Original Article

Review of General Psychology
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–12

DOI: 10.1177/10892680251324154
journals.sagepub.com/home/rgp
Sage

The Psychology of Purpose: A Comprehensive Approach

William Damon[1]

Abstract

Purpose has long been identified in philosophy and theology as an essential component of a well-directed life. In recent years, support for this longstanding philosophical intuition has come from a rapidly increasing set of studies in psychological science that has examined the nature, origins, development, and positive life outcomes of purpose. Yet this line of research has been limited by unexamined variations in how researchers across multiple labs define and conceptualize purpose. The present review examines prevailing definitions of purpose in present psychological research, discussing the strengths and limitations of each. Three approaches to conceptualizing and defining purpose emerged from this review: The first approach focuses on "*sense* of purpose," drawing on self-reflections structured by survey items such as "*There is a direction in my life.*" The second focuses on general states of psychological well-being, viewing purpose as a subcomponent of such states. The third views purpose as a unique psychological process that combines thought, action, long-term goals, and key features of self-identity. This review describes the features of each approach that present value for future research and practice in the field; and it offers a comprehensive definition that aims to capture the full nature of the psychology of purpose.

Keywords

purpose, psychology, character development

Purpose is a feature of human life that has been recognized, described, and celebrated for as long as writers have commented on the essentials of "the good life." Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle argued that our finest moments contain reflections about purposeful tasks (*ergon*). Philosophers and theologians over the centuries have stressed the role of purpose in providing a necessary condition for personal fulfillment and a meaningful existence.

A small selection of the countless historical commentaries include "A life without a purpose is a languid, drifting thing" (Thomas a-Kempis); "A purpose is the eternal condition for success" (T.T. Munger); "The secret to success is a constancy of purpose" (Benjamin Disraeli); "The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose" (William Cowper); "Strong lives are motivated by dynamic purposes" (Kenneth Hildebrand); "Firmness of purpose is one of the most necessary sinews of character, and one of the best instruments of success" (Philip Dormer Chesterfield); "The purpose of life is a life of purpose" (Robert Byrne); "When purpose goes, life goes dead in our hands" (Carl Jung); "Unless life is activated by sustained purpose, it can become a depressingly haphazard affair" (Richard Guggenheimer); "The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder – a waif, a nothing, a no man" (Thomas Carlyle); "Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose" (Hellen Keller).

The multi-disciplinary collection of quotes above has been drawn from philosophical, theological, and autobiographical reflections of prominent writers over centuries. Psychological science, a relatively young discipline, has taken an interest in purpose only in recent decades; but interest in purpose within the field of psychology has gained momentum over the past few years. An indication of this increasing interest can be found in *PsychInfo,* where a search for articles on "purpose in life" reveals that fewer than 150 articles on the topic of purpose were published in all the years prior to 2000, while over 8000 articles on purpose have appeared in the 24 years since.

The initial in-depth treatment of purpose within psychology was Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 1946). It is important to note that the book's original German title was *Nevertheless Say Yes to Life*; and the book's

[1]Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
William Damon, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University, 520 Galvez Mall, CERAS 207, Stanford, CA, USA.
Email: wdamon@stanford.edu

operative concept was not "meaning" but rather the German term "Zweck," which translates (approximately) as "important goal, or *purpose*." Also, of course, Frankl was writing about woman's search as well as man's search.

Frankl's book, written while the author was imprisoned in a concentration camp, presented a theory that identified purpose as an antidote to life's destabilizing misfortunes and stresses. He wrote that an active commitment to purpose in hard times provides resilience against disorders such as anxiety, depression, and despair; and in more fortunate times, purpose can provide inspiration, energy, and gratification. Frankl founded a school of counseling that he called "logotherapy," based on his thesis that purpose should be a *primary* objective of a well-lived human life not, as other schools of psychology had claimed (such as, e.g., behaviorism, Freudianism, and Maslow's "hierarchy of needs"), last in line once a host of biological and material desires had been satisfied (Lerner, 2018; Maslow, 1968). Frankl wrote from the perspective of a psychiatrist using clinical case studies as a data source. The disciplinary nature of Frankl's theory was psychiatric and autobiographical, and he drew on his own experience for his most telling case analyses.

Soon after the 1959 publication of Frankl's book in English, a few normative studies of purpose within the disciple of research psychology began appearing, initially drawing directly on Frankl's theoretical formulations and clinical analyses (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964, 1969). These early studies had limited databases and used rudimentary methods that merely recapitulated the self-reflective questions that Frankl had posed in explaining his theory. Later in the 20th century, Carol Ryff launched the first systematic research program into the psychology of purpose when she incorporated a purpose subscale in her measure of well-being (Ryff, 1989). Although Ryff's work was not focused primarily on the concept of purpose, it opened the door to further research in psychological and developmental science by identifying purpose as a variable of interest for a set of large-scale studies with an impeccably constructed database.

Also appearing at the end of the 20th century were a number of theoretical advances that drew attention to the importance of purpose in human life. These advances took place in several disciplines and subdisciplines within and beyond psychology; and these advances set the stage for a rapid and sustained increase in studies of purpose as it develops over the lifespan, and as it influences many essential dimensions of human existence. Among the disciplines that have contributed to this rapid surge of interest in purpose are economics and business; anthropology and cultural psychology; theology and philosophy; general, personality, and developmental psychology.

In *economics and business*, there has been an emerging consensus over the past several years that personal, team, and organizational purposes can promote flourishing business cultures (Harvard Business Review, 2020). The benefits of purpose in the corporate world are believed to include a culture of creative innovation, worker motivation, good will among the corporation's clients and shareholders, clarity of communications, and organizational solidarity over the long term. Carmine Di Sibio EY Global Chairman and CEO was quoted as declaring, "Purpose is not an add-on. It's not something you do on the side. Purpose has to be a core part of your business model and your long-term strategy" (EY Global Insights, 2020). The EY Global Insight proposed a "dedicated program that focuses on helping EY people discover their personal purpose and create the direct linkage to the company's purpose." The EY Insight concludes: "Leading purpose-driven organizations bring their purpose to life by aligning their leadership, creating opportunities for employees to engage in their purpose journey, and making purpose central to how they engage customers." Based on such realizations, recent research in the business world has advanced practice-based methods for measuring and fostering purpose (HBR Harvard Business Review, 2020).

