WHAT'S YOUR "WHY?"
A Content Analysis of Youth Purpose

Rachel Baumsteiger
Yale University

Brian Riches, Susan A. Mangan, James McConchie, and Kendall Cotton Bronk
Claremont Graduate University

Youth purpose has important implications for behavior and well-being, yet there is limited information about the types of purpose that young people pursue. The current study contributes insight into the content of purpose through a survey of 316 adolescents and young adults. Analyses of responses revealed that young people rated their purposes as most strongly related to supporting their family (37%), improving lives (25%), creating, designing, or inventing something that makes a difference in the world (13%), and serving a higher power (11%). Open-ended purpose descriptions varied considerably in terms of the number of purposes reported (0–7) and the scope of each purpose (e.g., making people smile, achieving world peace). There were also age differences such that young adults (ages 18–29) tended to describe purposes in more concrete, realistic terms than adolescents (ages 13–18). We discuss the implications of these findings for understanding and promoting youth purpose.

Keywords: purpose, youth, development, meaning

There is growing interest in cultivating youth purpose (e.g., Burrow et al., 2018; Damon, 2008). Much of this research regards purposes as uniformly positive. However, research among adults suggests that the specific content of purpose has different implications for development and well-being. For example, older adults who derive meaning from religious practices and beliefs tend to exhibit higher levels of subjective well-being than those who derive meaning from other sources (Krause, 2003). Additionally, middle-aged adults who endorsed purposes related to helping others tended to experience higher levels of generativity, personal growth, and integrity than adults who endorsed purposes related to creativity (Hill et al., 2010). Despite the importance of the content of purposes, there is limited research on the types of purposes that young people identify and pursue (Burrow et

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al., 2018). The aim of the current investigation is to investigate this topic. In the following section, we describe purpose and how it develops. We then review research on the content of purpose and describe a study designed to extend this work.

Defining Purpose

Purpose is typically defined as a stable, long-term intention to accomplish something that is both personally meaningful and involves engagement with the world beyond oneself (Bronk, 2012; Damon et al., 2003). This definition includes three components. First, a purpose is, at its core, a goal; it is an aspiration that guides behavior and gives people a sense of direction (Damon, 2008; Ryff, 1989). Purpose is distinct from other goals in that it is generalized, meaning that it is a broader, higher order goal that motivates behavior across domains (e.g., work and relationships) and across relatively long periods of time (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Second, a purpose is personally meaningful. In other words, the individual considers it to be significant and worthy of their time and attention (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Finally, a purpose is self-transcendent, meaning that it is directed at making a difference in the world beyond oneself. Self-transcendent aims can be spiritual (e.g., connecting to a higher power) or secular (e.g., helping other people or contributing to a body of work; Yaden et al., 2017); and include those that are explicitly prosocial (e.g., building shelters for homeless people) as well as those that are not (e.g., creating artwork; Quinn, 2014, 2017). Examples of purposes include teaching the next generation of students and fighting for social rights for a marginalized group (Damon, 2008).

In reviewing the purpose literature, it is important to note that the definition of purpose is not uniform. Some researchers describe purpose as generalized life aims, encompassing both beyond-the-self and self-focused goals (e.g., Abramoski et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2010). This definition is more consistent with lay conceptions of purpose (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Malin et al., 2019; Quinn, 2014). However, in comparison to self-oriented aims, other-oriented aims tend to be unique in terms of how they develop (e.g., Bronk, 2014) and in their relation with positive outcomes such as the motivation to persist in unpleasant tasks (Yeager et al., 2014). Therefore, we limit our study to those that include a beyond-the-self component. This is sometimes called "noble purpose" (Bronk, 2012), "positive purpose" (Hatchimonji et al., 2020) or "self-transcendent purpose" (e.g., Malin et al., 2019).

Purpose Development

Rates of purpose tend to increase significantly from late childhood to young adulthood, indicating that, for many people, the second and third decades are critical times for purpose development (Bronk, 2012; Moran, 2010; Tirri & Quinn, 2010). This timing makes sense given that purpose is intertwined with identity development, which tends to be particularly important during adolescence and young adulthood (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Erikson, 1968). In other words, as people think about who they are, they also tend to think about what kind of mark they want to make on the world (Eccles, 2019; Hill & Burrow, 2012).

