of purpose predicted lower mortality risk over a 14-year period (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Even when controlling for mortality covariates such as psychological and affective well-being, people who reported greater life purpose were more likely to live longer than their counterparts. From the day-to-day to the rest of one's life, purpose offers valuable benefits.

Perhaps one reason why purpose is connected to both fewer daily ailments and a longer lifespan is its positive association with health behaviors. Having a purpose in life has been positively associated with better self-rated health (Hill, Edmonds, & Hampson, 2017; Scheier et al., 2006). In addition, sense of purpose was also positively related to various health behaviors, such as amount of vegetable intake, flossing, sleep quality, and moderate through vigorous levels of physical activity (Hill et al., 2017). Furthermore, when considering these health behaviors, vigorous activity and sleep quality were both found to mediate the relationship between purpose and self-rated health. Therefore, a greater sense of purpose leads to greater health behaviors, which, in turn, promotes better health.

These findings bring up the question, what is it about having a sense of purpose that aligns with engagement in healthy behaviors? When considering purpose's positive relationship with the pathways and agency models of hope (Bronk et al., 2009; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010), perhaps people with greater purpose are able to recognize the necessary actions to live a healthy lifestyle (pathways) and also feel more capable of doing so (agency), which promotes the practice of healthy behaviors. Furthermore, the individual's purpose in life should also be considered. If someone's purpose is directly related to healthful activities, such as an athletic coach or a personal trainer, then the relationship between purpose and health is more clearly understood. However, if the relationship continues to hold regardless of one's line of work or particular purpose, then such findings would point to a particularly strong and consistent positive influence of purpose on health outcomes.

### **Social Benefits of Purpose**

Though well-being and health may be more obvious outcomes from having a purpose in life, our research also shows that purpose may have an important role in enhancing positive connections beyond the social ingroup. For instance, research has examined the role that sense of purpose plays with respect to momentary anxiety and distress when on a public transport train, depending on the racial and ethnic composition of the train (Burrow & Hill, 2013). All participants regardless of ethnicity reported greater negative mood when they were the ethnic minority on a train, but this negative mood was buffered when participants reported greater life purpose, pointing to an unexplained connection between purpose and this important comfort.

Further research evaluated how purpose related to feeling comfortable with diversity using self-reports and different experimental scenarios (Burrow, Stanley, Sumner, & Hill, 2014). Over three different studies, researchers found that sense of purpose was positively related with comfort with diversity and negatively associated with perceived threat toward ethnic majority status among White participants. In Study 1, participants who reported a higher sense of purpose also reported greater comfort with diversity. In Study 2, White participants reported on their sense of purpose before being assigned to two separate conditions in which pie charts depicted the ethnic breakdown in 2015 and in 2050; in the first condition Whites remained the majority in both periods of time, but the second condition showed Whites would lose their majority status in 2050, illustrating a future shift toward greater heterogeneity. Participants in the latter condition who reported a higher sense of purpose were less likely to report feeling threatened by having their majority status changed. In Study 3, participants were given the choice of moving to a White-majority neighborhood or an ethnically diverse neighborhood. While most of the sample chose to live in the homogenous neighborhood, Whites who participated in a pre-survey intervention where they wrote about their purpose in life were more likely to choose to live in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. These results remained after controlling for covariates, such as gender, age, neuroticism, openness, and colorblind attitudes. These findings speak to the ability of purpose actually to enhance comfort with ethnically diverse populations, not for purposeful people simply to ignore them.

Due to the goal-driven nature of having a purpose in life (Bronk et al., 2009), purpose may have kept participants' focus on their life direction, and thus ethnic diversity may have not registered as a potential stressor for those who reported a greater sense of purpose or participated in the purpose

activity. Conversely, purposeful individuals may better appreciate having others around from different perspectives and see the benefits of a more heterogeneous group. Moreover, given that individuals with a purpose in life are more likely to feel settled in an identity (Hill & Burrow, 2012), maybe they are less likely to be as perturbed or feel discomfort from those whose identity is unlike their own. Future research could evaluate stress-tolerance among those with higher levels of purpose in order to understand the various levels and types of social discomfort purposeful people can experience and remain unaffected.