In *philosophy and theology*, as noted at the outset, the topic of purpose has been central for thousands of years. Contemporary philosophers have noted that an avid interest in purpose and the closely related subject of life's meaning is widespread in today's academic philosophy (Metz, 2002, 2021). Shortly after the turn of the 21st century, Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life*, a theological treatment of purpose that described its influence on mental and spiritual well-being, became an international best-seller that contributed to the increasingly common use of the term in everyday speech (Warren, 2002).

In *anthropology and cultural psychology*, Richard Shweder's description of "three ethics" that distinguish the dominant moral perspectives of the world's various cultures drew attention to purpose's universal importance, in whatever cultural forms purpose happens to take (Shweder, 2003). Shweder named the three ethics "autonomy, community, and divinity." The ethic of autonomy prioritizes values, virtues, and purposes that revolve around the individual; the ethic of community emphasizes family and social purposes oriented to social groups; and the ethic of divinity focuses on religious and spiritually based purposes. Traditional cultures emphasize community purposes, whereas modern ones focus more on individual purposes. Spiritual purposes are common in all societies, though they take differing shapes across varying types of culture.

From Shweder's influential analysis, it became clear that modern and traditional cultures may differ not only in the purposes they favor but also in the degree of agreement within the cultures regarding which purposes are worth pursuing (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). Modern societies may be more challenged to develop shared purposes than traditional ones. In many cases, purposes in traditional cultures may seem natural and inevitable. For example, rites of passage, and purposes that go along with them, are expected and shared by all members in traditional cultures. These purposes are clearly understood by all who live in that culture. This can be

contrasted with modern societies, where individuals face a greater diversity of worldviews to choose from and available purposes to pursue.

Early research using Shweder's three analytic categories found both the autonomy ethic and the community ethic among a diverse American sample of youth, but with a strong prevalence of the autonomous ethic (Arnett et al., 2001). In this study of young Americans, the divinity ethic and commensurate spiritual purposes were rarely found. In contrast, a study of indigenous youth, conducted around the same time, found a strong sense of the divine, reportedly triggered by exposure to a Native American "Vision Quest Right"; and this divinity orientation was reported to foster a resulting purpose: "By exercising virtue in the Quest, personal power would be obtained in such a way that an individual would become a blessing to the community, especially the poor, young, and weak" (Zirlott, 1999, pp. 216–220).

In *personality psychology*, at the end of the 20th century Dan McAdams conducted a research program on "generative" adults (people who are creative and productive in their middle age). The concept of generativity is related to the concept of purpose and sheds light on how the capacity for purpose develops in adolescence and early adulthood (McAdams, 2001). Generative individuals strive to have a positive impact on the world. In McAdams' theory (which draws on Erik Erikson's stages of psycho-social growth), generativity is a period of mid-life development where healthy adults have a concern for promoting the well-being of future generations (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 2001). Generative adults provide for, and pass on wisdom to, younger people. They seek to have a positive impact in the long term, leaving a legacy of the self that continues to be fruitful for future generations after their own active years have passed. McAdams' research on generative adults suggested that such adults are healthier than other adults. They are more likely to be involved in civic activities and more connected to their families, churches, and political groups. Generative adults have an efficacious sense of self and an optimistic lens through which they view the world. They tend to believe that unfortunate occurrences can serve as learning opportunities and that good things will generally follow from such learning (McAdams, 2001).

In the year 2000, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced the *positive psychology* movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This was another turn-of-the-century advance that promoted the scientific study of purpose. Their statement was especially influential in the discipline of psychology because it addressed the very question of what psychological research should be investigating. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi launched the positive psychology movement because they believed that, from its inception, psychological study had focused too much on mental pathology and not enough on mental strengths. Purpose had long been recognized as a defining personal strength, but one that had not yet been studied to a sufficient degree by psychologists. In their initial, year 2000 statement, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi did not yet identify purpose as one of the strengths they had in mind (at that time they wrote of creativity, zest, happiness, and other joy-inducing capacities). But in a more detailed exploration four years later, Seligman and his colleague Chris Peterson included purpose in the "spirituality" section of their "positive character" classification scheme (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Although tacking purpose onto spirituality was not an ideal placement for the broader capacity of purpose, it landed the concept squarely on the map of psychological concern.

Around the same time as the positive psychology movement was redefining the subjects of interest for the field of psychology as a whole, a "*positive youth development*" movement ("PYD") arose within developmental science (Benson, 1997; Lerner & Benson, 2003; Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005). The positive youth development perspective emphasized the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people—including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those with the most troubled histories. While the positive youth development approach recognized the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect children in various ways, it resisted conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risk. Instead, it began with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world. The positive youth approach saw the child as a full partner in the community–child relation, bearing a full share of rights and responsibilities. Purpose was thus an essential focus of this "new look" at the nature of youth.

The recent surge of interest in purpose among academic researchers in psychology and several other disciplines has been accompanied by new attention to purpose in related fields of practice, such as *education*, *social work*, and *medicine* (Damon & Colby, 2022). This attention arises from a widely shared sense that purpose leads to important benefits for purposeful individuals as well as their communities. A growing body of evidence has indicated that purpose is associated with academic and vocational success, motivation, resilience, achievement, and psychological and physical well-being (Bronk, 2011, 2013; Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill & Turiano, 2014). When purpose is prosocial and conscience-driven, it can generate public benefits such as community contribution, effective work, and consequential vocational commitments (Gardner et al., 2001). In both K-12 and higher education, numerous efforts are underway nationwide to foster purposeful learning in the classroom and purposeful commitments to work outside the classroom (Malin, 2018). In medicine, leading gerontologists such as Atul Gawande have drawn attention to the value of purpose for well-being all through life (Gawande, 2014). Moreover, purpose has played a central role in ground-breaking accounts of how people can navigate their lives to maximize their opportunities for

developing their full potential and finding fulfillment in the present and future (Liang & Klein, 2022).

Accordingly, the growing body of scientific research on purpose has resulted in significant inroads on questions such as how purpose develops during adolescence and later life, what benefits it promotes, and how schools, families, and vocational settings can foster or hinder the acquisition of purpose (Damon & Colby, 2022). But because this research has been conducted by a variety of separate investigators, there has been variation in methods used to assess purpose across the range of existing studies. Likewise, there have been significant differences in the ways purpose has been defined and described across many of these studies. Such differences have not significantly diminished the value of these studies for understanding purpose and its psychological dynamics. Yet for the multiple communities that wish to participate in research on this topic, or who wish to use the research results for practice objectives, differences in the ways that purpose has been defined and measured across labs will pose a source of confusion unless these differences themselves are defined, understood, and ultimately resolved.

