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# How Supportive of Their *Specific* Purposes Do Youth Believe Their Family and Friends Are?

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## Abstract

Prior studies have found that youth reporting a general sense that “I have a purpose” also describe having social supports that enhance thriving. This study links *specific* social supports to *specific* purposes described by youth. We examined whether developmental level, social-structural supports of gender and ethnicity, and close relationship supports of family and friends explained (a) how likely youth were to describe three dimensions of a specific purpose content (intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self reasons), and (b) how youth with specified purposes used social supports to pursue those purposes. Youth in higher grade levels were more likely to describe their future plans, activities that pursued those plans, and reasons that considered consequences to others as well as themselves. Non-White ethnicity and higher friend support also increased the likelihood of youth expressing future plans. Youth with purposes sought or created—then integrated into a tailored support network—*purpose-specific* benefits from their families, opportunities to engage, and institutions.

## Keywords

purpose, positive youth development, engagement, prosocial, social support

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## Introduction

Purposes are considered life aims that serve as “continual targets for efforts to be devoted” (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009, p. 304). A sense of having a purpose, even if it is not specified, has been linked with higher life satisfaction and well-being (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009; Steger, 2012). Social supports in the environment help shape what purposes youth pursue (Grotevant, 1987). Most studies of purpose, however, assess *whether* individuals feel they have purpose in a general way (Ryff, 1989; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), without specifying *what* each youth’s specific purpose is. Few studies have addressed the intersection of social supports with the *specific* purposes youth may hold, despite calls for more attention to the issue (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Massey, Gebhardt, & Garnefski, 2008).

## Purpose in Adolescence

Research on youth purpose has burgeoned in the last decade. Adolescence is believed to be the start for purpose development. It is an important period for several constructs related to purpose, including meaning (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980, 1983), self-understanding (Damon & Hart, 1988), identity (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010), engagement in meaningful activities (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), developing beyond-the-self orientation (Debats, 1996), and prosocial behaviors (Damon & Hart, 1988).

Adolescents form goals appropriate to their immediate developmental level and engage in tasks that help them develop more long-term aims, strategies, and evaluation criteria (Nurmi, 1991). They explore and make decisions regarding educational, career, and other pathways that culminate in a personal ideology to steer them through life (Erikson, 1968). Intended outcomes increasingly encompass wider ripples of concern—from self and family, to friends, to communities and institutions, and for some, to “humankind” and global perspectives (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

## Moving Purpose From Subjective Sense To Self-Articulated Beacon

Most purpose research has been conducted on *sense* of purpose. These scales were intentionally designed to ask only about “the *feeling* [emphasis added] there is purpose in and meaning in life” (Ryff, 1989, p. 1071) without reference to what the purpose *is*. Responses to statements such as “My life has a clear sense of purpose” (Steger et al., 2006) do not indicate what

imbues respondents' lives with meaning and self-direction. Content is important for *how* and *why* purpose relates to particular psychological outcomes (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

Some measures address content by asking respondents to rate or rank a list of possible purposes (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980) or to express their relevant intentions in open-ended questions (Nurmi, 1991). However, list measures capture only general cultural categories of purpose (Massey et al., 2008), and the categories can become dated (Bronk & Finch, 2010). Both lists and open-ended survey questions lack a mechanism for follow-up questions regarding how purpose coheres or functions in one's life.

Prompts that provide scaffolding for youth to create narratives of their life stories better explicate purpose, its function, and its social supports (Steger, 2012). Life stories are sensitive to temporality, social and moral context, and causality from the participant's perspective. Life stories and they can capture coherence, not just the degree, of purpose and how purpose ties past experiences to future aspirations (Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Within a conversational context, youth provide a wide variety of responses: from general career or leisure aims (e.g., "job in robotics," "worship God") to more causally integrated pursuits (e.g., "start an advertising agency with a diverse workforce" or share the Japanese tea ceremony "to build relationships and peace"; see Moran, 2009). By allowing youth to link their purposes to aspects of their lives, including social supports, we may better understand not just *that* social supports help purpose, but in what ways.

## Dimensions of Purpose

Recent theorizing focuses on what purpose does for the person, that is, what function it serves. Purpose is a referent within a dynamic psychological self-regulation system (Marken, 2002; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). It is a "central, self-organizing life aim" that serves as a "continual target for efforts to be devoted" (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009, p. 304). Purpose is like a thermostat (Marken, 2002): it constrains individuals to behave in ways that support the purpose and to perceive environmental supports in terms of affordances for the purpose. Damon et al. (2003) emphasize how purpose functions by its specific content: purpose takes some aspect of the world that the person finds meaningful, and integrates that focal aspect along three dimensions: a future-oriented *intention* that drives *engagement* to accomplish with a reason to benefit something *beyond the self*.