Purposes can develop in many ways. For example, a purpose could begin with learning about an inspirational person such as Oskar Schindler or Ruth Bader Ginsburg; through participation in a transformative activity such as volunteering for Habitats for Humanity; or, through adverse experiences that evoke strong negative emotions, such as witnessing a loved one battle Cancer (e.g., Bronk, 2012; Hill et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2014; Malin et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2013; Okun & Kim, 2016). An initial interest is more likely to develop into a purpose when someone finds opportunities to take action related to that interest and to reflect on why it is personally meaningful, and when they have support from parents, friends, schools, and others. to pursue it (Malin et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2013). Given that purpose

development is influenced by one's contexts and experiences, its trajectory is likely related to the content of purpose.

Purpose Content

Our understanding of purpose content is largely informed by the study of meaning. Common sources of meaning include interpersonal relationships, careers, hobbies, religion, personal growth, preserving values such as fairness, and helping others (Baum & Stewart, 1990; DeVogler & Ebersole, 1981; Prager, 1996; Wong, 1998). Each of these is thought to be related to the underlying value of self-transcendence (Delle Fave et al., 2013). Sources of meaning could also contribute to one's purpose. For example, a person could draw meaning from watching their child perform at a recital and identify their purpose as raising kind and happy children. At the same time, sources of meaning and purpose could also be distinct. For instance, someone may feel that their purpose is to serve as a therapist to help people overcome addictions, but also find meaning in visiting new places. Thus, sources of meaning do not necessarily translate directly into a purpose.

More recently, research has focused directly on the content of purpose. This research has been largely qualitative, revealing specific examples of purposes such as helping sick animals (e.g., Bronk et al., 2010) or engaging in political activism (Malin et al., 2014). Other studies have explicitly sought to identify the main types of youth purpose. For instance, Mariano and Savage (2009) interviewed 172 adolescents about their purpose and coded responses into four categories: life aims that were social/practical (focused on money, career, success, and earning respect); moral/spiritual (focused on doing the right thing, helping others, fulfilling obligations, and serving a higher power); creative (focused on creating, discovering, and beautifying the world); or hedonistic (focused on pleasure seeking). Similarly, Hill and colleagues (2010) categorized college students' descriptions of their life goals into different "purpose orientations." The top four orientations included creativity, prosocial behavior, finances, and personal recognition (Hill et al., 2010). In both of these studies, two of the four categories (i.e., seeking pleasure, finding social success, gaining personal recognition) focus on self-promotion, and therefore do not align with our definition of purpose. For the self-transcendent categories, both studies identified creativity and moral/prosocial behavior. Related to moral/prosocial behavior, Malin and colleagues (2017) have found evidence that contributing to one's community (i.e., civic purpose) is common among adolescents. Thus, the literature indicates that creativity/discovery and spiritual/morality/prosociality are common forms of youth purpose.

Current Study

The objective of the present research was to identify common types of youth purpose beyond creativity/discovery and spiritual/prosociality/morality, which were identified in previous studies (Hill et al., 2010; Mariano & Savage, 2009). We also explored the ways in which young people described their purposes. Given that adolescence and young adulthood tend to be critical times for purpose development (e.g., Bronk, 2012; Moran 2010; Tirri & Quinn 2010), we directly compared purpose rankings and descriptions between a group of adolescents (ages 13 to 18) and young adults (ages 18 to 29). Finally, previous studies have identified gender differences in purpose such that women tend to have higher rates of purpose than men (e.g., Xi et al., 2018) and adolescent girls tend to have higher rates of meaning than boys (Hamama & Hamama-Raz, 2019). However, no research to our knowledge has investigated gender differences in the content of purposes. Therefore, we also explored potential gender differences in purpose rankings.