It is elementary that any area of scientific research requires clear-cut definitions. Among other things, this means that every key term must have its own meaning. No term should be used to signify different things as it is used across various contexts; and no concept requires more than one set of terms to denote it. In psychological science, failure to adhere to this dual principle has been known as the "jingle/jangle fallacy" (Corsini, 1991). This principle also applies to any practice that claims to be scientifically based. For example, in medicine—the prototype of a scientifically based practice—when a physician writes a prescription, it is essential that the term the doctor uses has the identical meaning the pharmacist recognizes for that term. It also is important to have *one and only one* distinct term for every scientific concept. For example, with reference to medicine again, if the terms kidney and spleen were used interchangeably to signify either, or both, of the organs, intestinal surgery would be a harrowing experience. Yet precisely this type of confusion haunts the term purpose—where, for example, the term "purpose" is frequently conjoined with the term "meaning," as in the familiar phrase "a life of meaning and purpose," with little or no thought regarding whether meaning and purpose are distinct from one another (and if so, how); whether "meaning and purpose" is one phenomenon or some combination of two; or even whether it is possible to experience one without the other. If this were medicine, all practice treatments would stop until conceptual clarity was achieved.

Regarding the concept of purpose, special efforts are required to promote conceptual clarity. Purpose is a term widely used in the vernacular; and vernacular uses of terms have neither the clarity nor rigor necessary for scientific research or rigorous practice. In common language, as noted above, the term purpose is often merged with the term *meaning*, as in "I'd like to lead a life of meaning and purpose," generally with no recognition that these are two distinct terms. Further, the following words are frequently conflated with purpose in the common language: *goal, meaning, passion, dream, desire, vision, and mandate.*

Such conflations take place not only among laypersons but also among professionals doing work in areas such as purpose learning, coaching, and counseling. A recent study revealed that purpose has been defined in more than a dozen distinct ways in the professional literature of academic journals (Bronk et al., 2023). In the more informal discourse of popular psychology publications, the range of purpose meanings can be even wider. For example, a 2023 *Psychology Today* cover story[1] was entitled, significantly, *Find your purpose: How to build a meaningful life,* thereby conflating purpose with meaning. The story itself used the term purpose in at least seven distinct ways, to indicate goals, values, motivation, commitment, kindness, love, and meaning. The story, in addition to demonstrating the popular appeal of purpose among present-day psychology practitioners, reveals the definitional ambiguity of the term among psychology's practice community—just as the Bronk et al. review demonstrated the same for the discipline's community of research psychologists.

Such lack of conceptual clarity will be an impediment to progress until it is corrected. Conceptual rigor is essential for interpreting the research findings reported by the many labs doing valuable work in this area; and it is also essential for creating valid assessments for determining the precise impacts of the increasingly frequent practice efforts in this area.

This conceptual problem has been helpfully recognized in a recent *American Psychologist* essay about the definition and measurement of purpose (Kashdan, Goodman, McKnight, & Rum, 2024). The authors write that "... purpose remains so varied with respect to its definition, researchers may not be capturing potential effects of purpose… Creating a more universal definition of purpose will lead to more consistent findings" (p. 838). The authors make a number of useful distinctions between purpose and related-but-distinct concepts such as values, meaning, and well-being; and they propose a definition of their own that joins several previous definitional efforts, implicit or explicit (Damon et al., 2003; Ryff, 1989; Sharma et al., 2018). The present essay will compare and contrast all these existing definitions, after initially identifying the elements essential to broad-based psychological definition of the concept purpose for uses in scientific research and practice.

Criteria for a Sufficient Scientific Definition of Purpose

The first essential assumption, introduced above, is that the concept must be defined in a way that distinguishes it from all other terms, at least in some part. It may contain elements of other terms and close associations with other terms, but it

cannot be synonymous with another term. Second, as also implied by the discussion above, the concept must be defined in a stable manner that applies across all uses: it cannot mean one thing in a certain context and something else in another. Third—and perhaps most importantly—the definition must capture the major ways that the concept has been discussed over the centuries in philosophy and theology, as well as the central ways in which the term is used in the common language.

In addition to these three elementary assumptions, there are other definitional requirements for a concept such as purpose that has been employed in both scholarly discourse and the common language. The definition must capture the gist of its repeated uses—not all of them (see above examples of irrelevant uses), but certainly the most compelling and profound ones. The quotations offered at the beginning of this paper provide examples of some compelling uses. Any sufficient definition of purpose must include the considerations evident in these and other such uses of the term. For scientific usage within the discipline of psychology, essential elements of the concept can be identified and compiled for a definition that is stable, sufficient, and that captures the unique phenomena that the term purpose denotes.

The essential features of purpose that, in the aggregate, distinguish the concept from all others and that, in combination, account for purpose's contributions to personal and social goods are as follows: 1) purpose is a major life goal of perceived importance; 2) purpose reflects an active commitment, 3) purpose has a long-term, enduring quality, 4) purpose is meaningful to the self, and 5) purpose has a beyond-the-self component. To explicate these features in order:

Purpose is a Major Life Goal of Perceived Importance

Almost every moment of life poses goals of one sort or another, but few are purposeful goals. We would not consider brushing our teeth, tying our shoes, eating our breakfasts, or finding parking places in town to be life purposes, even though all of these goals may be necessary for successfully navigating our daily activities. A purpose organizes multiple ordinary goals towards the pursuit of a cause that a person considers to be an "ultimate concern" that the person has chosen to pursue (Emmons, 2003).

Purpose Reflects an Active Commitment

We would not think of a mere statement, vision, daydream, or unrealized intention as a true purpose. Sustained activity toward the fulfillment of the objective is required. This does not mean that the objective must be obtained, or even that an observable degree of progress must be achieved. But there must be actual efforts towards the goal. Having purpose implies walking the walk, not just talking the talk.

Purpose has a Long-term, Enduring Quality

Purpose is not a fleeting aim or one-time effort, however noble that effort may be. If someone jumps into a river to save a drowning child, this is a commendable (even heroic) act; but it would be a misnomer to call that a purpose in life (unless the person regularly patrols the river looking out for drowning children as a continuing commitment). Rather, this is a gallant response to a one-time, chance event. It may be, of course, that this person has a commitment to "help people in trouble," of which this response could be one of many instantiations. If so, and if the person indeed conducts such acts regularly, it is this general aim that defines the person's purpose, rather than a particular aim of saving a drowning child that arose just once. Purpose implies a commitment over time. This does not mean that it must last forever—people take on new purposes and let others go over the course of their lives. But if a person does not stick with a particular goal in more than a momentary way, that goal does not serve as a purpose for that person.