Two of these dimensions are unproblematic in the purpose literature and have been much studied. *Intention* is a cognitive representation of a future

behavior that helps individuals plan, persevere, and coordinate actions (Bratman, 1987). *Engagement* is acting toward one's purpose to prime further moral, purposeful behavior in the future (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009).

The third dimension is more controversial although it is well supported in the purpose literature. *Beyond-the-self reasoning* addresses "why": the person pursues the aim, in part, to benefit other people, institutions, society, or culture (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). The reason need not be self-sacrificial; there are many ways to be prosocial (Carlo & Randall, 2002). But there must be a link to contribute not *only* to one's own well-being but also to others'. This dimension builds on Frankl's (1988) call for transcending the self and "giving to the world," it corroborates recent positive youth development theory focused on attaining "transcendence beyond their solitary selves" (Steger, 2012) and contributing to the community (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, et al., 2005). Empirical research shows that sense of purpose correlates with higher rates of prosocial behavior (Bronk et al., 2009; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010). Purpose list measures include beyond-the-self categories (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1980) through which people can be categorized as self- or other-oriented, and other-oriented people are more likely to search for or identify a purpose (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Some positive youth development theories incorporate all three dimensions. For example, Benson and Scale's (2009) "Developmental Assets" conception of thriving includes status markers of "spark identification" and "hopeful future" (intention), "nutrient-rich relationships" and "major actors in their own development" (engagement), and "moral compass" and "contribution to the social good" (beyond-the-self). Damon's definition goes a step further in conceptualizing purpose as a *required configuration* of these three dimensions. How these dimensions coincide determines what form of purpose an adolescent has. Fully developed, integrated purpose requires all three dimensions. When engagement or beyond-the-self reasoning is missing, a precursor form exists: "self-oriented life goal," which demonstrates engagement but the intention primarily benefits the self, and "dream," which exhibits a beyond-the-self intention but lacks engagement. Lack of an intention, or an intention missing more than two dimensions, is considered "non-purpose." A study of 270 American youth, age 11 to 22, found 25% of youth described integrated purposes, 25% described self-oriented life goals, 10% described beyond-the-self-oriented dreams, and 40% were deemed without purposes (Moran, 2009).

## Supports for Purpose

Social supports have been linked to engagement in thriving behaviors, including helping others (Benson & Scales, 2009). Family and friends dominate youths' social supports in general (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) but also more particularly for meaning and purpose (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983). Researchers are calling for studies addressing how social supports more directly affect purpose, not just general positive development (Haase et al., 2008), especially from the youth's perspective. In particular, this study addresses how much youth *perceived* support from family and friends in pursuing their individualized life aims. Perceptions of social support are good indicators of support quality as youth need to recognize environmental affordances as useful (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westerfeld, 2010).

## Development

Social supports available and perceived can differ based on age and developmental level. Furthermore, purpose is posited as a developmental phenomenon. We address whether particular adolescent stages are more or less important to each of the dimensions or the integration of the dimensions into purpose.

*Grade level.* Grade level addresses stages of youth—early adolescence, middle adolescence, late adolescence, and emerging adulthood—that have been used in past youth purpose and positive development research (e.g., Theokas, Almerigi, Lerner, Dowling, et al., 2005). As described above, purpose and its dimensions develop over the course of adolescence. It is also helpful to consider supports with a developmental lens because past research suggests that what youth consider supportive—and what supports actually work—differ across age stages (e.g., Bokhorst et al., 2010; Gutman, Schoon, & Sabates, 2011). Furthermore, grade level describes the adolescent's relation to level of schooling, and educational achievement has been associated with purpose in positive youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009).

## Social Structures

Although purpose is argued to be available to all youth regardless of their demographic categorization (Damon, 2008), the social supports available or valued may vary based on youth's location within the wider social structure (Gutman et al., 2011; Shamah, 2011). These demographic categories can

constrain or enable what purposes are possible for youth to pursue, which purpose they select for themselves, the context in which they engage their purposes, and the social norms they use to evaluate their progress (Massey et al., 2008).

**Gender.** Some purpose studies suggest no gender differences (Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003), whereas others find that youth with purposes or aspirations are more likely to be female (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Gutman et al., 2011). Females also are found to be more prosocial (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Females tend to choose different goals than males and to pursue them less aggressively based on cultural stereotypes (Massey et al., 2008).

**Ethnicity.** Although there is much overlap in content of goals that youth of all ethnicities report (Massey et al., 2008), and ethnicity is a complex concept (Phinney, 1996), ethnicity differences have been reported in relation to senses of purpose (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Ryff et al., 2003) and self- versus other-oriented purposes (Bronk & Finch, 2010). Ethnic identity also was associated positively with prosocial intentions (Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999). Furthermore, ethnocultural stereotypes provide information about ideal selves and feared selves to which youth can orient, and these stereotypes can affect the experiences of members of the stereotyped group in their goal pursuits (Massey et al., 2008).

