

Profiles of a Developmental Asset: Youth Purpose as a Context for Hope and Well-Being

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Abstract While having a purpose in life has been theorized as a developmental asset, the extent to which adolescents cultivate a meaningful sense of direction is not well understood. In the present study, cluster analysis was used to classify adolescents by levels of purpose exploration and commitment. The sample ($N = 318$; 55% female) consisted of youth aged 14–18 and was predominantly White/non-Hispanic (76.3%). Results supported four meaningful yet distinguishable profiles of youth purpose that are largely consistent with theories on identity formation: Achieved, Foreclosed, Uncommitted, and Diffused. Hypothesized linkages with affect and hope were established across the profiles such that positive emotions and goal-directed thinking were most apparent among Achieved and Foreclosed youth and least apparent among Diffused and Uncommitted youth. Overall, findings demonstrate the inherent complexity in adolescents' engagement with purpose and suggest a correspondence between stronger commitments to purpose and youths' sense of personal agency and well-being.

Keywords Purpose · Adolescents · Identity · Positive youth development

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Introduction

*To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,
But life without meaning is the torture*
- Edgar Lee Masters, from *George Gray*

Across diverse literatures, finding a sense of purpose has been described as a fundamental human drive. Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of this notion has not substantially tightened our grasp of the developmental timing of discovering one's purpose. Yet, there is evidence that having one is healthy. Research reveals that discerning meaning and purpose in life is associated with greater positive affect (King et al. 2006), psychological well-being (Wong and Fry 1998; Ryff 1989; Zika and Chamberlain 1992), resilience (Frankl 1959; Masten and Reed 2002), and self-efficacy (DeWitz et al. 2009). Therefore, establishing a purpose has been conceived as an asset for positive youth development (PYD; Benson 2006; Scales 1999): If a sense of purpose is adaptive, individuals engaged with it early should be better suited to thrive as a result. In this sense, purpose may be characterized as a form of *identity capital* (Côte 1996, 2002), or a personal resource that individuals invest to build promising futures. Yet, remarkably little empirical work has investigated the extent to which youth in fact recognize a sense of purpose for themselves or the adjustment correlates of those who do relative to those who do not. The present study was intended to address these limitations by investigating patterns of purpose exploration and commitment among adolescents and describing their linkages with hope (goal-oriented thinking) and well-being.

Characterizing Youth Purpose

Purpose can be conceptualized as having a “stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at

once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al. 2003, p. 121). Belief that adolescents engage themselves in such ultimate concerns stems from the vision of a program of research broadly interested in PYD (Lerner et al. 2003). The basic position of PYD research is to challenge traditional deficit-based perspectives that youth are incapable of contributing in valuable ways to self and others. Indeed, establishing such ultimate concerns as identifying a purpose might seem like a hefty task for adolescents considering that autonomy seeking and self/identity explorations are normative during this transitional period (Erikson 1968; Lapsley and Edgerton 2002; Schwartz et al. 2005). Yet, the process of resolving who one is may provide an essential context for identifying and pursuing goals that are meaningful to the self. As Erikson (1968) theorized, a sense of purpose can facilitate adolescents’ resolution of identity *crises* by offering a meaningful ideal to which they can dedicate themselves. More recently, Hill et al. (2009) showed that adolescents nominate a variety of purposes for themselves, and Burrow and Hill (2009) documented that these purposes, apart from one’s overall sense of identity, shape youths’ personal and interpersonal experiences in everyday life. Among emerging adults, Schwartz et al. (2005) found that a greater sense of purpose was linked to more deliberate individualization (i.e., selecting opportunities to enhance personal growth). In contrast, individuals with less of a sense of purpose showed less personal agency and were more apt to accept default experiences and opportunities. Thus, a principal benefit of identifying a purpose during adolescence may be its promotion of efficacious identities that help adolescents transition to adulthood in positive ways.