### **Other Benefits for Adult Development**

Though less frequently examined, having a sense of purpose appears to be associated with additional benefits outside the realms of psychological well-being, physical health, and social connections. For instance, studies have linked sense of purpose to cognitive aging outcomes. In one study, higher sense of purpose was positively related to objective measures of executive functioning and episodic memory (Lewis, Turiano, Payne, & Hill, 2017). Purpose continued to significantly predict these aspects of cognitive functioning when accounting for self-rated health, gender, and education. Moreover, research suggests that sense of purpose even predicts reduced risk for later Alzheimer's disease and pathological cognitive function among older adults (Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010; Boyle et al., 2012). The question then remains why might sense of purpose predict greater cognitive resilience, which may be linked again to the tendency for purposeful individuals to be more engaged with their lives (Scheier et al., 2006).

Moreover, though research is limited, one study also suggests that sense of purpose may concurrently and longitudinally predict financial outcomes (Hill, Turiano, Mroczek, & Burrow, 2016). Following up a sample of young-to-older adults nearly a decade after the initial survey, financial outcomes were considered in relation to self-reported sense of purpose and personal wealth. First, sense of purpose was positively related to household income and net worth levels. Second, sense of purpose also *prospectively* predicted positive changes in household income and net worth over the nine years. Third, gender was not a significant moderator for the relationship between purpose and net worth, but age was a significant moderator for one analysis; specifically, the relationship between purpose and net worth was stronger for older than younger adults over the nine-year period. In sum, purpose

significantly predicted both household income and net worth levels both concurrently and over time.

While there is less literature on the financial benefits of purpose, previous purpose research may give context to these findings. Given that sense of purpose moderates the associations between daily stressors and daily well-being (Hill et al., 2018), people with higher sense of purpose could potentially be able to function in their jobs more effectively, and not feel as defeated by daily issues. Furthermore, because one's purpose is directly related to the pursuit and achievement of goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), the purpose itself could promote success in the workplace, if pursuit of purpose initiates productive and beneficial workplace behaviors. Also, when considering the associations for purpose with both hope and grit, purposeful people are more likely to know the pathways to accomplish a goal, feel the motivation to do so, and have the passion and perseverance to overcome what it takes to succeed (Bronk et al., 2009; Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016), which would most likely lead someone to be a hardworking and more desirable employee in the workplace. Future research needs to replicate these financial findings and delineate the aspects of purpose that promote greater prosperity.

### **Conclusion**

Purpose is powerful. It gives us a goal to pursue, reveals the paths to pursue it, and encourages us when we doubt our abilities to reach it. Purpose keeps us from sweating the small stuff and being hurt by the small things. Purpose keeps our lives long and our minds sharp. Purpose opens doors to enhanced interactions with those unlike ourselves and puts some extra cash in our pockets. But how can we obtain this mighty and multifaceted entity? Future research should investigate potential pathways to enhance sense of purpose as well as assistance in the identification of one's particular purpose in life. Toward this end, it is important to realize that purpose development is a lifespan process. With this in mind, certain purpose exploration and commitment interventions could be enacted in high school or in college to assist students through these vulnerable time periods in the purpose development process. Further, when considering the difficulties associated with being an adult stuck in the purpose exploration process, considerations should also be given to later-in-life interventions to create and shape a sense of purpose. These interventions would also be valuable amongst older adults with their purposes shifting or being disoriented as they face retirement or the loss of a spouse. Purpose truly is a powerful construct, and future



research avenues should focus on the ways in which we can help those who do not have it in order that they may obtain it.

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**Gabrielle N. Pfund** [gabrielle.pfund@wustl.edu; Washington University in St. Louis, 1 Brookings Drive, Campus Box 1125, St. Louis, MO 63130] is a graduate student in the Purpose, Aging, Transitions, and Health (PATH) lab at Washington University in St. Louis. Her research explores the way relationships and purpose shape each other. Her current research focuses on how romantic partners can help or hurt each other's sense of purpose, and how similarities between sense of purpose levels and life goals predict relationship outcomes.

**Patrick L. Hill, PhD** [Patrick.hill@wustl.edu; Washington University in St. Louis, 1 Brookings Drive, Campus Box 1125, St. Louis, MO 63130] is an Associate Professor in the Psychological and Brain Sciences Department at Washington University in St. Louis. His research focuses on understanding individuals' trajectories for sense of purpose across the lifespan, as well as whether and how purposeful individuals experience better outcomes in different life domains. Currently, his work focuses on helping older adults find purposeful aims following retirement.

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