Adolescent Purpose Development: Exploring Empathy, Discovering Roles, Shifting Priorities, and Creating Pathways

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The development of youth purpose was explored in a qualitative, cross-sequential study. Interviews about life goals and reasons for pursuing them were conducted with 146 adolescents from four age groups (6th grade, 9th grade, 12th grade, and college sophomores or juniors). Participants completed the interview twice in 2 years. Each cohort focused on different aspects of purpose: middle school youth desired to be empathic; high school youth focused on finding a role to engage their purpose; high school graduates focused on re-evaluating their priorities through transitions; and college students focused on developing pathways to support their purpose. These phases were impacted by several factors, including transitions, identity formation processes, and external supports and influences.

Among developmental psychologists, there is a growing interest in the concept of purpose and what it means for individuals to have purpose in life. The field of positive youth development, in particular, has recently recognized purpose as a vital indicator of adolescent thriving (Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). Scholars have identified purpose as a developmental asset (Benson, 1997), a "central, self-organizing life aim" (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009, p. 304), and a goal that gives direction to life (Damon, 2008). Despite the theorized significance of purpose to youth thriving, there is little empirical understanding of how purpose develops in adolescence. Although some scholars have proposed origins of, precursors to, and incipient forms of purpose (Damon, 2008; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Moran, 2009), they have not yet investigated purpose through transitions in the formative life phase of adolescence.

In this article, we report findings from a qualitative study that examined changes in adolescent purpose over time. We used developmental systems theory as an analytical frame. Developmental systems theory, which examines human development by looking at the relationship between individuals and their contexts, is the analytical foundation of positive youth development theory (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002). Purpose, like other indicators of thriving and positive development, manifests in the relationship between an individual and his or her environment because it is an aspiration to have a meaningful existence in the world. Therefore, the developmental systems approach was used to examine purpose, to see whether and how it develops in the interaction between individuals and their contexts, and how it supports thriving and healthy adaptation to the environment.

Accordingly, to understand how purpose develops in adolescence, we need to know not only that young people have purpose, but also the content of their purpose: what they are trying to accomplish, what actions they are taking to accomplish it, and why they want to accomplish it. Knowing the content of young peoples' purpose is important to understanding where their purpose is coming from, how it integrates with other aspects of life, and how it both influences and is influenced by development. Numerous survey-based studies measured the presence of purpose (i.e., Ryff, 1989; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), but made no account of purpose content. Some research has examined purpose in specific domains, including the impact of purposeful career goals on schoolwork (Yeager & Bundick, 2009) and the role of religion and spirituality in adolescent purpose (Mariano & Damon, 2008; Tirri

& Quinn, 2010). Recent grounded theory work showed that commitment to a particular domain is important to developing exemplary purpose among adolescents (Bronk, 2011). The present study was conducted to build on that theory by examining the types of purpose that appear in adolescence and how youth purpose changes over time and across diverse life contexts. Our intent is that this description of purpose transitions during adolescence will contribute to shaping a preliminary model of purpose development.

DEFINING YOUTH PURPOSE

Purpose is a central life aim that organizes and guides planning, behaviors, and short-term goal pursuit (Damon, 2008; Emmons, 1989; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Though essentially a goal, purpose is more of an internal drive, more meaningful to the individual, and of a higher order than most goals. Adolescent goals have received extensive attention in the developmental literature (Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008; Nurmi, 1991) and have been found to be important in the lives of adolescents because they are associated with psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000), can be predictive of adult achievement (Schoon, 2001), and play an important role in self-definition (Nurmi, 1993). Life goals related to educational attainment, career, and family begin to take shape after middle adolescence (Massey et al., 2008), and even young adolescents talk about seeking meaning in life (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980, 1983; Fry, 1998). These findings suggest that purpose can start to develop in adolescence, as young people explore life goals while also considering what makes life meaningful.

Purpose and meaning have often been used interchangeably, but recent theory defines purpose as a distinct construct. Individuals seeking purpose ask not only "what gives my life meaning?" But more specifically, "how can I contribute to or connect with the world in ways that give my life meaning?" Damon et al. (2003) defined this distinct construct as follows: "Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond-the-self" (p. 121). With this definition, they proposed three dimensions that, when fully realized and integrated, result in the profound and driving experience that we call purpose. These dimensions are as follows: stable and future-oriented *intention*, meaningful *engagement* in activity to realize that intention, and desire to connect with and contribute to something beyond the self. In the next section, we elaborate these three dimensions and examine what is known about their development during adolescence.