PILOT STUDY

The goal of the pilot study was to generate a list of common types of purpose, which was then

used for a ranking procedure in the main study. Although previous studies have identified types of youth purpose (e.g., Bronk et al., 2010; Malin et al., 2014), these studies were not designed to provide a comprehensive list. Therefore, this step was needed to ensure that the major categories were represented. Additionally, because we planned to ask participants to rank these categories, we also sought to identify categories that were as distinct as possible.

We recruited 114 young adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), whose samples tend to be relatively representative of the U.S. population (albeit slightly more liberal and educated) and provide reliable survey responses (Follmer et al., 2017). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30, with 56% females and 44% males. After providing consent, participants answered open-ended questions related to purpose such as, "What long-term goals do you have that matter most to you? why?"; "What kind of impact do you hope to make on the world and people around you?"; and, "When you think about your life, how do you hope to leave your mark on the world?"

We used a conventional content analysis approach to identify the most common types of purpose that were described. Conventional content analysis is a procedure for systematically organizing qualitative data and deriving meaning, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than based on a priori hypotheses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, two raters reviewed all responses and independently generated a list of categories. Given that the length of responses to each question varied, but that they were all about purpose, raters read all three responses and identified one "type of purpose" for each person. Next, the raters merged the two lists to create an initial coding scheme and used that to code the first 30 cases. The raters then met to revise the coding scheme, collapsing and expanding codes. For example, responses that described supporting one's parents, children, and/or siblings were collapsed into the code "supporting my family." Finally, the raters applied the final coding scheme to all responses (recoding the first 30).

There was good interrater reliability across responses (Cohen's kappa = .75). A third rater reviewed the cases in which there were discrepancies and decided on the final code.

Of the eight types of purpose identified, three correspond to spiritual/moral/prosocial and creative types of purpose that have been identified in previous research on youth purpose (e.g., Hill et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2016; Malin et al., 2017): "to improve the lives of other people," "to serve a higher power," and "to create, design, or invent something that will make a difference in the world." The other types of purpose were: "to support my family," "to help to solve a problem in society," "to help animals," "to improve/protect the environment," or "to accomplish something else." Notably, the final category is ambiguous—it could include both self-transcendent and self-focused aims (which do not align with our definition of purpose). Given that the main study included open-ended questions that could be used to verify whether people who endorsed this category were describing self-oriented or self-transcendent aims, and that this option could serve to capture multiple other types of purpose that were not described in the other options, we retained this option for the main study.

MAIN STUDY METHOD

Adolescents and young adults were invited to participate in a study aimed at testing the efficacy of activities designed to improve well-being. Researchers visited three high school classrooms to invite students to participant. Those who agreed completed surveys and other online activities during class on three separate occasions. Participants from MTurk were recruited through an online invitation posted on MTurk.com. Both students and MTurk workers received $10 in compensation.

After providing consent, participants completed a pretest survey that included the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (McCcullough et al., 2002), Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997), Proso-

cial Behavioral Intentions Scale (Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019), Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk et al., 2018), and demographic questions. Next, participants completed online activities related to gratitude, memorization strategies, or purpose. Those who completed the purpose activities began by viewing the definition of purpose, described as a long-term goal that is meaningful to them and involves engaging with the world beyond themselves. Next, they were asked to answer questions about their purpose, described below. Adolescents completed this individually during class, whereas adults completed it on their own time. Finally, all participants completed a posttest survey that included the same measures as the pretest. Only participants who were assigned to the purpose condition were included in the analytic sample.

Participants

The first portion of the sample included 70 adolescents (ages 14–18) who were recruited from a midsized public high school located in a suburban area of Southern California. This school is average to wealthy, with 31% of students being eligible for free lunch. The majority of students at this school are Hispanic/Latinx (50%) or White (28%), with approximately 10% of students being more than 2 races/ethnicities, and other ethnicities not being reported. The second portion of the sample included 217 young adults (ages 18–29) who were recruited from MTurk. MTurk workers tend to be largely White (80%) and Hispanic/Latinx (20%), with a smaller proportion being Black (9%), Asian (6%), or another race/ethnicity (1%), which aligns with the racial/ethnic composition of the U.S. population (77% White, 18% Hispanic/Latinx, 13% Black, 6% Asian, 2% other race/ethnicity; Moss & Litman, 2020). The combined sample (N = 316) included people from ages 14 to 29, with most people (90%) under age 26. There were approximately 45% males, 45% females, and 10% people who identified as other genders (e.g., transgender) or who did not report their gender.