Purpose is Meaningful to the Self

Obeying a mandate is not a purpose, unless the person believes in the rationale behind the mandate. Children begrudgingly doing homework just so they won't get in trouble are not performing purposefully. For most people, obeying parking laws or paying parking fines are rarely instances of purposeful behavior. A person needs to "own it," to believe in it, to take on the goal freely and voluntarily. A command that feels unwelcome and externally driven will not be a purpose unless the person comes around to seeing the value in it. It may be important to obey commands for instrumental reasons, but the obedience will not be purposeful unless the obedience seems meaningful. Children only approach homework with purpose when they see that it has value—and thereby meaning—for them because they can learn something from it.

Purposeful has a "Beyond the self" Component

It is this component that makes purpose consequential to the broader world. The beyond-the-self component has been frequently noted in philosophical and theological treatments of purpose. As one example, Rick Warren's *Purpose-Driven Life* begins with the sentence "It's not about you" (Warren, 2002). The "beyond-the-self" component of purpose generally signifies a prosocial intent. Yet there are purposeful intents that are beyond-the-self without being directly prosocial. For example, studies have reported cases of artists and scientists whose purpose is aimed at contributing to their domain (art or science) and not towards helping others (Damon, 2008). The artist doing "art for art's sake" is being purposeful even when he or she has little concern for pleasing an audience. Such work is still beyond-the-self because it is aimed at improving the domain of art or science. It is not

intentionally altruistic or pro-social. It may eventually contribute to human welfare, but that is not why the artists or scientists say they are doing it. Such work is purposeful because it contributes to beyond-the-self objectives, not because it is aimed directly at benefiting others in a pro-social fashion.

The above criteria have established a foundation for a definition of purpose proposed by the present author and colleagues, and frequently used for research and educational practice in many parts of the world, including the U.S., Brazil, China, Japan, Africa, and Europe (Arantes et al., 2017; Araujo et al., 2016; Blom et al., 2020; Bronk, 2012; Bundick et al., 2019; Colby, 2020; Damon et al., 2024; Damon et al., 2003; Greater Good Science Center Magazine, 2025; Jiang et al., 2016; Liang et al., 2017; Lincoln et al., 2023, 2024; Malin, 2019; Malin et al., 2019; Quinn, 2016; Reilly & Mariano, 2021; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroat, 2022; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2016; Zhou et al., 2022). The definition is as follows, as amended in minor ways since its original introduction:

> Purpose is an active commitment to accomplish an aim that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon & Colby, 2022; Damon et al., 2024; Damon et al., 2003).

Although frequently used, our definition is far from universal: many research programs, and most practice efforts, do not specify a particular definition of the term purpose but rather rely on whatever associations the term brings to mind; and other research and practice programs intentionally investigate "sense of purpose" rather than "purpose" per se, thus not requiring all of the definitional criteria set out above. In addition, there has been at least one explicit definitional effort for purpose that includes some but not all the criteria outlined above (Kashdan et al., 2024). The following section reviews these alternate efforts at defining and operationalizing the concept of purpose, and the final section offers an integration of these alternate efforts with the Damon et al. definition quoted above.

Alternate Approaches to Defining Purpose

In keeping with the familiar vernacular phrase "sense of purpose," a number of research programs have chosen to intentionally explore *sense* of purpose, focusing on the mental experience of feeling purposeful rather than on the kinds of active commitments designated in the Damon et al. definition above (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Hill & Turiano, 2014). Measures for assessing sense of purpose generally use self-report items on surveys that can be quite brief. For example, one brief measure of self-reported "purpose in life," used in several consequential studies, has the following five items: "*There is a direction in my life; My plans for the future match with my true interests and values; I know which direction I am going to follow; My life is guided by a set of clear commitments*" (Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2015). Even briefer is the purpose subscale of VanderWeele's widely used "Human Flourishing" measure, which contains only the following two items: "1) *Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?* 2) *I understand my purpose in life*" (VanderWeele, 2017). Since these items probe how subjects "feel" and "understand" as their indexes of purpose, they are squarely in the "*sense* of purpose" camp.

It should be clear that there is a difference between purpose and *sense* of purpose because some who believe that they have purpose may not behave in accord with their beliefs. In such cases, there can be important discrepancies between active purpose and sense of purpose. The nature and extent of such possible discrepancies are empirical questions that have not been sufficiently studied to gauge their significance. In the closely related sphere of moral judgment, consequential discrepancies between belief and conduct have been established (Bandura, 1991; Damon & Colby, 2015; Turiel, 2006). Although judgment/conduct research has not yet been conducted with regard to the concept of purpose, the discrepancies established in the moral domain should lead us to expect similar discrepancies between purpose and sense of purpose.

Nonetheless, despite this expectation of certain discrepancies, it is important to note that the existing empirical studies of self-reported sense of purpose have documented robust outcomes related to mental and physical health and psychological well-being (Hill & Turiano, 2014; VanderWeele, 2017). As Hill and colleagues write, research on sense of purpose has shown that "Individuals who have a greater sense of purpose - the perception one has a direction and aim in life that leads to life engagement…experience better health and wellness outcomes across the life span" (Hill et al., 2023). If there are indeed serious discrepancies between sense of purpose and "active" purpose, such discrepancies have not disrupted these particular sets of findings regarding health and wellness outcomes.

A future agenda for purpose research should be to determine the extent to which a sense of purpose alone, in the absence of actual commitments to purposeful activities, could account for the entire host of salutary effects that have been attributed to purpose. This is one of many reasons why it is essential to establish the definitional clarity that distinguishes sense of purpose from the related-but-possibly distinct concept of active purpose. Moreover, further theoretical distinctions between sense of purpose and purpose may reveal insights regarding the psychology of purpose and its development across the lifespan. Hill and colleagues have introduced an intriguing theoretical model that they call "PATHS (Purpose As Trait, Habit, and State)" as a way of considering not just sense of purpose (the "state" of feeling purposeful) but also the "life direction" that purpose provides (the "trait" part of their model) and the goal-directed

"routines" that purpose provides (the "habit" part) (Hill, Pfund, & Allemand, p. 1). It will be of interest to see how this and other efforts to parse various dimensions of purpose inform the psychological study of purpose, as empirical findings are reported.