This possibility is congruent with predictions of the Identity Capital Model (Côté 1996, 1997, 2002). According to this model, a stable sense of self provides individuals with the wherewithal to successfully navigate developmental transitions by enhancing their recognition of obstacles and opportunities most relevant to them. Identity capital, then, represents self-relevant resources that can be invested to optimize experiences for personal growth and individualization (Côté 1997; Côté and Schwartz 2002). A sense of purpose is thought to be an especially valuable form of capital because it could anchor individuals’ experiences to meaningful aspects of their identities and engender beliefs that they can accomplish their personal goals (Côté and Levine 2002). To the extent that purpose is a resource for youth, however, research is needed to elucidate in what measure it is so. Still unknown is whether individual differences in purpose exploration and commitment are linked to adjustment, or if the adaptive adjustment patterns proposed by the identity capital model are accessible uniformly to youth regardless of their level

of engagement with purpose. In the present study, we examined within-group heterogeneity in adolescents’ purpose engagement by employing a person-centered approach. We believe that exploring multiple configurations of purpose potentially offers a more nuanced understanding of the range of ways youth engage with this construct and yields more precise delineations of the adjustment correlates of unique profiles that may be inherent within this population.

Associations Between Identity Formation and Purpose Configurations

If identity formation is central to adolescence, and this process can be linked to the search for purpose and meaning, it may be possible to classify subgroups of adolescents based on the relative salience of purpose in their lives. To this end, research on identity construction provides a useful framework for understanding the range of purpose subgroups that may be inherent among adolescent populations. According to identity formation theories (Erikson 1964; Marcia 1966; Waterman 1993), youth construct a sense of self through actively exploring plausible self-definitions that lead to commitments to particular identities over time. Thus, identity exploration and commitment can be separated into distinct developmental processes that interact to produce a broad tapestry of who one is. Marcia’s (1966, 1980) well-known identity model pairs the extreme high and low levels of exploration and commitment processes to create four identity statuses. Included in these statuses are: (a) an *Achieved* status marked by high levels of exploration that have lead to a strong identity commitment; (b) a *Moratorium* status in which individuals manifest high levels of identity exploration but have not committed any self-definition; (c) a *Foreclosed* status marked by high levels of commitment to an identity without significant exploration of alternative resolutions; and (d) a *Diffused* status in which individuals have neither explored nor committed to a self-definition. Research suggests that more advanced identity statuses (e.g., Achieved) are typically associated with greater individualization (Schwartz et al. 2005) and perceptions of agency (Schwartz 2006).

There is emerging evidence that, like identity formation, searching for and establishing a purpose represent related but distinct processes (Bundick et al. 2006; Burrow and Hill 2009). Whereas committing to a specific purpose may provide youth with a sense of stability (Erikson 1964), sustained exploration might signify individuals’ difficulty in selecting meaningful goals. Therefore, charting both dimensions of purpose exploration and commitment simultaneously may afford a comprehensive understanding of its essential nature. Still unknown, however, is whether doing so yields profiles similar to those delineated in

identity formation models. Based on evidence that purpose aids in identity resolution, a relative congruence between the two processes might be expected. That is, profiles of purpose among adolescents should follow, in large part, the developmental structure of identity statuses. Indeed, obtaining evidence that youth can be classified along high and low ranges of both purpose exploration and commitment, and that these classifications correlate in expected ways with indices of identity development, would establish strong empirical footing for purpose as identity capital.

Purpose as a Context for Hope and Well-Being

From the perspective of PYD, while finding that purpose in life helps youth resolve a sense of identity makes studying purpose important, finding that it also promotes thriving in youth makes doing so paramount. There is ample evidence that purpose and meaning are associated with well-being (see Ryan and Deci 2001; Zika and Chamberlain 1992, for reviews). Across a series of recent experimental and daily diary studies conducted by King et al. (2006), experiences of meaning and purpose were consistently associated with increased positive mood, suggesting that purpose is directly linked to how individuals feel. Considering that adolescence is a period of increased negative emotions (Larson et al. 2002), distinguishing groups of youth who are able to countermand this normative trend by their commitment to purpose would contribute substantially to adolescent research.

In addition, as noted earlier, purpose appears to foster a more flexible sense of personal planning and agency (Schwartz et al. 2005). Importantly, these two features embody Snyder's (1991) concept of goal-oriented thinking, or what he termed *hope*. According to hope theory (Snyder et al. 1991; Snyder 2002), the ability to both (a) envision cognitive pathways and (b) initiate efficacious action underlies goal attainment. Accordingly, cultivating a purpose in life may provide a context for hopeful thinking insofar that the pursuit of meaningful goals can only be maintained if one is hopeful about their eventual attainment. Indeed, research supports a strong positive relationship between purpose and hope (Feldman and Snyder 2005), and further implicates cognitive flexibility and greater perceived agency as explanations for why a greater sense of purpose is adaptive (Bronk et al. 2009). Evidence that this relationship holds for youth who are negotiating the transitional period of adolescence would substantially contribute to our understanding of factors that promote PYD.