Materials

Purpose Rankings

Participants were asked to read a list of common purposes and rank which ones they connect with the most from 1 (*most important*) to 8 (*least important*). The options included: "Improve the lives of other people," "support my family," "create, design, or invent something that will make a difference in the world" "help to solve a problem in society," "serve a higher power," "help animals," "improve/protect the environment," or "accomplish something else."

Open-Ended Purpose Questions

The top-ranked purpose category from the purpose ranking activity was inserted into two follow-up questions on the following page. Each question was presented with a textbox where people typed their responses. The first question was, "Why do you want to …? Why is this goal so important to you?" The second question was, "How do you hope to …? In other words, what would pursuing/achieving that goal look like? What specific things could you do to work toward it?" We used the term "goal" in these stems rather than "purpose" to emphasize that purposes are a type of goal—as a part of the intervention for which this activity was completed. Finally, participants were instructed to spend a few minutes imagining their lives in the future, what they hope to be like, and what they hope to accomplish. They were then asked to respond to the question, "What kind of mark do you hope to leave in the world?"

Data Analyses

Frequencies were computed to identify the types of purposes that were ranked as first or second important. ANOVA was conducted to examine age differences on the top-ranked purposes. We also computed mean scores on

top-ranked purposes for males and females to compare gender differences in purpose.

Next, we used conventional content analysis of open-ended purpose descriptions to identify themes in how and why people pursue different types of purposes. Two raters each reviewed the data independently, met to create codes that represented the major themes in the types of purposes people described, and assigned codes to each response. After the first round of coding, the raters noticed trends in how people described their purpose that extended beyond the types of purpose (e.g., the length of responses, the amount of specific detail included, the number of domains described as connecting to purpose). Therefore, the raters developed a second coding scheme to capture these themes and then recoded the data. Across all codes, interrater reliability was sufficient (Cohen's kappa ranging .69–.92, $M = .76$). See Table 1 for interrater reliability across all codes. When there were disagreements, the raters discussed the discrepancies and agreed upon a final code. Responses from adolescents and young adults were analyzed separately to enable comparisons between them.

FINDINGS

Rankings

The most common type of purpose was related to family, selected as the top category by 37% of the sample. The next most common types of purposes were related to improving lives (25%), creating, designing, or inventing something that makes a difference in the world (13%), and serving a higher power (11%). Less-commonly reported types of purpose were related to working to solve a societal problem (5%), helping animals (4%), helping to save/improve the environment (4%), or other purposes (1%). There were similar trends across the second-rated purpose categories. See Table 2 for all purpose rankings.

Age and Gender Differences

There were significant age differences in the top-ranked types of purpose, $F(7, 308) = 5.62$, $p < .001$. Post hoc analyses using Tukey's analysis indicated that young people who endorsed improving lives ($MAge = 18.85$) and protecting the environment ($MAge = 19.21$) tended to be significantly younger than people who endorsed other categories. Similarly, people who indicated a religious purpose ($MAge = 24.97$) tended to be significantly older than other participants. There were also small gender differences in top-ranked purposes such that men were more likely than women to say that supporting their families and helping to solve a society problem were most important, whereas women were more likely than men to endorse a purpose related to religion, helping animals, or improving other people's lives. Descriptive information on age and gender differences are displayed in Table 2.