Among investigators who use the single word "purpose" (rather than "sense of purpose"), focusing their sights on both conduct and cognition together, there are important variations in how they define their multidimensional concepts of purpose (see Kashdan et al., 2024; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroat, 2019). As noted above, the earliest empirical research on purpose was introduced by Carol Ryff, who studied purpose as a component of psychological well-being—along with autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). A person scoring high on the Ryff Psychological Well-Being scale demonstrates "goals in life and a sense of directedness, feels there is meaning to present and past life, holds beliefs that give life purpose, and has aims and objectives for living" (Ryff & Keyes p. 727). Assessments in Ryff's scale use a 7- or 3-item purpose-in-life subscale from the Scales of Psychological Well-being, a robust measure that has undergone rigorous validation tests (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Much of the research based on this conceptualization of purpose features data drawn from midlife and older adult samples, especially participants in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, which follows behavioral, psychological, social, and biological outcomes of national samples of U.S. adults between 25 and 74 years of age at the time of recruitment (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Findings from this and other research programs using the Ryff measure (or modifications thereof) have established that purpose is associated with indicators of psychological and physical health, including cardiovascular health, better sleep, reduced incidence of stroke, and greater longevity (Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kim et al., 2013, 2015, 2019; Ryff & Kim, 2020). The size and representativeness of these studies' samples provides a high degree of credibility for these reported results. Still, the Ryff measure does not distinguish the concept of purpose from the concept of meaning; nor does it distinguish purpose from any other types of long-term, well-directed goals. The joining of purpose and meaning makes it impossible to determine which effects can be attributed to purposeful acts as opposed to a general feeling of meaning in life—a confusion exacerbated by research on "meaning in life" that has reported similar outcomes to some of Ryff's findings (Steger et al., 2006) (although this problem has been somewhat rectified by recent revisions in the Steger Meaning in Life scale) (Martela & Steger, 2023). We shall discuss the problem of conflating purpose with other types of long-term goals later in this section.

An intentional attempt to directly address the challenge of defining purpose in a rigorous manner recently appeared in a review by Todd Kashdan and his colleagues (Kashdan et al., 2024). The authors offer the following definition:

> "Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that can be evaluated on the dimensions of strength (i.e., the influence it has on behavior), scope (i.e., the range of domains affected), and awareness (i.e., the degree to which there is conscious clarity and articulation" (p. 838).

Unlike many previous purpose researchers, the authors make key conceptual distinctions between purpose and the related concepts of *meaning*, *goals*, *values*, and *well-being*. These key distinctions have long been needed in this area of research, as we discussed above in the present paper. Because of the importance of this contribution, we shall examine the Kashdan et al. treatment of each of these four distinctions, beginning with meaning, the concept most often conflated with purpose in both common and scholarly discourse.

The authors point out that "A person can have reliable sources of meaning ...without any semblance of purpose in life" (p. 840); and yet "purpose in life and meaning in life are often treated as interchangeable constructs" (p. 840) (as we noted above in the present paper, this is a conceptual conflation in the vernacular as well as in psychological science, e.g., as manifested in the customary phrase "I want to lead a life of meaning and purpose"). The Kashdan et al. paper does not offer clear conceptual grounds for separating meaning from purpose, instead justifying the distinction by citing different empirical findings accruing to the two concepts. But their conceptual rationale for the distinction can be inferred from their treatment of meaning as a process of "drawing connections and inferences about the self, other people, and the world …" (p. 840), in contrast to their treatment of purpose as a "life aim" (see the full Kashdan et al. definition, above). In this way, embedded in their brief review of relevant empirical findings, Kashdan et al. offer a reasonable and valuable way of distinguishing purpose from meaning.

Kashdan et al. present their distinction between purpose and *goals* on more explicitly defined conceptual grounds. They define purpose as an organizer of subsidiary goals, "a broader aim that often exists without an attainable outcome" (p. 841). As an example, they offer the "purpose" of living a healthy lifestyle, which drives shorter-term goals such as eating well, exercising, and so on. In this treatment, as in their treatment of the meaning/purpose distinction, the authors are in agreement with Damon et al. definition and the central arguments of the present paper. Still, as discussed below, the Damon et al. definition of purpose would not accept "living a healthy lifestyle" as a full purpose, since it does not meet the "beyond-the-self" criterion. We shall return to this difference by the end of this paper.

In distinguishing purpose from *values*, Kashdan et al. state that "Purpose is the highest order aim that often reflects a subset of a person's values" (p. 842). This reflects a treatment of purpose similar to that of Robert Emmon's concept of

"ultimate concern" (Emmons, 2003). Once again, this point is generally in line with the arguments of the present paper. As in the relation of purpose to goals, purpose is seen as having an organizing function that draws on values and is informed by values—but that ultimately turns the values towards dedicated aims rather than experiencing them as mere value preferences. As in their treatment of meaning, the authors use empirical findings to support the conceptual distinction they are trying to make, which does not enable them to resolve this matter in an explicit and definitive manner (they comment "…distinguishing between values and purpose can be challenging," p. 842). But the distinction they make between purpose and values is sound, constituting a useful contribution to the psychological literature.

Finally, the authors, similar to other investigators noted above, distinguish purpose from overall *well-being*. The authors see purpose as one component of well-being, not the entire state. This treatment of purpose, as discussed earlier in the present paper, is already implicit in the way purpose has been frequently used as a subscale in widely known measures such as Ryff's Scales of Psychological Well-Being and VanderWeele's Human Flourishing Scale. Kashdan et al. make a needed contribution by explaining and reinforcing the distinction between the entireties of the composite measures of well-being and the purpose scales they include, which in both cases are only brief sections of the composite measures.

Evaluation and Reconciliation of Purpose Definitions

Three alternative approaches to conceptualizing and defining purpose emerged from the review above. The first type focuses on "*sense* of purpose" and draws on self-reports structured by brief survey items such as "*There is a direction in my life*." The second type focuses on more general states of psychological well-being and views purpose as a subcomponent of such states. The third type views purpose as a unique psychological capacity that combines thought, action, long-term goals, and central features of self-identity. In this concluding section of the paper, we consider the advantages and limitations of each approach.

The "sense of purpose" approach has the advantage of corresponding with perhaps the most frequent way the word "purpose" is used in the English vernacular, in common statements such as "now I have a sense of purpose…." Moreover, "sense of purpose," indicating a state of mind, can be directly assessed through instruments that examine subjects' verbal representations of their reflections about how they think and feel. Research that limits its purview to "sense of purpose" is on solid conceptual and methodological grounds as long as its methods provide valid access to subjects' reflections about their own mental states. Finally, such research has yielded impressive results regarding physical and psychological health outcomes of "sense of purpose," thereby affirming the significance of this concept as a variable of interest (Hill et al., 2023).