Overview of the Present Research

Toward determining the value of purpose for PYD, it is important to first establish the landscape of purpose

engagement among adolescents. Identifying unique purpose profiles via person-centered designs may offer insights to the nature of this construct for youth not discernable through traditional variable-centered approaches (Bergman and Magnusson 1997). Emergent profiles or clusters based on indices of purpose exploration and commitment could then be examined for their unique relations to adjustment (hope and well-being), perhaps illustrating the function of purpose as tailored to specific types of youth. Guided by research on identity formation and identity capital, several predictions can be made about optimal cluster resolutions and their adjustment correlates expected in the current study. First, if youth purpose parallels identity formation, four empirically distinct and conceptually meaningful clusters should be evident among adolescents. The emergent clusters should closely resemble the Achieved, Moratorium, Foreclosed, and Diffused statuses captured by Marcia's (1966) model. A second and related prediction holds that purpose clusters higher in commitment should also report greater identity commitment, while purpose clusters higher in exploration should also report greater identity exploration. Third, with respect to adjustment correlates of emergent clusters, it is anticipated that clusters with higher levels of purpose commitment (similar to the Achieved identity status) will report significantly greater levels of positive affect and hope than clusters with the less commitment to purpose (similar to the Diffused identity status). In addition, because purpose is theorized to be a valuable commodity for those who possess it (Côte 2002), greater levels of purpose commitment were hypothesized to correlate positively with positive affect and hope for intermediate clusters that may emerge.

Method

Participants

Participants were 318 adolescents recruited from three high schools in the midwestern US. Ages ranged from 14 to 18 ($M = 15.92$, $SD = 1.44$) and the majority of the sample was female (54.6%). Across the schools, the breakdown by class was fairly balanced: 22% freshmen, 26% sophomores, 28% juniors, and 24% seniors. Ethnic composition of the sample mirrored the populations of the schools represented: 76.3% White, 15.2% African–American, 7.1% Latino, and less than 1% Asian.

Procedure

The participants were recruited from two suburban, private, Catholic high schools and one suburban public high school in the midwestern US. Permission to collect data was

obtained from principals of each of the schools. Passive parental consent and participant assent were obtained before participation. Participants completed surveys during class and were compensated with a \$5 gift card or the chance to win one of twelve \$30 gift cards. The students were debriefed following participation.

Measures

Demographics

A form was administered to participants to identify their background characteristics of gender, age, school type (public or private), year in school, and ethnicity.

Youth Purpose

The 20-item Youth Purpose scale (Bundick et al. 2006) was used to assess two dimensions of purpose via exploration ($\alpha = .85$) and commitment ($\alpha = .88$) subscales. Support for the validity of these subscales among youth samples has been established in studies demonstrating their association with greater satisfaction in life and hope (Bronk et al. 2009). Statements included on the 5-item exploration subscale include, “I am always searching for a purpose in life” and “I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant”. Sample statements from the 15-item commitment subscale include, “I have a purpose in my life that reflects who I am” and “I understand my life’s meaning”. The response format ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Identity Commitment and Identity Exploration

Two subscales from the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (Balistreri et al. 1995) were used to assess aspects of identity commitment ($\alpha = .64$) and exploration ($\alpha = .65$) across eight different domains (occupation, religion, politics, values, family, friendships, dating, and sex roles). Evidence for the validity of this measure has been demonstrated across ethnically diverse youth samples (Schwartz 2007; Schwartz et al. 2009). The reliability coefficients for the current sample are lower than those reported in studies with college students (e.g., Balistreri et al. 1995), but are similar to those reported in studies with adolescent samples (e.g., Ferrer-Wreder et al. 2002). Examples of statements from the 16-item commitment subscale are, “I have definitely decided on the occupation I want to pursue” and “There has never been a need to question my values”. Sample questions from the 16-item exploration subscale include, “My values are likely to change in the future” and “I have considered different

political views thoughtfully”. Response formats ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Positive Affect

The positive affect subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988) was used to assess positive mood. This subscale consists of 10 positive moods (interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active). Greater positive affect has been shown to indicate a greater sense of purpose among youth (King et al. 2006). Participants were asked to endorse the extent to which they generally feel each item. The response format ranged from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Cronbach’s α was .83.