Content Analyses

The most prevalent motive underlying adolescents' purposes (appearing in 82% of responses) was a desire to help other people. Most often, adolescents (in 39% of responses) provided very brief, vague statements such as that they want to help others by making other people happy, to give back to family, to be kind toward others, to make other people's lives easier, and to make the world a better place. A smaller group of adolescents (4%) described a motivation to help others through social or political action, such as raising awareness for personally meaningful causes and fighting for equality among social groups (e.g., "I hope to make the world very positive and leave it like this when I depart. I hope there is no longer inequality between races because it is not right"). Others (8%) talked about helping people who are in need by engaging in formal prosocial behaviors such as volunteering or doing philanthropic work (e.g., "To help

TABLE 1
Content Analysis Coding Scheme

Codes	Example Entry	Interrater Reliability (Cohen's Kappa)
Motives		
General desire to help	I hope that when people think of me that the mark I left on this world was that I went out of my way to help anyone and everyone possibly, that I cared and showed love for those who did not know it could exist and that I brought a smile to their face and a warmth to their heart.	.76
Religious	I would also like to use my resources to help people in need in the name of God.	.92
Breaking a cycle	I grew up with neglectful parents and an abusive mother. I want to do everything in my power to make sure my kids never feel the way I did. And help them reach their full potential as happy and healthy adults.	.84
Types of Helping		
Helping through social/political action	I hope to solve a problem in society by helping out with political movements/ because that problem represents unfairness between people and the opportunities that they have.	.79
Formal prosocial behaviors	In my community, I would still like to be volunteering to make others' lives better.	.88
Abstractness		
Vague	I hope to have had a positive impact on the world, such that the world is better because I existed.	.72
Concrete	I hope to educate and help women with postpartum depression by helping them own their thoughts and bodies again through meditation and yoga.	.75
Scope		
Small	I'm content knowing that I made a few people's lives happier.	.69
Large	I want people to remember me for impacting the world somehow whether it's helping end poverty and fight for equality or ending global warming. I want it to be something big that helps many people.	.70
Number of Goals/Purposes		
Single	I want people to look at my art and feel a strong connection and feel happy.	.72
Multiple purposes	I hope that I was able to teach my children what I have learned while instilling good values onto them. I wanted to be able to make a difference in my field of expertise and leave some long-lasting traditions in the areas of work and family.	.78
Purpose Connections		
Work	Supporting my family means working hard so my husband can go to school and finish his degree. It means balancing home and work so we have enough time to spend together and just have fun too. I work towards a future with our own home we own, so I make plans like saving, retirement et cetera.	.74
Education	I hope I can make it out of high school and get into a good college. I want to support my family because it is mainly just my mom and me. I know she has health issues and I just want to be able to help her when she needs it.	.72

Notes: Cohen's kappa was calculated based on the agreement between two raters. Codes were not mutually exclusive; some responses received multiple codes.

TABLE 2
Purpose Rankings With Age and Gender Differences

Type of Purpose	% First Choice	% Second Choice	Of People Who Ranked Each #1 ...		
			Age M(SD)	% Males	% Females
Family	37	20	22.89 (5.24)	42	35
Improve lives	25	19	18.85 (4.17)	22	26
Create, design, or invent	13	10	21.61 (5.13)	13	12
Religious	11	35	24.97 (4.75)	8	14
Societal problem	5	7	21.06 (3.57)	8	3
Animals	4	10	23.08 (4.97)	3	5
Environment	4	18	19.21 (3.98)	4	4
Other	1	2	24.75 (1.71)	1	1

charity/I want to travel/and give them a lot of supplies for health and other things").

As with adolescents, helping others was the most prevalent purpose among young adults (appearing in 99% of responses). Some participants (9%) reported vague prosocial goals such as making other people's lives easier and happier and exhibiting kindness toward other people. However, the majority of adult participants described more concrete goals such as taking care of family members (34%; e.g., "I support my family by working my job and providing the things they need such as food, clothing, shelter, health insurance, etc., [and] by spending time with them") or helping to solve societal problems (8%; e.g., "I would help society by making college not a requirement and drastically lowering the cost. Pursuing this would require heavy legislative pushes and lots of campaigning with the right people"). A slightly different motive that appeared in a smaller number of responses (3%) was the desire to help others in ways that the individual had not been helped. For example, one person wrote that he wanted to have "broken the chain of abuse." In contrast to more proactive goals, this motive emerged in response to specific negative experiences individuals had experienced in their lifetime. Another theme that emerged was the desire to help others or be a

good person in the service of a higher religious power (e.g., "I want to make a lasting mark so that people know the goodness of God"). This theme was much more common among adults (13%) than adolescents (<1%).

