



The meaning of action: Do self-regulatory processes contribute to a purposeful life?



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ABSTRACT

Viewing life as purposeful is a powerful belief: in addition to positively coloring our feelings, it is associated with decreased risk of falling ill, and, ultimately, dying (Kim et al., 2013). Having valued goals infuses life with purpose (Scheier et al., 2006), suggesting that purpose is closely tied to people's self-regulation. According to Kruglanski et al. (2000), two self-regulatory processes are important: to attain our goals, we must identify what it is that we want to accomplish and how best to pursue it (assessment), and then follow through and actually do it (locomotion). Does purpose, then, emerge from *moving* toward one's desired outcomes, from carefully *identifying* and *evaluating* the best outcomes to pursue, or both? And could purpose be a mechanism linking people's self-regulatory tendencies to their subjective well-being? Three studies (total $N = 744$) showed that purpose was positively predicted by locomotion, but negatively by assessment; no interaction between locomotion and assessment was found. Moreover, purpose mediated the link between self-regulation and people's satisfaction with life. Our results imply that purpose is derived from movement and that action carries meaning.

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1. Introduction

Having a sense that life is purposeful is perhaps one of the most powerful beliefs a person can carry: far from just coloring our thoughts and feelings, viewing life as purposeful is associated with decreased risk of falling ill, and, ultimately, dying (Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2015; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kim, Sun, Park, & Peterson, 2013; Sone et al., 2008). Yet, where do perceptions of purpose come from?

Valued goals are thought to be essential to the experience of purpose in life (Baumeister, 1989; Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004; Scheier et al., 2006), but it is unclear what exactly it is about the pursuit of such goals that makes them so important. It is possible, for example, that people may come to experience purpose when critically thinking about the relative value of their life's goals and desires while making sure to choose wisely among these. It is also possible that people may come to experience purpose when actually trying to pursue these goals and desires rather than merely reflecting on their importance.

These two possibilities map closely onto the self-regulatory orientations outlined in self-regulatory mode theory (Higgins, 1998; Kruglanski et al., 2000). This theory identifies two independent tendencies that contribute to goal pursuit: To attain our goals, we must identify what it is that we want to accomplish and how best to

get there (assessment), and then follow through and actually do this (locomotion). Assessment, specifically, refers to the critical appraisal of alternative options and reflects an orientation toward carefully considering the value or importance of something. According to theory, it “constitutes the comparative aspect of self-regulation concerned with critically evaluating entities or states, such as goals or means in relation to alternatives in order to judge relative quality” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). Locomotion, on the other hand, refers to the psychological experience of movement and reflects an orientation toward making quick and continuous goal progress. It “is the self-regulatory aspect concerned with movement from state to state and with committing the psychological resources that will initiate and maintain goal-directed progress in a straightforward manner, without undue distractions or delays” (Kruglanski et al., 2000, p. 794). Together, these two orientations make up necessary components of all self-regulation.

Does a purposeful life, then, emerge from *moving* toward one's desired outcomes or from carefully *evaluating* and *identifying* the best outcomes to pursue? Our research attempted to answer this previously unexplored question by investigating people's self-regulatory tendencies toward assessment versus locomotion as potential sources of purpose in life.

1.1. Modes of self-regulation: Assessment and locomotion

When it comes to successful self-regulation, people must go through a number of steps to achieve their valued goals, referred to as

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assessment and locomotion (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000). According to classic theories (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Gollwitzer, 1990; Higgins, 1998), self-regulation involves carefully comparing and selecting among different end-states to identify those to pursue and deciding how to best attain those desired states (assessment). It is also necessary to initiate the goal-directed action necessary to actually achieve those states (locomotion). While both of these self-regulatory modes are needed for successful achievement of one's goals, assessment and locomotion are independent tendencies that can be emphasized to different degrees by different people and in different situations (Kruglanski, Orehek, Higgins, Pierro, & Shalev, 2010; Orehek, Mauro, Kruglanski, & van der Bles, 2012). From this perspective, one can be high on one tendency and low on the other, high on both, or low on both.

People's relative emphasis on each of these self-regulatory orientations has consequences for the direct targets of their attempts to self-regulate, including how quickly they complete their tasks (e.g., Pierro, Giacomantonio, Pica, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2011). Moreover, people's relative emphasis on locomotion or assessment is associated with different facets of their subjective well-being (Hong, Tan, & Chang, 2004; Kruglanski et al., 2000). Kruglanski and colleagues, for example, found that locomotion was associated with less depression, while assessment with more depression. Given that self-regulation seems essential in shaping beliefs about life's purposefulness (e.g., Scheier et al., 2006), locomotion and assessment are particularly likely to influence the extent to which life is experienced as purposeful. In the following section, we will discuss our predictions about how people's locomotion and assessment tendencies may influence their perceived purpose in life, starting with the expected relationship between locomotion and purpose in life.