Hope

The Hope Scale (Snyder et al. 1991) was used to assess two dimensions of goal-directed thinking: pathways (4 items, $\alpha = .60$) and agency (4-items, $\alpha = .68$). Among youth samples, greater scores on both subscale has been associated with fewer anxiety and depressive symptoms (Feldman and Snyder 2005). Sample items include, “I can think of many ways to get out of a jam” (pathways) and “I energetically pursue my goals” (agency). The response format for both subscales ranged from a 1 (*definitely false*) to 4 (*definitely true*).

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 illustrates the Pearson-correlations, means, and standard deviations for study variables across the entire sample. Average scores for identity exploration ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .60$) and commitment ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .65$) as well as purpose exploration ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.16$) and commitment ($M = 4.65$, $SD = .87$) were above the mid-points on each respective subscale, suggesting youth in the current sample were engaged with self-definition and purpose. Several bivariate relationships were found between study variables. While purpose commitment was positive associated with identity commitment ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), purpose exploration was related negatively to identity commitment ($r = -.16$, $p < .01$) and positively to identity exploration ($r = .30$, $p < .01$). With respect to adjustment, youth higher in purpose commitment also reported greater hope-pathways ($r = .32$, $p < .01$), hope-agency ($r = .51$, $p < .01$), and positive affect ($r = .56$, $p < .01$). Youth

Table 1 Intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations for study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Purpose commitment	–	–.08	.44**	.05	.56**	.32**	.51**
2. Purpose exploration		–	–.16**	.30**	.04	.15**	.10
3. Identity commitment			–	–.22**	.32**	.13**	.24**
4. Identity exploration				–	.11	.11	.19**
5. Positive affect					–	.34**	.52**
6. Hope pathways						–	.43**
7. Hope agency							–
<i>M</i>	4.80	4.65	3.70	3.69	37.18	3.04	3.13
<i>SD</i>	.87	1.16	.65	.60	6.35	.48	.50

** $p < .01$

higher in purpose exploration reported greater hope-pathways ($r = .15$, $p < .01$).

Cluster Analysis

Hierarchical cluster analyses were used to objectively illustrate the structure of the data (Hair and Black 2000). This person-centered classification strategy is intended to group respondents into smaller, homogenous groupings based on specified characteristics. Ward's method with squared Euclidean distance was used to obtain discrete clusters of youth based on z -transformed scores on the purpose commitment and exploration subscales. The agglomeration schedule provided by this method was examined for evidence of large jumps in the fusion coefficient, which indicates distinct clusters. Based on these fusion coefficients, three-, four-, and five-cluster solutions were examined. The three-cluster solution was not appropriate because none of the clusters significantly differed from each other on the purpose commitment dimension, and one of the clusters contained well over half of the sample (61%), indicating that perhaps this cluster grouped together more heterogeneous profiles than desirable. The five-cluster solution provided a virtually identical pattern of clusters as the four-cluster solution, but with less parsimony, thereby obscuring interpretation (Aldenderfer and Blashfield 1984). Specifically, two of the five clusters that emerged in this solution were characterized by low levels

of engagement with both purpose dimensions, and thus were deemed theoretically similar. Consistent with expectations, the four-cluster solution (see Table 2) emerged as optimal based on solution attributes: (a) adequate sample cluster sizes for meaningful comparison were present and (b) the resulting clusters were theoretically consistent with identity formation models (Marcia 1966). As a validation of the four-cluster solution, a K -means cluster analysis was conducted to assess convergence of cluster membership established by the hierarchical strategy. In this analysis, a four-cluster a priori solution was specified and “forced” on the data (Aldenderfer and Blashfield 1984). Agreement between the two clustering strategies was satisfactory, indicating that 80% of participants were in a similar cluster across both models. Thus, the four-cluster solution of youth purpose was deemed reliable.