Taken together, analyses of the qualitative responses indicated that helping other people was the most prominent factor motivating people's purposes. This is not surprising given that the prompts were designed to elicit responses related to self-transcendent aims, and that self-transcendence often overlaps with a desire to help other people (Li et al., 2019). Additional motives included preventing others from experiencing the same hardship as oneself and serving a higher power. In addition to evaluating these motives, reviewing the responses also revealed several themes in how people describe their purpose in life. These are described in detail below.

Scope of Purposes

One noticeable way that people's purposes varied was the scope of their goals for impacting the world. Many people (43%) identified relatively small aims (e.g., "I just hope to leave happy kids behind in the world. Happy people make the world a better place" whereas others (23%) described considerably more lofty goals

(e.g., "I hope to/help have a more united world"). The remaining participants (44%) reported a desire to make both a small and large impact. For example, in part of his response, one person wrote, "I hope I brought world peace, but would settle for people remembering me as a cool guy."

Number of Purposes/Goals

Although some people (13%) described one discrete purpose, more (85%) discussed multiple goals with some individuals mentioning up to eight aims. For example, one participant wrote: "I want to make sure that I raise my son (and other children if I have them) to be a strong, unshakable force who helps and cares for others/I want to make a change in the African American community/I want to make art for others/I want to be an art therapist/I want to show gratitude and appreciation/I want to recycle more/I just want to spread as much love and information that I think is important to the best of my ability." Mirroring this theme, another participant wrote: "I hope that I will have been there for my loved ones/that my family knows how much I truly appreciate them/that my children are strong, responsible, intelligent, and kind/ [that I] have been a loving wife/I have contributed something to society/I have helped people along the way/I have contributed even a little to my career field and that I was known as a hard and diligent worker."

Family Purposes Connected to Income

Another notable finding was that 85% people who wrote about familial purposes connected this goal to earning money. For instance, one person wrote, "I hope to support my family working hard paying bills and making sure that they are provided for. Also saving up money to buy them a new house." Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying: "The main thing would be to work so I can earn and save money to financially support my family. We have goals in mind that we will need

money in order to accomplish (have kids, pay off house, purchase new car, etc.)." It is worth noting that this finding could reflect the question wording such that the term "support" evoked thoughts about money.

Adolescents' Purposes Connected to Education

Similar to the previous finding, some adolescents (18%) drew connections between their purposes and their plans to attend college or trade school. For example, one 15-year-old described his purpose as inventing something, "because there are a lot of imperfections in this beautiful world, so inventing something to check one of those imperfections off the list, would be satisfying." When asked how he would achieve that, he said that the first step is to attend college: "I would go to college after I finish school, and expand my knowledge, then I'd spend a lot of time alone to think, and let my mind do the rest of the work." Similarly, a 16-year-old reported that she will work toward her purpose of supporting her mother—who, she notes, is currently coping with health problems—by getting into a good college so she can find a well-paying job.

Age Differences in Abstractness

Perhaps the most apparent distinction between adolescents' and young adults' purpose descriptions was that adults tended to provide more concrete, detailed, and realistic descriptions of their purposes, whereas adolescents tended to describe their purposes in a more vague, idealistic manner. For example, when asked what kind of mark they hope to leave on the world, a 14-year-old wrote, "I hope to have made people think and laugh." Similarly, a 16-year-old wrote that she hoped to make "A healing mark that makes the world a better place than it was before." In contrast, a slightly older person (age 22) wrote:

> I'd like to contribute to what is known about nature /to pass along what is known to new generations of

students and perhaps inspire them to contribute /to raise a bunch of reasonably normal, inquisitive kids that grow into compassionate, responsible adults/to be remembered as a good neighbor in the community and a good friend of the environment.