1.1.1. Purpose in life and locomotion

First, we predicted that a high focus on locomotion would be positively associated with purpose in life. As mentioned earlier, purpose is thought to emerge from moving toward one's valued goals and objectives (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Ryff et al., 2004; Scheier et al., 2006), and locomotion tendencies signal the desire to engage in precisely this form of action. As Scheier et al. (2006, p. 291) suggested, people must actually *put effort* toward their personal desires for a sense of purpose to emerge: "Valued goals are important because they provide a purpose for living. Valued goals also provide the mechanism by which a person remains behaviorally engaged in life." Consistent with this notion, Kruglanski et al. (2000) found that locomotion was related to important subjective well-being variables in the same way that purpose in life is. They found, for example, that just like purpose in life (e.g., Scheier et al., 2006), locomotion was associated with greater self-esteem and optimism as well as less depression. It is possible that higher perceptions of purpose in life are one pathway through which locomotion may confer these states of well-being.

In further support of our prediction that locomotion will be positively associated with purpose in life, ample research has shown that movement toward one's goals is associated with subjective well-being in a general sense. In the work place, for example, locomotion has been associated with less stress, burnout, and psychological strain (Bélanger et al., 2015; De Carlo et al., 2014). Movement toward one's goals, moreover, has been associated with greater life satisfaction (Brandstadter & Renner, 1990; Harlow & Cantor, 1996; Palys & Little, 1983; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988) and happiness (Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993), as well as less negative feelings, depression, and neuroticism (Brandstadter & Renner, 1990; Emmons & King, 1988; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988). Worth (1995) found that incarcerated people were less likely to seek medical help for mental and physical illness and were less likely to resort to violence when their prison allowed them to pursue long-term educational goals. Similarly, Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, and Carver (2003) found that college students' ability to pursue new goals when entering college was positively associated with the extent to which they perceived their lives as purposeful.

1.1.2. Purpose in life and assessment

We also expected that strong assessment tendencies would be associated with lower perceptions of purpose in life. While a certain degree of assessment may be necessary to select the most functional (in this case most valuable or purposeful) goals to pursue, critically reflecting on one's life goals and desires does not mean that one will actually try to fulfill these. Assessment may also be associated with lower purpose in life because of its focus on critical evaluation. A high tendency toward assessment is likely to disrupt a person's goal engagement efforts, leading them to suspend goal pursuit in order to re-evaluate their chosen means to attain the goal and sometimes even the goal itself (Kruglanski et al., 2000).

Such focus on evaluation is likely to deter high assessors from pursuing some goals and courses of action, instead freezing them in a state of non-action. Indeed, high assessors are more likely to procrastinate than low assessors (Pierro et al., 2011). Whereas purpose is thought to emerge from acting toward a valuable goal, high assessors are prone to second-guess their chosen course of action, thereby undermining their engagement in focused pursuit of their goals and desires. Such indecision should interfere with dedicated action, likely decreasing the extent to which assessors' behaviors feel purposeful.

A high tendency toward assessment may further detract from the sense that life is purposeful because, concerned as high assessors are with evaluation, they care more about the *consequences* of their activities rather than engaging in the activity *itself*, including how their actions and their outcomes reflect on them as a person and how their choices are perceived by others (Bélanger et al., 2015; Kruglanski et al., 2000; Pierro, Kruglanski, & Higgins, 2006). Purpose is unlikely to result from doing things to please others, but rather results from doing things for their own sake (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), further suggesting that assessment will decrease perceptions of purpose in life.

1.1.3. Purpose in life and a combination of assessment and locomotion

Of course, the final possibility exists that locomotion and assessment give rise to purpose in life together. Previous research on locomotion and assessment, for example, has found that a combination of high locomotion and high assessment predicts greater success in one's pursuits, including higher grade point averages for students and higher likelihood of successfully completing an elite military course for men in military service (Kruglanski et al., 2000). On the other hand, Hong and colleagues (Hong et al., 2004) found that a combination of high locomotion and low assessment predicted greater well-being, in this case, greater life satisfaction and lower depression. Because of this, we will also test for the possibility that locomotion and assessment may interact to predict perceptions of purpose in life.

1.2. The present research

We conducted three studies to investigate the links between purpose in life and the self-regulatory tendencies toward locomotion and assessment. In Study 1, we measured people's self-regulatory mode tendencies and perceptions of purpose in life. In Study 2, we measured these variables in a different sample, and included a measure of life satisfaction in order to test the possibility that purpose might mediate the link between regulatory modes and subjective well-being. In Study 3, we tested whether we could replicate the findings of Study 2 in a different sample and using a different measure of purpose in life than in the preceding studies. For all studies, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study.

Our sample sizes (443 in Study 1, 188 in Study 2, and 113 in Study 3) were determined by a combination of power analyses and decision rules implemented at the time of data collection. For our power analyses, we focused on our two main effects of interest, namely the potential associations between locomotion and purpose in life and between

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