Labels were assigned to each cluster based on examination of z -scores on purpose dimensions. The first cluster ($n = 114$) was labeled “Achieved” because members of this cluster scored the highest on commitment ($z = .91$) and above average levels of exploration ($z = .31$). The second cluster ($n = 25$) was the least populated and was labeled “Foreclosed” because it was comprised of youth reporting above average levels of commitment ($z = .61$), but the lowest levels of exploration ($z = -2.10$). The third cluster ($n = 54$), labeled “Uncommitted”, was characterized by the lowest levels of commitment ($z = -1.33$) and the highest levels of exploration ($z = .76$). The fourth and

Table 2 Means scores and standard deviations for purpose exploration and commitment variables generated by hierarchical cluster analysis

Purpose variable	Achieved ($n = 114$) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Foreclosed ($n = 25$) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Uncommitted ($n = 54$) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Diffused ($n = 125$) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i>
Purpose commitment	5.59 ^a (.45)	5.32 ^a (.74)	3.63 ^d (.55)	4.46 ^c (.44)	49.44*
Purpose exploration	5.01 ^b (.93)	2.26 ^d (.77)	5.54 ^a (.84)	4.42 ^c (.82)	400.64*

Means with different superscripts in each row are significantly different, by Scheffé tests with significance levels of 0.05. *df* for univariate F tests were 3, 313. * $p < 0.001$

largest cluster ($n = 125$) was labeled “Diffused” because its members reported below average levels of both commitment ($z = -.38$) and exploration ($z = -.20$).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using the Pillai-Bartlett test criterion demonstrated significant differences on the purpose dimensions by cluster membership, ($V(6/626) = 1.12$, $F = 133.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$). In addition, significant univariate effects emerged for purpose exploration ($F(3, 313) = 400.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .69$) and purpose commitment ($F(3, 313) = 49.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$). Post-hoc Scheffé tests revealed that youth in the “Achieved” and “Foreclosed” clusters reported significantly more purpose commitment than youth in the “Diffused” cluster, and all three of these clusters reported greater commitment than the “Uncommitted” cluster. With respect to purpose exploration, each group was significantly different from each other, with the “Uncommitted” cluster reporting the greatest exploration, followed by the “Achieved” cluster, then the “Diffused” cluster, and finally the “Foreclosed” cluster.

Chi-square tests were conducted to investigate whether demographic characteristics varied by cluster membership. No statistically significant differences emerged with respect to gender, year in school, school type, or ethnicity between the unique purpose profiles found in this study.

Associations with Identity Variables by Cluster Membership

Table 3 shows the results of an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) conducted to examine if the four purpose clusters differed on levels of identity exploration and commitment. Significant between-cluster differences were found for identity exploration, $F(3, 294) = 4.72$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$ and identity commitment, $F(3, 296) = 15.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .13$. Post-hoc Scheffé tests indicated that the Foreclosed ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .79$) and Achieved ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .68$) clusters reported significantly greater identity commitment than the Uncommitted ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .57$) and Diffused ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .55$) clusters.

With respect to identity exploration, the Foreclosed ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .55$) cluster reported significantly lower levels than any other cluster.

Associations with Hope and Well-being by Cluster Membership

An ANOVA was also conducted to examine whether the four purpose clusters differed on levels of positive affect, $F = 24.10(3, 294)$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .19$, hope-pathways, $F = 12.17(3, 294)$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$ and hope-agency, $F = 23.77(3, 294)$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .19$. As shown in Table 3, results indicated significant differences between the clusters along all three of these indices. Post-hoc analyses showed that clusters exemplifying the greatest levels of purpose reported the most adaptive adjustment profiles. Specifically, the Achieved youth reported significantly higher levels of positive affect ($M = 40.71$, $SD = 4.77$), hope-pathways ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .43$), and hope-agency ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .35$) than both Uncommitted ($M = 32.59$, $SD = 6.80$; $M = 3.00$, $SD = .53$, and $M = 2.83$, $SD = .47$, respectively) and Diffused youth ($M = 35.81$, $SD = 6.01$; $M = 2.89$, $SD = .44$; $M = 2.99$, $SD = .51$, respectively). In addition, the Foreclosed cluster reported greater positive affect ($M = 38.79$, $SD = 4.31$) and hope-agency ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .53$) than the Uncommitted group on these respective measures.