Supporting this trend, a 24-year-old wrote:

In my current goal of working to improve the lives of other people, I volunteer in the community helping underprivileged families and proving educational services to children in schools. I've been taking different courses in education and have worked in tutoring agencies that provide this service. It is important to me that I maintain my skills and provide them the best possible service that I can as this helps them greatly in taking the standardized exams that lead them to college.

Although there was variation among people of each age group, the level of detail and realism tended to be higher among responses from older participants than young participants.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the content of young people's purposes. The results support previous findings that spiritual/prosocial/moral and creative/discovery purposes are common among youth (e.g., Hill et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2016; Malin et al., 2017). Specifically, 25% of top purpose rankings were related to prosocial behavior ("to improve the lives of other people"), 13% were related to creativity ("to create, design, or invent something that will make a difference in the world"), and 11% were related to spirituality ("to serve a higher power"). Interestingly, religious/spiritual aims tended to be polarizing; people either rated it as most or least important. At the same time, the results indicate that the most common type of purpose was related to family; more than half of respondents (57%) rated supporting their family as either their most important or second most important goal. This finding makes sense given that values and purpose are inherently meaningful, and that people tended to cite relationships with others as a primary source of meaning in life (e.g.,

Prager, 1996). Combining this research reveals that adolescents and young adults—like middle-aged and older adults—consider their relationships with others to be a critical aspect of their purposes. Other types of purpose that were reported—although somewhat less frequently—included solving a societal problem, helping animals, and helping the environment.

Further insight into the content of purpose was obtained from the qualitative analyses. Given that participants were asked to select among and then expand upon categories that were intentionally chosen to represent purposes, which include a beyond-the-self component (e.g., Damon, 2008), it is not surprising that many of these responses (95%) were related to self-transcendence. Nonetheless, these responses offer insight into what motivates these types of purposes (e.g., a general desire to help, religious beliefs, a desire to break harmful cycles) and the actions that young people associate with their purposes (e.g., volunteering, political action, working, pursuing an education, creating art, caring for family members). An especially interesting finding was who young people said that they wanted to make a positive contribution toward; although there were some exceptions (e.g., wanting to help animals), most of young people's purposes aimed at promoting the welfare of either their family members (i.e., parents, siblings, children) or a more generalized other. A focus on one's family aligns with the prosocial behavior literature, which indicates that people tend to help in-group members before helping out-group members (for a review, see Everett et al., 2015). However, in-group favoritism seemingly conflicts with the idea that people would be motivated to contribute to the world or help others *in general*. This leads to questions about what this type of purpose means. For instance, does not having a specific recipient group indicate that one's purpose is not fully crystallized, as is indicated by broad, vague descriptions of other elements of purpose (Bronk et al., 2010)? Alternatively, does a desire to help others in general reflect identification with all of humanity, meaning that some

people care deeply about and want to promote the well-being of all human beings (McFarland et al., 2012)? Further research is needed to investigate the development and implications of such aims.

Analyses of purpose descriptions also proffered additional insights into the content of youth purpose. One compelling finding was that almost all participants supplied a description of their purpose. Of 316 people, only 2 (<1%) wrote that they did not believe that they had a purpose. This percentage differs significantly from previous estimates, which are much lower (approximately 15–25%; Hill et al., 2010). This discrepancy is likely due to differences in measurement: rather than asking people whether they had a sense of purpose, we asked them to describe meaningful goals for contributing to the world beyond themselves. This approach could have led people to report goals that are not completely crystallized into what researchers would consider to be a purpose. Similarly, our question wording did not specify that goals were long-term and overarching. As a result, some responses may reflect short-term goals, which would not align with the definition of purpose as something that is stable and generalized (Damon et al., 2003). Thus, it is important to note that responses could reflect a broader conception of purpose than our target definition.