DIMENSIONS OF PURPOSE

The dimensions of intention and engagement describe what the individual hopes to accomplish and what they are doing to accomplish it. Intention is *what* the individual hopes to accomplish, or the content of purpose, such as becoming a nurse, curing cancer, or improving the lives of others. When attended to, an intention guides an individual to find opportunities, select behavior, and direct attention toward achieving their goals (Baltes, 1997; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007). In cross-cultural studies, adolescent future intentions were influenced by contextual factors, such as location, family, peers, and school transitions (Massey et al., 2008; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1994). For example, youth set their goals based on social norms, then evaluate their success against those norms and set subsequent, higher-order goals depending on how successful they were at meeting those expectations (Nurmi, 1991). Therefore, interaction between individuals and their context is important to developing purposeful intentions, which are the highest order goals.

Intentions must be acted on if they are to give purpose to life. An unengaged intention, however meaningful, may be a life dream, but it cannot give life purpose. Engagement refers to an individual acting in and on—engaging with—his or her social and cultural context to realize an intention. Even engagement of lower level goals provides the individual with a sense of meaning because it is a way the individual acts on and connects with his or her world (Little, 1993). However, engagement is particularly meaningful for the individual when the activity contributes to community or society, for example, through volunteering (Reker & Wong, 1988; Steger, 2009; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Meaningful engagement is a hallmark of purpose (Bundick, 2009).

The reasons behind an action can be as important to a goal as the actions themselves (Carver & Baird, 1998). The beyond-the-self (BTS) dimension is perhaps the most important for distinguishing goals that give one purpose from those that only provide personal satisfaction; it is what makes us ask, when considering our purpose in life, "why am I here? What is it that gives meaning to my presence in the world?" Purpose is an outward-

directed aspiration, as compared to the inward reflection of the search for meaning (Damon et al., 2003). The desire to connect with or contribute to something larger than the self that is inherent to purpose does not supersede self-interest; rather, in purposeful individuals we expect that self and BTS interests will be integrated.

Developing the desire and capacity to contribute to the world is important to thriving (Lerner et al., 2002), moral commitment (Colby & Damon, 1992), and having a sense of mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Purpose is achieved when BTS contribution is central to how young people talk about their most important life goals. Most of what we know about how BTS reasoning develops comes from research on prosocial development. Prosocial reasoning increases between childhood and adolescence (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006), and Hoffman's (2000) theory of empathy suggests that, in comparison with children, adolescents are more responsive to the needs of others due to increased cognitive abstraction skills. Furthermore, hedonistic reasoning decreases between childhood and adolescence, but then increases again during the emergent adult years (Eisenberg, Carlo, Murphy, & Van Court, 1995). Therefore, we expect that the emerging capacity for BTS reasoning would play an important role in the development of purpose during adolescence.

FULLY REALIZED AND PRECURSOR FORMS OF PURPOSE IN ADOLESCENCE

In earlier studies, the three dimensions of purpose were operationalized to determine the forms of purpose demonstrated by adolescents (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, 2008; Moran, 2009). Young people were considered fully purposeful if they exhibited all three dimensions to a high degree as they pursued an important life goal. If they exhibited some combination of one or two of the dimensions, they were determined to have a precursor form of purpose: dreaming, dabbling, or self-oriented goal. Dreamers had a strong intention, but were not acting on it. Dabblers were engaged in BTS-oriented activity, but had no future intentions related to the activity. Those with a self-oriented goal had an important life goal and were working to accomplish it, but they showed no beyond-the-self reasons for pursuing the goal. Those who had none of the dimensions of purpose were considered nonpurposeful. Table 1 shows how the precursor forms and fully realized purpose were determined.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the present study was to explore the forms of purpose as indicators of a developmental model. Because purpose is so deeply dependent on the relationship between individuals and their contexts, and young people experience such a diverse and evolving landscape of social supports, opportunities, and constraints, we hypothesized that the forms of purpose observed at a single time point would not unfold sequentially over time, but would instead come and go in fluid transitions between nonpurpose, precursor forms, and fully realized purpose. The principal goal in our analysis was to describe the transitions between these forms in order to develop a preliminary model of purpose development. Secondary to the goal of identifying and describing purpose transitions over time during adolescence, this study sought to explore the interactions between individuals and their developmental contexts, to see how different interactions related to transitions in purpose.

With this analysis, we examined changes in forms of purpose from middle school through early adulthood. We analyzed the processes and contextual factors that determined whether and how young people integrated the dimensions of intention, engagement, and BTS reasoning to take on a purpose, lost one of these dimensions and disengaged from a purpose, or maintained purpose during these years. The primary question driving this study was: How does purpose change over the course of adolescence? We observed indicators of change by asking the following questions: What changes occurred in forms of purpose over a 2-year interval in adolescence? And what changes occurred in the dimensions of purpose during this interval?

