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Collegiate purpose orientations and well-being in early and middle adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Two studies evaluated whether different purpose orientations, defined by the content of one's life-goals, would differentially predict personal well-being in the short- and long-term. Four types of purpose orientations (creative, prosocial, financial, and personal recognition) were examined using a sample of 416 (57% male) college undergraduates tested as seniors and again thirteen years after graduation. At senior year, all four purpose orientations were correlated with perceived personal development during college, measured using Higher Education Research Institute surveys. However, at middle adulthood, only the prosocial purpose orientation was predictive of greater generativity, personal growth, and integrity. These studies point to the benefits of having goals focused on helping others rather than helping oneself.

Emerging adulthood is a period of extensive self-exploration in which individuals are required to form goals and identify their life's purpose (Arnett, 2000). Indeed, finding a purpose in life, defined as having set goals and a direction for one's life, appears to be clearly adaptive for emerging adults (Ryff, 1989b). Therefore, the specific personal values and goals that individuals construct during college and emerging adulthood has been an enduring topic of interest for researchers (e.g., Arnett, 2004; Astin & Nichols, 1964; Astin, Green, Korn, & Schalit, 1986; Salmela-Aro, 2001). In line with this interest, the current studies investigated how emerging adults' purpose orientations, indicated by their goals for life, predict developmental and well-being outcomes in the short- and long-term. Study 1 assessed the short-term benefits of different purpose orientations established during the collegiate years. In Study 2, the long-term benefits of purpose orientations were investigated by following these same individuals into middle adulthood. Furthermore, Study 2 assessed whether purpose orientations demonstrated stability over time from emerging into middle adulthood. These studies sought to address two primary objectives: (1) to distinguish unique types of purpose orientations via assessment of its content during emerging adulthood, and (2) to investigate whether these orientations predict long-term well-being.

Lifespan development, goal-setting, and purpose

Erikson's classic theory (1950, 1968, 1982) of lifespan development describes a series of "crises" encountered during the lifespan. During late adolescence and emerging adulthood, Erikson suggests that individuals face the crisis of identity versus identity confusion. To resolve this crisis, individuals need to decide "who they are." It is in this period that individuals frame occupational goals and reflect on what makes life meaningful. Indeed, Erikson (1968) suggests that resolving this crisis often involves defining one's purpose in life. Importantly, Erikson clearly states that the resolution (or lack thereof) of one crisis directly affects all subsequent "crises." Therefore, finding a purpose for one's life should demonstrate adaptive outcomes both immediately and in the long-term. One such outcome should be the individual's level of generativity. Generativity refers to one's desire to pass on and contribute to future generations (Erikson, 1950). Following Erikson's conceptualized trajectory, an individual who has designated a purpose for his/her life should in turn "solve" the identity crisis, and be more suited to demonstrate generativity. Indeed, studies have supported this timeframe by demonstrating that mid-life adults are most likely to report generative concerns (e.g., McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Generativity thus appears to be a relevant outcome for examining the long-term effects of identifying a purpose for one's life.

It is often unclear, though, what is meant by having a "purpose in life." A common thread across definitions is that one's purpose is linked to one's goal-setting. Ryff (1989a,b) proposed that those with a sense of purpose have set goals for life, a sense of direction, and belief that their lives have meaning. Emmons (1999) suggests that "goals

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appear to be prime constituents of the meaning-making process" (p.147). Furthermore, he claims that evaluating one's goals provides a methodologically sound approach toward investigating an individual's meaning-making process. Indeed, Nurmi (1991, 1993, 2001) has proposed that the goals one sets, and how one pursues them, serve to define the self. Finally, Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) also defined purpose in life with respect to goal-setting, and emphasize the need to focus on long-term rather than short-term goals.

Therefore, finding a purpose in life is a paramount objective for an emerging adult that involves setting a course for one's life. Not surprisingly then, several studies have evaluated the outcomes of goal-setting among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1991; Little, 1993; Salmela-Aro, 1992; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1997). Across these studies, it appears that goal content is linked differentially to well-being. For example, Salmela-Aro and Nurmi (1997) had Finnish college students list their goals using Little's (1983) personal projects questionnaire, and complete measures of initial well-being (life events, depression, and self-esteem). Participants then completed the same well-being measures two years later. Participants' goals were grouped into three categories: self-focused, achievement-focused, and family-focused. Participants with more family-focused goals were more likely to have positive well-being at follow-up, while those with a higher number of reported self-related goals showed lower levels of well-being subsequently. Furthermore, participants with more family- and achievement-focused goals were less likely to report negative life events at follow-up. These findings suggest that being focused on others (i.e., one's family) rather than on oneself may be indicative of greater well-being. Indeed, Cross and Markus (1991) also have reported that having more self-focused goals is linked to decreased life satisfaction across the lifespan, in a sample of American participants. The symmetry between these studies speaks to the generalizability of this result across different samples, and thus suggests that setting "other-focused" goals may be more adaptive than setting "self-focused" goals.