The unanswered question with respect to research on "sense of purpose" is whether the state of feeling purposeful is a valid proxy for acting purposefully, for purposeful commitment, and for living a life of purpose. This question has not been examined empirically; but, as noted above, there are reasons to expect discrepancies between how people describe their mental states and how they act in everyday life (see, e.g., Killen & Hart, 1994). If, as we should expect, such discrepancies exist, do they affect the outcomes of "having purpose" in critical ways that need to be identified? Intuitively, it seems likely that lives full of purposeful activities and commitments will yield outcomes that cannot be obtained through occasional sentiments such as "sensing" purpose. But early research testing this intuition has produced only modest support for the proposition that active purpose may have more consequential outcomes than reflections on it (see Damon et al., 2024). A final judgment on the significance and validity of the "sense of purpose" approach must await empirical findings that resolve the essential question of how a "sense of purpose" relates to the purposeful behaviors alluded to in the multidisciplinary set of statements quoted at the outset of this paper. To put the key question simply: Does "sense of purpose" capture the full nature and power of purpose in human life, as observed by scholars and writers across humanities, social science, and theological disciplines over the centuries?

The approaches that conceive of purpose as a subcomponent of psychological well-being began with Ryff's research program late in the 20th century (Ryff, 1989). As an initial take on a concept that rarely had been defined for empirical study, early versions of this work conflated the concept of purpose with related-but-distinct concepts such as meaning and long-term goals. Later modifications have addressed some of these conflations (Martela & Steger, 2023); but this line of work has not attempted an overall definition of purpose that meets the definitional criteria set forth in the present paper. Moreover, assessing purpose only as one subcomponent of a broader variable sets limits on the extent and quality of its purpose assessment. An extreme example of this is the VanderWeele Human Flourishing measure, which makes room for only two items in its purpose subcomponent assessment (*overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? I understand my purpose in life*). The methodological problems with this include not only the sparse bit of reasoning sampled but also its reliance on abstract words such as "worthwhile" (and "purpose" itself) to gauge subjects' mental states. It seems obvious that people across different age and cultural groups will interpret such words differently, thus placing in question the validity of their responses. In addition to raising the problem of research validity, such minimal, abstractly phrased items seem to be of doubtful use in educational and medical practice with populations not familial with such terms—including, for

example, less-educated people, younger people, people from differing cultures and subcultures, and so on. Because of the conceptual and methodological limitations of this "purpose as-a-component" approach, it is not well-equipped to investigate purpose as a variable of interest in itself, nor is it a sufficient base for practice dedicated to enhancing purpose across diverse populations that could benefit from purpose learning and development. This reservation does not diminish the value that this approach may have for its other uses in examining overall well-being and flourishing.

The third approach, which conceives of purpose as a unique psychological capacity that combines active engagements, long-term goals and commitments, and central features of self-identity, follows the manner in which the profound statements quoted at the start of this paper conceive of purpose. Two examples of this approach that have tackled the definition issue by offering and justifying their own definitions are the Kashdan et al. treatment and Damon et al. treatment (Bronk, 2013; Damon et al., 2024; Damon et al., 2003; Kashdan et al., 2024). Both of these definitions, and their authors' rationales, are presented above. It must fall to others, of course, to comment critically on the present author's definition. As for the Kasden et al. treatment, the present author's views on their definition's chief elements, and on its missing elements, are as follows:

1) "Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim." The idea that purpose is an "aim" is sound because it captures both the motivational and the directive nature of purpose. The modifier "self-organizing" is also sound because it distinguishes purpose from the multitude of other aims in life; and, beyond that, it suggests that purpose is a way of organizing other aims around the sense of "self." The "self-organizing" modifier captures the nature of purpose as a driver and integrator of short-term, intermediate aims; and it also captures the relation of purpose to self-identity. Finally, the modifier "central" is sound, if understood to mean "of major importance to the person." The degree of centrality may vary across persons and purposes; and it could be that for some people certain purposes seem peripheral in relation to other purposes. In such cases, the term "central" may be an overstatement if taken literally. But, overall, the present author is in close agreement with this foundational statement of the Kashdan et al. definition.

2) "(Purpose) ...can be evaluated on the dimensions of strength… scope...and awareness." Although this statement is true, it does not serve as a useful or even appropriate part of a definition of purpose. It is true that purpose may be evaluated on the dimensions of its strength, scope, and awareness, as well as on a number of other dimensions not mentioned here (including its longevity, its prescriptivity, its enjoyability, and almost countless others). It is also the case that, in their paper, the authors describe several interesting research questions pertaining to each of these evaluations. We could imagine many other such questions that would pertain to other dimensions that characterize the ways of human purpose. But the potential for research evaluations for a psychological construct plays no part in a conceptual definition of that construct (see, for a philosopher's discussion of conceptual definition, Putnam, 1975). Most psychological constructs (linguistic ability, math knowledge, religious belief, anger, empathy, etc.) can be evaluated on their strength, scope, and awareness. For this and other reasons, this component of the Kashdan et al. definition is not useful in distinguishing purpose from a host of other capacities and processes. Nor does it capture any particular quality of purpose that indicates how purpose functions, how it is experienced, how it develops, or what processes and outcomes it is associated with.

3) The missing elements: The Kashdan et al. approach does not include the final criterion in the Damon et al. definition, "of consequence to the world beyond the self." There are understandable reasons to bypass this criterion. For one thing, many vernacular uses of the term—such as the Kashdan et al. example that "a person's purpose might be to 'live a healthy lifestyle'"—are indeed self-oriented. For another thing, the phrase "beyond the self" connotes altruistic motivation; whereas it should be clear from human history and everyday observation that many purposeful people are far from altruistic. But, as discussed earlier in this paper, the "beyond-the-self" component of the Damon et al. definition refers to a commitment to a non-self-oriented cause that may *or may not be* intended pro-socially—for example, as in the examples discussed above, it can be an artistic or scientific contribution intended to contribute to a domain of creative achievement or knowledge rather than for the sake of helping other people (see Damon, 2008, for an in-depth treatment of this matter).

The present author's argument for including the "beyond-the-self" criterion is that it captures the self-transcendent nature of purpose that those who have written most profoundly about the concept (such as in the sample quotes above) have always stressed. And it is this quality that accounts for the power of purpose to provide resilience against severe hardships of the type that Frankl chronicled (Frankl, 1946). This is because the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose provides an antidote to self-absorption and the related mental-health risk of dysfunctional anxiety. Accordingly, it is reasonable to hypothesize that many of purpose's observed physical and psychological health outcomes in part can be attributed to purpose's beyond-the-self quality. As also noted above, however, the research necessary for substantiating this claim has not yet been done.