Analyses of purpose descriptions also revealed several themes related to how young people think about purpose. One theme was that multiple purposes were common. This has also been found in previous research (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008; Malin, 2019; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Describing multiple goals may indicate that each is not truly a purpose in the sense that it is a generalized aim under which other goals are organized (e.g., McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Nonetheless, it is helpful to recognize that some people may think of their smaller, less generalized as representing multiple purposes. On the other hand, some people described one purpose that influences multiple domains of their lives (e.g., work, family). Previous researchers refer

to this as purpose integration, which has been found to correspond to purpose commitment among young adolescents (Nayman et al., 2019). Thus, it is possible that people who described a single, overarching aim may be more likely than those who described multiple aims to be committed to their purpose. A related finding was that some of the purpose descriptions varied considerably in terms of scope. This could have important implications. For example, purposes that are larger in scope may have a stronger influence on behavior across life domains. Alternatively, purposes that are smaller in scope may be more achievable, and therefore indicate a higher likelihood of purpose engagement (for further discussion, see McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). More research could be done to evaluate factors that could influence the scope of one's purpose (perhaps, for example, optimism, idealism, and self-efficacy beliefs), as well as the implications of the scope for behavior and self-evaluation.

Qualitative responses also provide insight to purpose development. Specifically, young adults provided more concrete, realistic purposes than adolescents, whose purposes tended to be more vague and idealistic (e.g., achieving world peace). The latter type of descriptions correspond to what has been called the "dreamer stage" of purpose development, which is characterized by high levels of intention and desired contribution, but low levels of purpose engagement (Bronk et al., 2010). This age difference aligns with previous research suggesting that purposes become more realistic and specific throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Bronk et al., 2010; Malin et al., 2014). Taken together, these trends support the notion that important aspects of purpose development occur during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Hill et al., 2010).

Findings from this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. One such limitation was that purpose was measured through self-report surveys, which are susceptible to social desirability bias (Arnold & Feldman, 1981; Bergen & Labonté, 2020); participants

might have expressed more other-oriented goals rather than self-oriented goals to appear more selfless. This issue is especially relevant to this study because other-oriented goals align with the "beyond the self" component of purpose. Therefore, the desire to provide socially desirable responses may have led participants to express more purposeful goals, thereby inflating our estimates of purpose. Another limitation was that respondents were asked to select from a predetermined list of purpose categories. Although we believe this was useful for the sake of comparing types of purpose, and we conducted pilot studies with a similar sample to generate these categories, this certainly influenced the types of purposes people described. Related to this, the purpose categories that were supplied were not mutually exclusive. For example, solving a problem in society could serve to improve other people's lives. Therefore, forcing people to rank which category best described their purposes could lead to an overly narrow definition of their purpose. Furthermore, the process of analyzing qualitative data is inherently susceptible to researcher bias (Hoyt, 2000). Although we used multiple raters and shared direct quotations to help address this issue, it is possible that these data would be interpreted differently by other raters. Another limitation was that the adolescent and young adult samples were recruited in different ways (at school versus online) and were not matched based on variables such as ethnicity and income level. Therefore, findings on differences between these groups could reflect factors besides age and development, such as their opportunities to explore career paths. A conceptual replication of these studies could verify whether similar findings emerge among different samples, with more open-ended questions, and with different raters analyzing the data. Researchers could also build on this work and findings from previous studies (e.g., Hill et al., 2010) by investigating whether certain purposes are more conducive to well-being than others.

Taken together, these findings broaden our understanding of the content of youth purpose.

Most importantly, this research reveals that, when asked about how they want to contribute to others, young people often report that they want to help support their families or a more generalized other. It also points toward variation in how people describe purposes in terms of scope, realism, specificity, multiplicity, and domains. Investigating how the antecedents and effects of different types of purpose could lead to a more nuanced understanding of how purpose develops and how it influences well-being. For example, given that prosocial behavior is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being (Nelson et al., 2016), it would be interesting to compare whether purposes that are explicitly prosocial are more likely than others to contribute to an individual's well-being. This research could also help to inform efforts to promote purpose development. For example, purpose interventions might appeal to a wider audience if they encourage people to pursue goals related to helping family and friends, as well as less-common goals such as creating artwork or contributing to a body of knowledge. Similarly, it might be useful to frame purpose more broadly by refraining from asking people to limit their purpose to a single goal or domain. Continued research on this topic could help guide efforts to support more people in leading lives of purpose.

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