METHODS

This study used a cross-sequential design, analyzing interview data collected from four different age groups twice over a 2-year interval. Qualitative methods were used to conduct first a cross-sectional analysis of the interviews, then a longitudinal analysis, and finally a cohort-sequential analysis, so that the results could describe the forms of purpose experienced by adolescents, their transitions into and out of those forms, and a broad developmental picture of purpose over the course of adolescence.

Sample

For this study, we interviewed 146 adolescents twice in 2 years. Participants were recruited through

TABLE 1
Forms of Purpose Determination Based on Level of Intention,
Engagement, and Type of Motivation

High			
Self-Oriented Dream	BTS Dream	Self-Oriented Life Goal	Purpose
Intention			
Non-purpose		Dabbling	
Low			
Low		Engagement	High

Note. BTS dream, self-oriented life goal, and dabbling are considered precursor forms of purpose for this analysis.

their schools, which were selected for regional and demographic diversity. The first wave (T1) sample comprised 270 young people interviewed in suburban and agricultural California ($n = 222$), rural Tennessee ($n = 24$), and urban Trenton and Philadelphia ($n = 24$). Five middle schools, five high schools, and five colleges were selected based on the demographic features of their students, with the goal of having a sample that was diverse in terms of region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Students at four grade levels were interviewed at each location: 6th grade (age 11, $n = 68$), 9th grade (age 14, $n = 63$), 12th grade (age 17, $n = 70$), and college sophomores or juniors (age 21, $n = 69$). The final sample was gender-balanced and had more Whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans than Blacks, Filipino or Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

In the second wave (T2), 146 of the original 270 young people were interviewed again using the same protocol. From the original sample, retention was higher among White participants (64%) than other participants (42%), lower among 12th graders (24%) than other ages (58%), and lower among urban participants (21%) than other locations (52%). The rate of retention among males and females was balanced. Table 2 shows the demographic breakdown of the sample at both time points. Because the second interview occurred 2 years after the first interview, all of the 6th grade cohort were still in middle school (8th grade), all of the 9th grade cohort were still in high school (11th grade), and the 12th grade cohort had transitioned out of high school. Of the T1 college cohort, 57% were still in college, and the remaining 43%

had transitioned either to work or graduate school by T2.

Data Collection

Most participants completed a Youth Purpose survey prior to being interviewed. Interviewees were told that they would be asked about the things that are important to them. The interview took approximately 45 min and asked what was most important and meaningful to the participant, why, and how these important things affected the participant's life now and in the future (see the appendix for the full interview protocol). The protocol was semistructured in that it asked about particular topics, yet gave interviewers latitude to probe more deeply into the meaning of participant responses (Damon, 1977). Middle and high school students participated in the interview during class time and college students were interviewed outside of class time. All participants signed an assent form prior to the interview and received a small incentive for participation. Minors also provided parent consent forms. Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed.

Data Coding

We conducted a qualitative content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to organize the interview data. We developed a coding structure based on our definition of purpose to identify a primary goal, the actions taken to achieve that goal, the meaningfulness to the self of that goal, and the degree to which that goal was of consequence beyond the self. Three coders were trained on, and came to agreement on, a subset of 30 interviews (10% of the interview sample) at T1, and attained reliability with a Cohen's kappa score of .70 (Fleiss, 1981). For the remaining 90%, two coders coded each interview and came to agreement at each step prior to moving on to the next step. While coding the T1 interviews, the researchers developed a codebook to ensure that identical procedures would be used for coding T2 interviews (Malin et al., 2008).

In the first step, coders independently identified the one most important thing the participant wanted to accomplish and came to agreement. This important goal was identified as a potential area of purpose for the individual. In subsequent steps, coders labeled statements that addressed actions taken to pursue the goal, plans for future actions, reasons the goal was considered important, and reasons for current and planned actions. Coders independently

TABLE 2
Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Sample at Time 1 ($n = 270$) and Time 2 ($n = 146$)

Characteristic	Total	6th Grade		9th Grade		12th Grade		College	
		n	%[a]	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Time 1									
Ethnicity									
White	65	13	19	17	27	17	24	18	26
Asian American	52	19	28	7	11	8	11	18	26
Hispanic	48	10	15	16	25	15	21	7	10
Filipino/Pacific Islander	17	8	12	3	5	2	3	4	6
African American	12	2	3	4	6	5	7	1	1
Middle Eastern	7	1	1	0	0	5	7	1	1
Mixed ethnicity	36	11	16	11	17	11	16	3	4
Gender									
Female	135	37	54	33	52	36	51	29	42
Male	103	26	38	27	43	28	40	22	32
Total	270	68		63		70		69	
Time 2									
Ethnicity									
White	46	11	24	13	33	8	40	14	35
Asian American	30	14	30	5	13	1	5	10	25
Hispanic	24	6	13	7	18	4	20	7	18
Filipino/Pacific Islander	9	4	9	2	5	1	5	2	5
African American	6	1	2	3	8	2	10	0	0
Middle Eastern	1	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	0
Mixed ethnicity	15	7	15	6	15	1	5	1	3
Gender									
Female	76	26	57	22	55	8	40	21	53
Male	58	17	37	17	43	9	45	15	38
Total	146	46		40		20		40	