Finally, the Kashdan et al. definition does not include the criterion that purpose must be "meaningful to the self." As noted above, the authors correctly distinguish purpose from meaning, a needed contribution to this area of research. But they do not require purpose to *include* meaning (which is very different than the two being synonymous). The reason meaning must be included as a component criterion of purpose is that its inclusion is necessary for distinguishing

purpose from an unwilful or grudging obedience to mandates imposed by external forces and not fully "owned" (or believed in) by the person. The "self-organizing" language in the Kashdan et al. definition does indicate that the main action in pursuing purpose stems from the self. But the "self-organizing" phrase does not capture the act of belief at the heart of a purposeful commitment. Students, for example, can self-organize around completing a homework assignment that seems to them a waste of time and only necessary because they want to stay out of trouble. This would not be purposeful work. It only becomes purposeful if and when the students endorse the learning goals of the homework—in other words, if and when the assignment becomes meaningful to them. In order to make the wholly voluntary and belief-driven nature of purpose explicit, it is important for the definition to specify that a purpose is necessarily meaningful to the self.

Conclusion

This review has documented and described significant differences in how purpose has been conceptualized in psychological research. Despite these variations, research findings have often reinforced and built upon one another, in both domestic and international studies (Bronk, 2013; Damon & Malin, 2020; Kashdan et al., 2024). Yet there have been exceptions, where findings based on different conceptions of purpose have yielded different findings. For example, studies employing the Ryff scale have found purpose declining with age, whereas research based on Damon and his colleagues' conceptualization has found purpose increasing with age (Bundick et al.., 2019; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Some of this disagreement may be attributable to differences in samples and ages of the subjects studied; but some of it may be attributable to the higher bar set by the more extensive criteria for purpose in the definition used by Damon and his colleagues. Explaining such discrepancies is but one of many reasons why it is important to clarify the ways that present conceptions of purpose vary across the multiple research labs and practice settings that have taken an interest in the psychology of purpose.

Fortunately, several researchers in this area of psychological study have taken up this challenge (Bronk et al., 2023; Damon & Colby, 2022; Hill et al., 2023; Kashdan et al., 2024). The present review examines these efforts critically in order to extract the beneficial contributions of each and propose a comprehensive definition that captures the unique nature of purpose as known in everyday life and as described across the many scholarly disciplines that for centuries have shed their own light on this eminent feature of human life.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges generous support from the John Templeton Foundation to the Stanford Center on Adolescence for research and convenings exploring the psychology of purpose over the course of human development.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

ORCID iD

William Damon https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7689-1766

Note

1. Psychology Today, February 2023, pp. 24-31.

References

Arantes, V., Araujo, U., Pinheiro, V., Marimon, M. M., & Sastre, G. (2017). Youth purpose through the lens of the theory of organizing models of thinking. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1345725

Araujo, U. F., Arantes, V. A., Danza, H. C., Pinheiro, V. P. G., & Garbin, M. (2016). Principles and methods to guide education for purpose: A Brazilian experience. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *42*(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1226554

Arnett, J. J., Ramos, K. D., & Jensen, L. A. (2001). Ideological views in emerging adulthood: Balancing autonomy and community. *Journal of Adult Development*, *8*(2), 69–79.

Bandura, A. (1991). Social cognitive theory of moral thought and action. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development: Theory, research and applications* (*1*, pp. 71–129). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Benson, P. (1997). *All Kids are Our Kids*. NY: Random House.

Blom, L., Bronk, K. C., Sullivan, M., McConchie, J., Ballesteros, J., & Farello, A. (2020). Peace and development indicators in Liberia through sport for development programming. Peace and Conflict. *Journal of Peace Psychology*, *27*(2), 284–296. https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000463

Bronk, K. C. (2011). The role of purpose in life in healthy identity formation: A grounded model. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *132*, 31–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.426

Bronk, K. C. (2012). A grounded theory of the development of noble youth purpose. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *27*(1), 78–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411412958

Bronk, K. C. (2013). *Purpose in life: A component of optimal youth development*: Springer.

Bronk, K. C., Reichard, R. J., & Qi, J. L. (2023). A co-citation analysis of purpose: Trends and (potential) troubles in the foundation of purpose scholarship. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2023.2168563

Bundick, M. J., Remington, K., Morton, E., & Colby, A. (2019). The contours of purpose beyond the self in midlife and later life. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1531718

Burrow, A. L., & Hill, P. L. (2011). Purpose as a form of identity capital for positive youth adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*, *47*(4), 1196–1206. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023818

Colby, A. (2020 February 6 online). Purpose as a unifying goal for higher education. *Journal of College and Character*. https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2019.1696829

Corsini, R. J. (1991). *The dictionary of psychology*. Routledge. pp. 513.

Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1964). An experimental study in existentialism: The psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of monogenic neurosis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *20*, 200–207.

Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1969). Manual of instructions for the purpose-in-life-test. Psychometric Affiliates.

Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (2004)*, *591*, 13–23.

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people Find their calling in life*. The Free Press.

Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2015). *The power of ideals: The real story of moral choice*. Oxford University Press.

Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2022). Education and the life of purpose. In M. Suárez-Orozco & C. Suárez-Orozco (Eds.), *Education: A global compact in a time of crisis*. Columbia University Press.

Damon, W., & Malin, H. (2020). The development of purpose: An international perspective. In L. Jensen (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of moral development*. Oxford University Press.

Damon, W., Malin, H., & Colby, A. (2024). Purpose development in the context of higher education. *Applied Developmental Science*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2024.2403535

Damon, W., Menon, J. L., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The Development of purpose during adolescence. *Journal of Applied Developmental Science*, *7*(3), 119–128.

Emmons, R. A. (2003). Personal goals, life meaning, and virtue: Wellsprings of a positive life. In C. L. M. Keyes & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 105–128). American Psychological Association.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*: W.W. Norton & Company.

EY Global Insights. (2020). https://www.ey.com/en_gl/insights/long-term-value/four-ways-to-put-your-purpose-to-work

Frankl, V. E. (1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press.

Gardner, H., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Damon, W. (2001). *Good work: When excellence and ethics meet*. Basic Books.

Gawande, A. (2014). *Being mortal: Medicine and what matters in the end*. Henry Holt.

