



Searching for a sense of purpose: The role of parents and effects on self-esteem among female adolescents



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Positive youth development
Sense of purpose
Parent–child relationships
Self-esteem

Achieving a sense of purpose during adolescence is a developmental asset; however, searching for that purpose may be a developmental stressor. Supportive parent–child relationships may help youth during this stressful experience. The present study included 207 female students in the sixth, eighth, and tenth grades from two competitive private schools. Searching for purpose negatively predicted self-esteem. Hierarchical linear regression examined moderating effects of parental trust and alienation on searching for purpose as a predictor of self-esteem. Parental alienation significantly moderated the association between search for purpose and girls' self-esteem; conversely, parental trust did not moderate the association. Results suggest that parent–child relationships characterized by high levels of parental alienation may exacerbate the pernicious effects of search for purpose. Person-based analyses found four clusters corresponding to Foreclosed Purpose, Diffused Purpose, Uncommitted Purpose/Moratorium, and Achieved Purpose. We discuss implications for practice and research based on these results.

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Positive youth development (PYD) scholars have become increasingly interested in the benefits associated with youth developing a sense of purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Damon, 2004). While the “purpose” construct has been defined in a number of ways, definitions tend to agree on the aspect of an overarching direction in life (Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler 2006). Having a sense of purpose has been associated with a number of key developmental outcomes in adolescence, such as higher self-esteem and academic achievement (Damon et al., 2003). In contrast, a lack of purpose can create unsettled feelings and serve as a stressor for adolescents. For example, adolescents who have low levels of purpose or who are still searching for purpose may experience higher rates of depression and anxiety (Damon, 2008; Keyes, 2011). According to PYD theory, social support can buffer the inimical effects of such developmental stressors (Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009). For youth, their relationship with their parents typically represents a formative, long-standing social support source with the potential to promote positive developmental trajectories (Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, & Lerner, 2010; Steinberg, 2001). Despite the formative role of parents, little research has investigated whether and how parents might foster a sense of purpose in their children. The current study seeks to address this gap by examining the role parents play in adolescents' experiences of searching for purpose and their developmental outcomes, specifically self-esteem.

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Purpose in adolescent development

The construct of “purpose” typically encompasses: 1) aim, as a quality indicating intention towards a long-term goal and 2) engagement, as an internal motivation to be active in pursuit of the personally meaningful aim (Bronk, 2008; Bronk et al., 2010; Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009). Damon et al. (2003) have also emphasized a third dimension to this construct – contribution, as a goal that seeks to contribute positively to society. However, this dimension is difficult to operationalize largely because whether one’s purpose contributes positively to society tends to require subjective judgment (Waddington, 2009). Thus, in the current study, we focus on the first two dimensions of purpose and based on converging theories of purpose, we consider an achieved sense of purpose one that simultaneously commits to a purpose and engages in an ongoing search for purpose (Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Waddington, 2009).

Sense of purpose, a PYD protective factor that conceptually integrates several PYD developmental assets, is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, hopefulness, goal directedness, educational aspirations, altruism, academic achievement, and mental and physical health (Bronk, 2008; Damon et al., 2003; Reilly, 2009). Moreover, self-esteem, a developmental outcome of purpose may also contribute to success in several other domains (e.g., physical health and academic achievement). For example, a high school student who, following her involvement on a number of service trips to Haiti, has determined that she will one day use her education to find ways for addressing global poverty may not only have higher levels of self-esteem, but also greater academic achievement compared to peers who do not have a sense of purpose. While commitment to a sense of purpose acts as a developmental asset facilitating positive outcomes, establishing a commitment to purpose may take years of discernment (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib & Finch, 2009). During this process, youth searching for their sense of purpose may experience negative outcomes such as lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, lower academic performance, and increased alcohol abuse (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Ghadirian, 1979). In light of the protective power of having a sense of purpose, it is important to understand how it develops and whether and how significant others can foster purpose in the lives of youth (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Scholars have hypothesized that the development of one’s sense of purpose parallels Marcia’s (1966) identity development categories: foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement (Burrow & Hill 2011; Steger et al., 2006). For example, a young person with a foreclosed purpose may adopt her parent’s ideas about her purpose without searching for her own unique purpose in life (low search, high commitment). Similarly, a diffuse purpose corresponds with low search and low commitment, a purpose in moratorium corresponds with high search and low commitment, and an achieved purpose corresponds with high search and high commitment (Burrow et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2006). That is, an achieved sense of purpose involves committing to a purpose while simultaneously maintaining an open-minded attitude through an ongoing search (Burrow et al., 2010; Waddington, 2009). The developmental stress of searching for purpose coupled with the instability of not yet committing to a purpose, may render the moratorium category of purpose development most stressful for youth.

It is important to note that the search for purpose alone may not necessarily cause developmental stress. It is the ongoing search for purpose without finding one that may be particularly unsettling. Moreover, in the absence of positive social support, the search for purpose may be prolonged and youth may come to fear that they will be abandoned and will fail to find their purpose (Keyes, 2011; Sveidqvist, Joubert, Greene, & Manion, 2003). In contrast, in the presence of positive social support, youth’s search for purpose may lead to positive results more quickly and serve as an opportunity for transformative growth. Engaging in the search for purpose while simultaneously engaging in identity formation (Marcia, 1966) involves adolescents taking a risk by engaging in the process of personal change and transformation while differentiating from parents (Keyes, 2011). In this way, the search for a sense of purpose may be a developmental stressor for youth because change is stressful, especially change that involves relational disconnections (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Sveidqvist et al., 2003). Yet, the search may potentially result in achieving a purpose. Unfortunately, little empirical work has explicitly examined the relational factors shaping youths’ experiences of searching for purpose; previous work has been theoretical or has utilized small samples or qualitative methods.

A goal of PYD research is to understand the mechanisms that not only decrease the magnitude of stress associated with searching for purpose, but also accelerate youths’ trajectory towards an achieved sense of purpose (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Mariano & Damon, 2008; Tarakeshwar, Khan, & Sikkema, 2006). While PYD theorists speculate about fostering purpose, PYD researchers still need to examine empirically the process of fostering purpose. Indeed, protective factors such as positive social support might shield youth from the negative effects of searching for purpose (Lerner et al., 2009). However, previous studies have not examined factors influencing how searching for a sense of purpose relates to adolescents’ self-esteem.

Given the long-term nature of developing a sense of purpose (Bronk et al., 2009), this paper focuses on the influence of parental relationships, arguably the most significant and long-standing source of support in an adolescent’s life (Lewin-Bizan et al., 2010). Overall, parent support plays an important role in adolescent development, and in shaping future career plans (Turner & Lapan, 2005). Thus, it stands to reason that positive parental relationships may alleviate the stress of searching for purpose and accelerate the achievement of commitment to purpose. Previous studies, however, have failed to examine this explicitly.

Parent–child relationship

Related research does demonstrate that supportive parent–child relationships buffer the effects of developmental stressors and contribute positively to youths’ self-esteem (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Sameroff, 2000). In particular, positive

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