Note. Numbers do not add up to the total because some participants did not report demographic information.
[a]Percentage of age cohort.

determined whether or not each participant's most important goal was a motivating force (driver) in their life by assessing how they talked about it: did they bring it up spontaneously, talk about it multiple times, or connect it to other topics?

For each interview, two coders first came to agreement on whether or not the individual had an intention that was a driver, then came to agreement on whether or not the person was engaged in activity related to that intention. Finally, the two coders came to agreement on whether or not the individual had BTS motivations for pursuing that intention. Based on the intention, actions, and motivations found in this coding process, coders assigned each interview a form of purpose, as defined above in Table 1. If no goal could be identified as a driver, the form was determined to be *nonpurpose*. If a driving goal could be identified, the form was then determined based on a combination of reasons and current actions (See Moran, 2009, for more information about the forms analysis phase of this study).

Longitudinal and Cohort-Sequential Data Coding

To generate theory about purpose development, a second coding procedure was used to analyze changes in purpose over time. This coding phase was conducted with only those participants who were found to be purposeful at either T1 or T2, or both, in order to maintain focus on the development of fully realized purpose. Three coders were each assigned one of the following transitions to analyze: losing purpose over time, gaining purpose over time, and stable purpose over time. A coding scheme was designed to identify changes from T1 to T2 by looking for indicators in the following areas:

Driver content—Indicators of change in the individual's primary goal between T1 and T2.
Driver priority level—Indicators of change in the priority level of the T1 primary goal.
Reasons for goals (beyond-the-self vs. self-oriented)—Indicators of change in the individual's reason for pursuing the primary goals.

Supports—Indicators of change in the types of support that the individual received for pursuing his or her goal, such as parental support or structured opportunities to act on a goal.

To conduct a deeper analysis of these developmental themes and to check for reliability, the coded interviews were redistributed among researchers, with each assigned to an age cohort: early adolescence (6th to 8th grade), middle adolescence (9th to 11th grade), late adolescence (12th grade to college or work), and early adulthood (college to college or work). The interviews were coded a second time and analyzed for change over the 2-year interval. The research team met frequently through all phases of analysis to discuss and come to agreement on developmental themes that emerged across adolescence.

RESULTS

Results are organized by age level to demonstrate the developmental changes indicated in participants' comments. Within each age level, we report the change over time in forms of purpose (i.e., nonpurpose, precursors of purpose, and purpose), and the changes in the dimensions of purpose (i.e., future intention, meaningful engagement, and BTS reasons). A chi-squared test of whether participants were stable or unstable in their form of purpose over the course of the study does not show a significant association with grade level (3, $N = 146$) = 3.36, $p = .34$. However, when the type of stability or instability is more closely examined, there are significant associations with grade level. For example, Table 3 shows that when the purpose form movement is categorized into five types of stability or instability, the distribution by grade level is significantly different than the expected distribution.

Early Adolescence: Empathy and Early Purpose

Eight young people in this group were purposeful at T1, but only two of those sustained purpose over the 2-year interval. In the follow-up interview, five of the six who no longer met our criteria for purpose had changed how they described their motivations from BTS to self-oriented, suggesting that BTS reasoning is unstable in early adolescence. Their activities and goal pursuits were similar, but the sense of pursuing their goals in order to contribute to something beyond self-interest was gone.

The BTS dimension manifested at this age as empathy, as participants described their reasons for their goals and activities in empathic terms (i.e., wanting to help less fortunate people). Empathic awareness was demonstrated in all purposeful participants in this cohort. The five who were purposeful at T1 but then lost the BTS dimension showed empathy at both time points, but it declined in importance compared with other things in their lives at T2. Jacob, for example, demonstrated empathy at T1 when he described his perfect world: "Everyone having lots of friends and no one teasing each other …. And for the people that are homeless, give them all homes to live in." His focus at that time was on his concern for suffering people, and he acted on this concern by donating his own money to charities. At T2, he still expressed empathy, but to a lesser degree, and his focus shifted to having fun and skateboarding. Among those who lost purpose in early adolescence, factors such as hedonic enjoyment and peer relations gained in importance and redirected their developing purpose.