Discussion

The current study sought to examine the extent to which adolescents engage with purpose and associated patterns of adjustment. As a guiding framework, we used theory and research on identity formation (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1966) and individualization (Côte 1996, 1997, 2002) to explore whether purpose is a resource for PYD. Employing a person-centered approach, adolescents were classified by their active levels of purpose exploration and commitment. At the intersection of these dimensions, four unique

Table 3 Between-cluster comparisons by identity exploration and commitment, positive affect, and hope variables

Purpose variable	Achieved ($n = 114$) M (SD)	Foreclosed ($n = 25$) M (SD)	Uncommitted ($n = 54$) M (SD)	Diffused ($n = 125$) M (SD)	F
Identity commitment	3.95 ^a (.68)	4.13 ^a (.79)	3.37 ^b (.57)	3.59 ^b (.55)	15.58**
Identity exploration	3.79 ^a (.64)	3.27 ^b (.55)	3.74 ^a (.65)	3.66 ^a (.52)	4.72*
Positive affect	40.71 ^a (4.77)	38.79 ^{ab} (4.31)	32.59 ^c (6.80)	35.81 ^b (6.01)	29.34**
Hope-pathways	3.25 ^a (.43)	3.05 ^{ab} (.48)	3.00 ^b (.53)	2.89 ^b (.44)	12.93**
Hope-agency	3.41 ^a (.35)	3.13 ^b (.53)	2.83 ^c (.47)	2.99 ^{bc} (.51)	26.27**

Means with different subscripts in each row are significantly different, by Scheffé tests with significance levels of 0.05. df for univariate F tests were 3, 299. * $p < 0.001$

profiles of purpose emerged (i.e., Achieved, Foreclosed, Uncommitted, and Diffused), supporting predictions that youth engage with purpose and, for many, doing so provides a compelling context for self-definition and adaptive adjustment.

It appears that the structure of adolescent purpose may follow existing formulations of identity development. A hierarchical clustering strategy identified four distinct purpose profiles that were largely reflective of Marcia's (1966) identity statuses. Clear support for Achieved and Foreclosed profiles emerged, hallmarked by their high levels of purpose commitment relative to exploration (especially so for Foreclosed youth). The inverse pattern was captured by the Uncommitted profile. While the traditional label of identity moratorium may be applied to members of this cluster given their elevated exploration scores, our label emphasizes their notably low levels of purpose commitment. Upon close exploration of this cluster, each member scored precisely at or below the average on the commitment dimension, while slightly over 20% of its members scored at or below the average on exploration. Thus, membership in this cluster was marked primarily by youths' lack of purpose commitment more so than their elevated levels of exploration. Finally, the Diffused profile, distinguished by comparatively lower scores on both purpose exploration and commitment, emerged as the most populated cluster. Considering the constellation of developmental challenges that adolescents are ostensibly negotiating for the first time, we believe many members of this cluster have not yet begun to engage with purpose. Additional research might explore factors that promote movement to another purpose status as these youth develop. Alternatively, some youth in this cluster may have previously sought or identified a purpose with which they subsequently became less engaged. Whether there is a difference between these types of youth in terms of their associated patterns of adjustment is also fertile ground for future research.

Findings suggest that, beyond structural similarities, the underlying processes of how youth engage with purpose may be in line with identity development. Specifically, we predicted that scores on *purpose* exploration and commitment should mirror scores on *identity* exploration and commitment. Indeed, we found that clusters defined by greater purpose exploration (Achieved and Uncommitted) also scored higher on identity exploration. In addition, clusters marked by greater purpose commitment (Achieved and Foreclosed) scored higher on identity commitment. These findings highlight a close relationship between identity and purpose development among adolescents (Côté 1996, 1997; Erikson 1968), and are suggestive of the potential for purpose to contribute to youths' identity resolution in ways congruent with Eriksonian theory. The strong overlap between purpose and identity processes

apparent in the current study suggests that exploring causality and directionality in their relationship is merited.

We also examined whether cluster membership was linked to patterns of adjustment implicated by existing research on identity capital (e.g., Côté 1996, 1997, 2002; Côté and Levine 2002) and broader literature on well-being. As suggested by the identity capital model, purpose may represent a valuable asset for individuals inasmuch as it fosters flexible thinking and agency helpful for successfully navigating developmental challenges. Achieved (most distinctly) and Foreclosed youth showed the most adaptive patterns of cognitive flexibility (greater hope-pathways) and personal agency as assessed by the hope measure. As members of these two clusters reported the highest levels of purpose commitment in our sample, this finding supports purpose as identity capital. In addition, these youth also reported feeling more positive than the Uncommitted and Diffused youths, adding to a growing body of research evidencing positive associations between discerning purpose and meaning in life and well-being (e.g., King et al. 2006; Ryff 1989; Ryff and Singer 1998).