Such research, though promising, often focuses on relatively short-term effects and short-term goals. A natural next step in this line of investigation is to examine long-term outcomes and constellations of related, long-term *life*-goals. One's purpose in life is often indicated by multiple and related goals, rather than a single one. For example, an individual who orients toward a prosocial purpose may be more likely to list several prosocial life-goals (i.e., help others, influence the social structure, serve the community), instead of focusing on a single prosocial goal. This path was followed when developing the purpose orientations measure implemented in the studies described below.

Measuring purpose orientations

Multiple methods have been offered for assessing one's sense of purpose in life (e.g., Bundick et al., 2006; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Ryff, 1989b). However, most of the strategies utilized thus far have focused solely on measuring the extent to which one feels a sense of purpose in life. Often the actual content of an individual's sense of purpose is neglected in the literature. Recently, Damon and Bronk (2007) underscored the need to evaluate purpose content as well. They suggest that individuals with highly ignoble goals (i.e., dictators, fascists) often feel a clear sense of purpose to their lives. Such individuals would likely exhibit scores on measures of felt purpose equal to those with more positive life purposes, and thus, such measures may mask important individual differences. Furthermore, as mentioned above, research on goal content also clearly indicates the need to assess "what" the nature of one's purpose is, rather than solely "how much," of it an individual possesses, as distinct purpose contents may differentially predict one's well-being.

We developed our purpose orientations measure using the life-goal items developed and refined by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The HERI survey has been given to college students across the nation for several decades and has remained largely constant. A large number of universities thus have extensive historical databases of their institutes' HERI data. Therefore, by deriving the purpose orientations measure from the HERI surveys, the current studies allow researchers across the nation to investigate similar trends within their students. While this means that we could not adapt or alter these items, the benefits to the research community appear to clearly outweigh this cost. Furthermore, a life-goal questionnaire would provide an easier-to-administer assessment approach in comparison to the extensive coding inherent with conceptually related assessments, such as personal projects (Little, 1983), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), and personal goals (Cross & Markus, 1991).

Scale development

To develop the purpose orientation measures, a factor analysis was performed on the HERI life-goal data from 1748 undergraduate seniors (62% Male; $M_{age} = 22$ years) at a private, mid-sized Catholic university in the Midwestern United States. These seniors were asked to rate the importance of 17 different life-goals on a four-point scale. A principal components exploratory factor analysis on the life-goal items suggested four factors, following the Lautenschlager (1989) parallel analysis criteria, and two items were removed due to their high crossloadings (>.3 on more than one factor). Factor loadings for the solution are provided for the 15 items in Table 1. The first factor was labeled a *prosocial orientation* because it was defined by one's propensity to help others and influence the societal structure. The second factor, a *financial orientation*, was defined by goals of financial well-being and administrative success. The third factor, a *creative orientation*, was defined by artistic goals and a propensity for originality. The fourth factor, a *personal recognition orientation*, was defined by one's desire for recognition and respect from colleagues. Studies 1 and 2 evaluated the short- and long-term benefits of endorsing these four purpose orientations, by analyzing the part of this undergraduate sample that filled out both the senior survey and the middle adulthood survey.

Study 1

Study 1 evaluated the relations between the four purpose orientation scores, and whether they correlated with outcomes

Table 1
Purpose orientations factor loadings following a varimax rotation.

Item	Item factor loadings			
	P	F	C	R
Participating in a community service program	**.78**	.05	.04	.03
Influencing social values	**.74**	−.01	.06	.12
Helping others who are in difficulty	**.73**	.04	−.09	−.02
Helping to promote racial understanding	**.71**	−.03	.16	.04
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	**.54**	−.14	.22	.00
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	**.48**	.11	.27	.10
Being successful in a business of my own	−.03	**.76**	.19	.06
Having administrative responsibility for the work of others	.10	**.75**	.17	−.12
Being very well off financially	−.18	**.73**	−.07	.24
Creating artistic work (painting, sculpture, decorating, etc.)	.11	.02	**.82**	−.01
Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts (acting, dancing, etc.)	.08	.02	**.68**	.12
Writing original works (poems, novels, short stories, etc.)	.14	−.10	**.68**	.10
Becoming an authority in my field	.10	.22	.02	**.78**
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field	.07	.25	.10	**.76**
Making a theoretical contribution to science	.02	−.08	.09	**.58**
Influencing the political structure	*.46*	*.12*	*.11*	*.37*
Raising a family	*.34*	*.44*	*−.15*	*−.15*

Note. P indicates prosocial factor, F – financial, C – creative, and R – personal recognition. Italicized items were removed due to high crossloadings.