Three participants became purposeful over the course of early adolescence, and two did so by becoming more intentional about acting on latent BTS goals. Eric, for example, became more intentional in his empathic behavior from T1 to T2 through the development of perspective taking and abstract thinking characteristic of adolescence (Pia-

TABLE 3
Change in Form of Purpose From Time 1 to Time 2 for Each Cohort

Cohort	Stable NP	Lost dimension of purpose	Stable PP	Gained dimension of purpose	Stable P	Total
6th grade	10	12	8	14	2	46
9th grade	5	10	10	11	4	40
12th grade	0	1	8	9	2	20
College	0	7	16	8	9	40
Total	15	30	42	42	17	146

Note. NP = Nonpurpose; PP = Precursor form of purpose; P = Purpose.
Fisher's exact test with Monte Carlo Significance (two-sided) at 99% confidence interval ($p = .001$, $p = .003$).

get, 1972). At T1, he generally wanted to improve the lives of others, but had no ideas about how to do it. By T2, he was able to think about ways that he could contribute to improving the lives of others less fortunate than him: "If I give someone a turkey, then they'll say, hey, I wanna try to get, maybe, a turkey next year all by myself. And they'll try harder." Although few among this age cohort gained purpose from T1 to T2, those who did, like Eric, demonstrated that purpose could develop out of empathic awareness.

The importance of family and friends. The relative importance of family and friends may account for the varying purpose outcomes observed among young people who had some capacity for empathy during their early adolescent years. Parents supported empathy development among the purposeful youth in this cohort by modeling prosocial behavior and using teaching talk to scaffold their child's learning that behavior (Hoffman, 2000). For example, one participant who became purposeful over the course of middle school said that his parents discussed environmental impact when they saw a car emitting exhaust, and talked about the beneficiaries of their donations when they contributed to a charity. Angela, who maintained purpose from T1 to T2, said that her family taught her, "If you would be able to help other people, then maybe it'll be a better world and a better life." She described watching her mother act on this belief by volunteering for youth programs and said that her mother invited Angela to volunteer with her.

Peers appeared to have a negative influence on purpose at this stage, and a shift from family to peer influence over the course of middle school may alter the course of purpose development during this time. The five participants in this cohort who lost purpose had a newfound emphasis on peer relationships and peer-related hedonistic activities that caused them to lose focus on previously important empathic concerns.

Middle Adolescence: Developing a Role for Oneself

Compared with early adolescence, high school students have a more realistic perspective on their developing life goals. This realistic perspective can help them envision more specific roles that they can take to be a contributing member of society, shifting from very general goal content such as "help children" or "be a good community member" to more specific content such as "counseling abused chil-

dren" or "improve my community as an electrical engineer." However, this changing perspective can also cause young people to doubt their ability to take on a role, or leave them floundering if they are not yet envisioning any possible roles for themselves.

Four participants in this age group sustained purpose over the 2 years of this study. They were very stable in their goal pursuits, and all had found ways to increasingly engage their purpose over the 2-year interval. One person gained purpose when she was provided opportunities to turn her general desire to help others into a concrete goal.

In middle adolescence, the intention to contribute BTS started shaping into a role that young people create for themselves with the help of family, social supports, and structured opportunities. The roles that youth sought to take on combined their vision of a future self with their existing interests, strengths, and talents (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They started to consider the unique contributions they could make, integrating their BTS activities and personally meaningful activities. This connection between altruistic values and personal interests started to shape their plans for the role they could take in society. Sara, for example, who gained purpose from T1 to T2, had a vague and general desire to help children at T1, but no plans to do so. She started working at the preschool where her mom worked and felt empathy for the children based on her own experience of being judged by her peers. Integrating and reflecting on these experiences, she started to see herself on a path toward a career caring for abused children.

Career role development was clearly seen among the four middle adolescents who sustained purpose from T1 to T2. These young people started with goals that had very general content in 9th grade, and by 11th grade had elaborated their general goals with more specific content and clear direction. At T1, Amita talked about a general desire to help animals and people, and by T2 she had a clear and specific goal to be a veterinarian. With a specific career in mind, both Amita and Sara envisioned and committed themselves to the path to get there.

Four participants in this cohort transitioned from purpose to nonpurpose, primarily because the content of their goals changed to something that was not meaningful or BTS-oriented. None of these four had developed a strong vision of a role for themselves. This was problematic for two of these young people, as they seemed to lose all direction in the intervening years. Rosa started to doubt herself and her ability to develop her chosen career: "I've always wanted to be a fashion designer, but I don't know.