Overall, the demonstrated linkages between purpose profiles and adjustment have important implications for those working with youth. Our results appear to suggest that it is greater levels of commitment, and not exploration, that are particularly adaptive. However, given that establishing a purpose likely requires youth to undergo some level of exploration (although perhaps less so for Foreclosed youth), the searching process itself should not be plainly dismissed as irrelevant or even detrimental. Many Achieved youth, for example, reported above average levels of exploration, suggesting that this process is not inherently maladaptive. In addition, the definition of purpose espoused earlier, on which the measure we employed was based, is symbolized by goals in which a meaningful sense of accomplishment for both self and others is ultimately concerned (Damon et al. 2003). It is possible that some youth designated as Uncommitted in the current study have, in fact, identified goals that are of personal import, but lack broader social relevance. In such cases, these youth may no longer be searching for goal alternatives but are instead exploring how to align their existing goals to benefit others. It is in this light, perhaps, that youth who have already realized goals that serve objectives beyond the self appear to thrive, due to a greater perceived overlap between their sense of direction and the broader developmental context in which they navigate (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1998; Lerner et al. 2003). The heightened sense of hope and well-being evidenced among youth with greater purpose commitment, then, may encourage the development of mentoring programs aimed to help Uncommitted types of youth integrate their goals within existing structures.

Furthermore, the absence of clear developmental trends (by year in school) in the patterning of purpose engagement supports a disassociation between membership in purpose clusters and progression through adolescence. As a result, a cautious interpretation of the purpose clusters reported warrants their consideration as clear statuses and not stages. One implication of this distinction is that youth may continue to refine their sense of purpose over time in ways similar to the moratorium-achieved (MAMA) cycles proposed in identity status models (Marcia 1993). It is important to note that even if discerning a purpose in life does not follow a unidirectional developmental progression, attending to developmental outcomes likely to stem from individuals' levels of purpose engagement during key periods remains critical for those working with youths. Damon et al. (2003), for instance, describe the possibility that pursuing certain types of purpose may thwart the acquisition of other types or engagement in specific experiences later on. Programs aimed at optimizing youth outcomes may benefit from identifying factors that help youth maintain purposes that are adaptive and re-evaluate and modify those that are less so.

The present investigation offers an initial glimpse into the role of purpose in adolescents' lives. Yet, important limitations of the study should be noted. The hierarchical clustering analysis was, by design, useful for determining the types of purpose existing within our sample. However, different purpose typologies may emerge using this same strategy depending on the sample examined. While our sample was primarily White/non-Hispanic and middle to upper-middle class, patterns of purpose exploration and commitment may differ for low-income or ethnic minority youth. Additional research is thus needed to support the generalizability of the purpose profiles that emerged. Related to this point, youth in our study were recruited from two private high schools and one public high school. While no significant differences in cluster membership emerged as a function of school context, broad claims regarding the null-effects of school context on purpose development are not warranted. Diversity in school organizational structures, curricula content, and pedagogies may yield tremendous variability in the extent to which students attending these schools engage with purpose. A direction for future research might be to explore the extent to which school staff can readily discern differences between youth in their level of purpose engagement. Finally, study analyses were cross-sectional in nature and thereby limited our ability to make developmental inferences. Given the associations between cluster membership and adjustment, there is a clear need for longitudinal studies on adolescent purpose as it relates to long-term outcomes. Such work could truly delineate processes of purpose exploration and commitment and their relative contribution to adolescent adjustment.

The findings of this study indicate significant heterogeneity in how adolescents engage with purpose. For many youth, the processes of exploring and committing to a purpose have important implications for identity development and their well-being. Specifically, clusters of youth characterized by higher levels of purpose commitment reported greater identity commitment, hope, and positive affect. The evidence presented supports Masters' contention, in the lead-in quote to this article, that failure to discern meaning and purpose in life may diminish opportunities for optimal development. By framing our predictions and findings within existing literature on identity development, we hope to encourage continued research on adolescent purpose as an identity-related resource for promoting positive youth development.

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