Greater Good Science Center Magazine. (2025). https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/purpose/definition#what-is-purpose

Haidt, J., & Kesebir, S. (2010). Morality. In S. Fiske, D. Gilbert, & L. Gardner (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (5th ed.) Wiley.

Harvard Business Review. (2020). *How to lead with purpose: Special issue*.

Hill, P. L., Pfund, G., & Allemand, M. (2023). The PATHS to purpose: A new framework toward understanding purpose development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 1–6.

Hill, P. L., & Turiano, N. A. (2014). Purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across adulthood. *Psychological Science*, *25*(7), 1482–1486. https://doi.org/10.1177/095679761453179

Jiang, F., Lin, S., & Mariano, J. M. (2016). The influence of Chinese college teachers' competence for purpose support on students' purpose development. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *42*(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1226555

Kashdan, T., Goodman, F., McKnight, P., Brown, B., & Rum, B. (2024). Purpose in life: A resolution on the definition, conceptual model, and optimal measurement. *American Psychologist*, *79*(6), 838–853.

Killen, M., & Hart, D. (Eds.), (1994). *Morality in everyday life: Developmental perspectives* (pp. 342–370). Cambridge University Press.

Kim, E. S., Delaney, S. W., & Kubzansky, L. D. (2019). Sense of purpose in life and cardiovascular disease: Underlying mechanisms and future directions. *Current Cardiology Reports*, *21*(135). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11886-019-1222-9

Kim, E. S., Hershner, S. D., & Strecher, V. J. (2015). Purpose in life and incidence of sleep disturbances. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, *38*(3), 590–597. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-015-9635-4

Kim, E. S., Sun, J. K., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2013). Purpose in life and reduced incidence of stroke in older adults: 'The health and retirement study. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, *74*(5), 427–432. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2013.01.013

Lerner, R. M. (2018). *Concepts and theories of human development* (4th Edition). Routledge.

Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. (2005). Positive youth development: A view of the issues. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *25*, 1. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211

Lerner, R. M., & Benson, P. I. (2003). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice*. Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers.

Liang, B., & Klein, T. (2022). *How to navigate life: The new science of finding your way in school, career, and beyond*. Martin's Publishing Group.

Liang, B., White, A., Rhodes, H., Strodel, R., Gutowski, E., DeSilva Mousseau, A. M., & Lund, T. J. (2017). Pathways to purpose among impoverished youth from the Guatemala City dump community. *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.1285/i24212113v3i2p1

Lincoln, B., Patel, K. N., Binder, M., Lund, T. J., & Liang, B. (2024). Transforming service into civic purpose: A qualitative study of adolescent civic engagement and purpose development. *Adolescents*, *4*(1), 90–106. https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents4010007

Lincoln, B., White, A. E., Lund, T. J., Liang, B., Blustein, D. L., & Barnett, G. M. (2023). Moving from passion to purpose: A

STEM-focused after-school program's influence on purpose outcomes. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584231182137

Malin, H. (2018). *Teaching for Purpose: Preparing students for lives of meaning*. Harvard Education Press.

Malin, H. (2019). Engaging purpose in college: A person-centered approach to studying purpose in relation to college experiences. *Applied Developmental Science*, *27*(1), 83–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2022.2033120

Malin, H., Morton, E. R., Nadal, A., & Smith, K. A. (2019). Purpose and coping with adversity: A repeated measures, mixed-methods study with young adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, *76*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.07.015

Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2023). The role of significance relative to the other dimensions of meaning in life—an examination utilizing the Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale (3DM). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *18*(4), 606–626. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2022.2070528

Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. Simon and Schuster.

McAdams, D. P. (2001). Generativity in midlife. In M. E. Lachman (Ed.), *Handbook of midlife development* (pp. 395–443). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

McKnight, P. E., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-Being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology*, *13*(3), 242–251. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017152

Metz, T. (2002). Recent work on the meaning of life. *Ethics*, *112*, 781–814.

Metz, T. (2021). Life, meaning of. In E. Mason (Ed.), *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press.

Putnam, H. (1975). Mind, language and reality. *Philosophical papers* (*2*). Cambridge University Press.

Quinn, B. P. (2016). Learning from the wisdom of practice: Teachers' educational purposes as pathways to supporting adolescent purpose in secondary classrooms. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *42*(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1226557

Reilly, T. S., & Mariano, J. M. (2021). Fostering mature purpose beyond the classroom: Considering family and other institutions in agentic purpose commitment *Seção Temática | Projetos de Vida*. https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0275202138e210115

Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *57*, 1069–1081. https://doi.org/10.1037%2F%2F0022-3514.57.6.1069

Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*(719). https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719

Ryff, C. D., & Kim, E. S. (2020). Extending research linking purpose in life to health: The challenges of inequality, the potential of the arts, and the imperative of virtue. In A. J. Burrow & P. L. Hill (Eds.), *The ecology of purposeful living across the lifespan: Developmental, educational, and social perspectives* (pp. 29–58). Springer.

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5

Sharma, G., Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M., & Kang, Z. (2018). Sense of purpose scale: Development and initial validation. *Applied Developmental Science*, *22*(3), 188–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2016.1262262

Sharma, G., & Yukhymenko-Lescroat, M. (2019). Validation of the revised sense of purpose scale with emerging adults. *Journal of Character Education*, *15*(2), 39–52.

Sharma, G., & Yukhymenko-Lescroat, M. (2022). Life purpose as a predictor of resilience and persistence in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251221076828

Shweder, R. (2003). Why do men barbecue? *Recipes for cultural psychology*. Harvard University Press.

Steger, M., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *53*(1), 80–93.

Tirri, K., & Kuusisto, E. (2016). Finnish student teachers' perceptions on the role of purpose in teaching. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *42*(5). https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1226552

Turiel, E. M. (2006). In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (The Sixth Edition, *3*): John Wiley and Sons.

VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). *On the promotion of human flourishing* (*31*, pp. 8148–8156). Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A.

Warren, R. (2002). *The purpose driven life: What on earth am I here for?* Zondervan.

Zhou, M., Rauen, J., Sepulveda, J., Lund, T., Liang, B., & Mousseau, A. D. (2022). Purpose in the face of adversity: The roles of meaning-making and adversity among purposeful college students. *Journal of Character Education*, *19*(2), 1–22.

Zirlott, C. (1999). *The formative relationship of the dispositions of humor and humility for reforming false life strategies*. Doctoral Dissertation. Duquesne University.