I'm worried that I won't be as successful." She talked about other career options, but with little interest or commitment. For others in this cohort, the loss of purpose was not problematic, but rather was indicative of the opportunities the high school years present to explore different roles. For example, Jason's goal was to contribute to his community, and at T2 he was considering music and engineering as two possible routes he could take to realize that goal. Although Jason appeared to lose purpose, the fact that he was exploring different possible roles suggests that he was on a forward path in his purpose development, even if he appeared to regress on our trajectory from nonpurpose through precursor forms to fully realized purpose.

Supports and opportunities in high school. In school, clubs, and summer camps, new opportunities became available for high school students to act on the empathic intentions that surfaced in middle school. Through these opportunities, they explored activities that let them use their unique interests to contribute beyond the self and started to develop a role through which they could realize purpose. The relationship between BTS intentions and structured opportunities to realize these intentions appears to be reciprocal. Dawes and Larson (2011) found that when adolescents were able to engage their BTS goals in youth club activities, the activity became more important and motivating for them. In addition to structured opportunities, high school youth described the importance of family members modeling contributive roles and providing opportunities to explore possible careers. Some, like Sara at her mom's preschool, were given opportunities to work with a family member, which helped to solidify their career interests. Through their own careers, family also provided support by modeling the ways that interests and goals could take shape as work that contributes to society.

Late Adolescence: Youth Reexamine Values Through Life Transitions

Following high school, participants' aspirations were greatly influenced by the transition from school to either college or work. This transition provided both opportunities to become purposeful and challenges in maintaining existing purpose. In general, this transition was marked by upheaval in purpose.

There were no identifiable patterns observed in the change of dimensions of purpose from T1 to T2. In large part, this is likely due to the difficulty of establishing patterns with small subsamples, as

this cohort had a very low retention rate. Of the three who gained purpose, one transitioned from pursuing a self-oriented goal, one from having a BTS dream that she was not acting on, and one from nonpurpose. Adolescents in this cohort were likely to experience a shift in the content of their primary goals, and this shift caused them to lose or gain purpose. Of the six participants in this cohort who were purposeful at one or both time points, only one maintained the same primary goal content across both interviews.

Despite this upheaval, two potential themes emerged. First, relationships served as a context that helped young people gain or sustain purpose during the transition. Second, entering college helped some young people to coalesce BTS values that were previously too vague or general to grasp. For four of the five youth who were purposeful at T2, the values that coalesced were related to noncareer goals. The emphasis on noncareer goals among the purposeful youth in this cohort was unusual, as the majority of recent high school graduates in our sample were focused on career goals. However, a noncareer focus does align with previous findings that family-related goals stabilized more during the college years (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997), while career and achievement goals destabilized (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002). In this study, the shake-up of a major life transition and entering a new environment caused these young people to re-evaluate their life priorities and take a new course.

Five of the six participants who were purposeful at one or both time points changed the content of their most important goal during this transition. Rather than focus primarily on career pursuits, most youth who were purposeful at T2 showed their values shifting as they gained new perspective by entering a new environment. This shift in perspective was especially noticeable among the participants who gained purpose between T1 and T2. For them, entering a new environment catalyzed purpose by offering a new perspective on their values. Jeremy, for example, forged new friendships with environmentalist peers in college, took a course on the environment, and worked in a summer camp with younger children who viewed him as a role model. These experiences gave Jeremy the opportunity to reexamine his values and his role in society, and reconsider his self-oriented career goals (Reilly, 2009).

Commitment to relationships stabilizes purpose through life transitions. Two participants were purposeful at T1 and T2, and both transitioned from career-related purpose to family-related pur-

pose. Each became newly committed to a family role at T2, which caused them to structure their goals and activities in service of developing that role. Anne, for example, valued family highly, and by T2 she had become a support provider in her family and was committed to the goal of keeping her family together. She demonstrated how maintaining family connections could lead adolescents to engage a purpose at a time when other aspects of their lives are in transition. Peer relationships also played a role in purpose development at this stage. When young people enter college, they may forge friendships that provide modeling and support for engaging previously latent prosocial goals (Barry & Wentzel, 2006), as was the case with Jeremy when he developed new relationships with peers who were interested in environmentalism.

Early Adulthood: Forging Pathways to Adult Purpose

Early adulthood is a time when young people can choose a pathway that will lead them to realize the role that they envisioned for themselves in high school. This pathway will potentially lead them through the transition into adulthood and the work world, and determine what will happen to their BTS inclinations as they make that transition. Pathways offer both supports and obstacles, and they determine what opportunities a young person will encounter. They can influence the education and job choices young people make, and affect the direction that their original BTS intentions take.

The early adult cohort showed a relative stability of purpose compared with the younger cohorts. Among this group, nine were purposeful at both time points; all nine were consistent in the content of their goals across both interviews, and seven were increasingly engaged in and coherent about their aspirations. Six lost purpose from T1 to T2, four of whom lost the BTS dimension and focused instead on self-oriented pursuits. Among the six who gained purpose from T1 to T2, five experienced a change in life circumstances that enabled them to engage a BTS dream that was latent 2 years earlier. These changes included gaining financial security sufficient to act on philanthropic goals and loss of employment leading to reassessment of one's definition of success.

Stable and unstable pathways to purposeful careers.   Some career pathways provided considerable stability for young people as they made their way through college and into work, while others were so unstable as to hinder young people in developing purpose. Helping professions, in particular, enabled college students to sustain their BTS intentions and instilled confidence that the transition to work would be smooth. Eight of the nine early adulthood youth who sustained purpose from T1 to T2 were pursuing helping careers, such as nursing, medicine, and teaching. Training programs for helping careers may be structured to ease the transition through school and into work, making it possible for young people pursuing these careers to sustain commitment to their purpose in the face of obstacles.

Of the six who were no longer purposeful at T2, five were pursuing creative careers such as journalism, advertising, graphic design, and theater. In four of these cases, the BTS dimension of purpose disappeared after college graduation, as they talked more about the hedonistic enjoyment or financial gain of their work. Jessica, a graphic design student at T1, was more focused on finding happiness in her work, and at T2 said, "money did buy me happiness." Additionally, the challenge of finding a job after college was an obstacle for young people on a creative career path. College offered an environment where they were encouraged to connect their career goals to creative or socially impactful activity. In forging a career, however, they stopped talking about the BTS aspects of their work and focused on finding a job, their own happiness, and earning money (Moran, 2010).

College as a holding pattern.   College provides a context where some young people find the pathway that will lead them to realize the role they envisioned in high school, which ideally also manifests the empathic concerns that emerged in middle school. However, for other young people, college can be a holding pattern, that delays their moving forward on the path. Among the seven young people who transitioned from nonpurposeful to purposeful, six were in a holding pattern at T1. By T2, they achieved some tangible benchmark, such as finding an activity outlet or financial stability that enabled them to move out of the holding pattern. David, for example, was completing a BA in sociology, and his career goals were on hold until he could attend fire academy after graduation. Similarly, Lisa was taking courses in sociology, but she had no outlet to act on her strong interests in political activism. Rebecca was completing a marketing internship along with her degree and felt too financially unstable to sustain the philanthropic projects that gave her purpose. Each of these young people had meaningful and BTS-oriented goals that were latent or not fully fleshed out at T1.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to generate theory about how purpose develops during adolescence. The results suggest that development of purpose in adolescence is not a linear process, as young people lose and gain momentum, opportunities, and supports for different dimensions of purpose at different times. Yet, they tell a developmental story by uncovering the transitions of purpose that occur during stages of adolescence. In early adolescence, many young people demonstrated emerging *orientation* to purpose by showing an empathic inclination that drove them to engage in caring and helping behaviors. In middle adolescence, young people started to shape their BTS intentions into a *role*. This role integrated their desire to contribute to society with the unique interests and abilities that made up their developing identity. In late adolescence, young people *reevaluated* their priorities as they left high school, and relationships helped some to stabilize their purpose through this transition. During early adulthood, young people found or devised a *pathway* to fulfill the role they had envisioned.

Factors That Influence Purpose Development

The general trajectory of purpose development was marked by multidirectional movement far more than continuous upward movement through the precursor forms of purpose to fully realized purpose. This multidirectional movement was most notably caused by three factors: life transitions, identity formation processes, and external supports and influences. These factors show the developmental system at work, as young peoples' goals interact with and respond to changes in the developmental ecology through each phase of adolescence. The first factor—the impact of life transitions on the development of purpose—was particularly evident in the high school-to-college transition, when purpose was very unstable. After that transition, the purpose trajectory seemed to stabilize, until it became unstable again in the transition to work for individuals in certain fields (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). The identity formation process was a second factor, particularly among middle adolescents, who lost purpose either through reconsideration of their commitments during the identity formation process (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008; Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010) or the experience of low self-efficacy in the formation of occupational identity (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001).

Family support influenced purpose development throughout adolescence. In early adolescence, family members who modeled empathy supported young people in developing prosocial intentions (Eisenberg et al., 2006). In middle adolescence, young people looked to family members as models of possible roles that they could take in society and found opportunities to realize purposeful roles by working with family members. Overall, the findings suggest that during middle and high school years, parents can help their children develop purpose by modeling ways to contribute to society and inviting their children to participate in that activity. However, it also appeared that peer relationships could counteract that influence, as young people started to place more importance on social relationships and activities, shifting their attention away from nascent prosocial activity (Barry & Wentzel, 2006; Berndt, 1981). In late adolescence, young people who took on family support roles sustained purpose through the turbulent transition out of high school. It might be that commitment to family helps young people's purpose development through transitions, or perhaps young people who have a strong sense of purpose in their lives may find new ways to express it following upheaval.

Another influence on purpose development was the perceived presence and absence of structured opportunities to enact BTS intentions. Concurrent with research on developmental assets, our findings suggest that positive development in adolescence is supported when young people are provided opportunities to take on valued community roles (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). Few early adolescents described having structured opportunities to act on their empathic concerns, and consequently, their prosocial intentions drifted away when other interests arose. In high school, youth encountered more structured opportunities to develop potential purpose, such as helping family members at work or taking on a leadership role in a youth group. Finally, in early adulthood, young people on pathways that provided more structured opportunities through school and work (such as in the helping professions) were better able to sustain purpose than those on less structured pathways (such as in creative professions).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research and Education

This study provides preliminary evidence for a nonlinear trajectory of purpose development between early adolescence and early adulthood. We used qualitative methods to provide rich

description of how purpose operates in youths' lives and to generate new theory. Further research is needed to confirm and refine the phases of purpose development that we observed and to test the model that was suggested here. For example, a longer term longitudinal study following one cohort across the entire age range from age 12 to 23 would clarify the linkages between our four transitions. Additionally, while several factors were identified that influence purpose development in adolescence—such as family, peers, and structured opportunities—more research is needed to understand how these factors interact.

Another important direction for future research entails the educational implications of these findings: what do educators need to know if they want to foster purpose in their students? Although most of our interviews were conducted in middle school, high school, and university settings, few of our participants identified school experiences as most relevant to their important aspirations. Given that the academic disciplines offer potential pathways to purpose that may align with student interests, future research should focus attention on how educators might incorporate purposeful exploration of the disciplines into learning materials.

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that the previously identified precursor forms of purpose (dabbling, dreaming, self-oriented goal) do not cohere into a model of purpose development. Rather, we found a model of purpose development that is life-stage–dependent, but also strongly influenced by contextual and individual factors. Purpose appeared to develop through four phases as young people grow from early adolescence into early adulthood: first, orienting toward empathy; second, envisioning a role that they can take in society; third, reevaluating values and priorities through challenging life transitions; and fourth, developing a pathway that enables them to realize the role they envisioned. While these four phases imply an upward trajectory in purpose development, the variation found within age group shows that the path to purpose is not a linear and straightforward progression.

In this study, young people were asked a variation on the perennial question: "what do you want to be when you grow up?" The voices of our young participants suggest that they increasingly think about the answer to this question as they move through adolescence. We were particularly concerned with young people who had future goals that integrated personal meaning and a BTS component in a stabilized way—in other words, those young people who were developing purpose in life. We found that young people actively engage in their own development and are influenced by their families, friends, and opportunity structures. By focusing on the voices of young people themselves to understand purpose, we have contributed to the body of knowledge that suggests young people are capable of creating and acting on a life purpose that positively affects the world, while at the same time honoring what the individual finds most meaningful.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Self

Tell me a little about yourself: What matters to you? What are some of the things that you care about? What is really important to you? What kind of person are you?

How do you spend your time? What do you do well?

Beyond-the-Self

If you could change anything about the world, what would you want to be different?

Describe your perfect place/world? Are you doing anything in progressing toward this? How could you work toward making some of these changes?

Most Important

You've mentioned several things that matter to you; which are most important? Rank 1–3: Why is X more important than Y or Z? Is there anything else more important?

Centrality

How does X influence your life? You have also mentioned Y and Z, how do they relate to X?

Rationale

How does your participation in X affect others? How does X relate to the "ideal world" you described earlier? How do you feel when you are engaging in X?

Stability

How long have you cared about X? What do you do that shows X is important to you? Do you see your participation in X ending at some point?

Obstacles

Why are you excited about this? How do you keep yourself excited?

What were the obstacles? How did you overcome them?

What will you need to do to maintain your involvement in this?

Origin

How did X become important to you? When did it become important to you?

Why do you think you got involved in this particular cause rather than a different one?

Future

Picture yourself at say, 40 years of age. What will you be doing? Who'll be in your life? What will be important to you? What are your plans in the next few years?

Sense of Purpose

Do you have a purpose? What does purpose (the concept) mean to you?

Do you think you'll have it for the rest of your life? Do you think you will have one?

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