A more recent connection between ethnicity and purpose is through straddling cultures. Youth from ethnic minorities negotiate the tensions at the intersection of cultures (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). For some youth, this cultural straddling can be a support for purpose development (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). By living along cultural boundaries and being more aware of differences, these youth may experience *more* options for purpose (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998).

### *Close Relationships*

Connection to family and friends has been a cornerstone of positive youth development research (Theokas et al., 2005) and practice (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Yet, what supports general positive youth development may differ from what supports specific youth purposes. Because purpose involves *self*-regulation, what is important may not be whether a support is present, but how the support operates. Larson (2006) calls this issue the "Intentionality Paradox": external supporters cannot direct and control, but rather must respond and scaffold so that the young person's own psychological self-regulation can develop.

*Family support.* Family provides the primary context for self-direction (Yee & Flanagan, 1985) and prosocial orientation through encouraging other-oriented goals, modeling community involvement, and interpreting the meaning of activities (Lekes, Gingras, Philippe, Koestner, & Fang, 2010; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Parents influence what purposes youth assume, assessments of their ability to reach those purposes, plans for making them happen, and their confidence in and enjoyment of purposeful pursuits (Gutman et al., 2011; Massey et al., 2008).

*Friend support.* More egalitarian than parental relationships, friendships become increasingly important as youth spend more time with friends in activities (Massey et al., 2008); turn to them for meaning and a sense of belonging (Brown, 2004); and view them as role models, including for prosocial endeavors like service learning (Yates & Youniss, 1996) and positive purposes (Patrick et al., 1999). Whether purpose is enacted depends on finding peers with similar goals who provide useful expectations, feedback, and opportunities to engage (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001).

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

In summary, since purpose involves connecting to the wider society in a prosocial way, researchers theorize that social supports provide examples, connections, and reinforcement for possible purposes, and thus are important to study (Damon et al., 2003; Mariano, Going, Schrock & Sweeting, 2011). Within a general developmental framework based on grade level differences, our study focuses on social-structural supports stemming from demographic social group membership, and close relationships with family and friends. Based on the past research outlined above, demographic categorization can enable or proscribe purposes and social supports available, and close relationships provide more intimate communication to hone supports to youths' specific purposes. Our two research questions are

*Research Question 1:* How are grade level, social-structural demographics, and support levels from close relationships related to the likelihood that adolescents describe, in their own words, dimensions related to a specific purpose content (intention, engagement, and beyond-the-self reasons)?

*Research Question 2:* How do adolescents describe, in their own words, how social supports are used in relation to their content-specific purpose?



We use a mixed methods approach to examine both how youth perceive particular social supports when prompted in a questionnaire as well as how youth proactively provide information in a semistructured interview. Statistical analyses tell us *which dimensions* of purpose that perceived support from social-structural supports and close relationships may help explain. Qualitative analyses inform us about what these supports actually *do*. Combined, these analyses address how social supports may encourage the pursuit of a purpose with a specific content, and which dimensions of purpose these social supports most affect. In particular, based on past findings, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 1:* Since purpose is a developmental phenomenon, youth in higher grade levels are more likely to show evidence of all dimensions of purpose than younger youth.

*Hypothesis 2:* Since gender has been associated with increased pro-sociality, young women are more likely to express beyond-the-self reasons than young men.

*Hypothesis 3:* Since youth who come from more familial or collectivist cultures tend to orient toward others, and since minority youth straddling more than one culture tend to be more aware of cultural differences and affordances than youth from the majority culture, youth of non-White ethnicity are more likely to express intention and beyond-the-self reasons than White youth.

*Hypothesis 4:* Since family is the foundational close relationship support for youth, youth with higher perceived family support are more likely to show evidence of all dimensions of purpose.

*Hypothesis 5:* Since peer groups are important as role models and as teammates in activities, youth with higher perceived friend support are more likely to show evidence of beyond-the-self reasons and engagement.

## Method

### Sample

This study is part of a larger study that surveyed 1,200 students in five high schools, five middle schools, and five colleges or community colleges in California, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. School selection was based on the demographics of their students and the schools' willingness to cooperate. The intent was to match the survey samples' demographics to the

**Table 1.** Sample Description Overview

	Surveyed Interviewees	Female	Non-white Ethnicity
<b>Total</b>	238	103 (43%)	160 (67%)
<b>Grade</b>			
6th	63 (26%)	26 (41%)	46 (73%)
9th	60 (25%)	27 (45%)	47 (78%)
12th	64 (27%)	28 (44%)	46 (72%)
College	51 (21%)	22 (43%)	21 (41%)
<b>Region</b>			
CA	207 (87%)		
TN	17 (7%)		
NJ/PA	14 (6%)		

Note: Percentages for grade levels and region in first column are percent of total surveyed interviewees (N=238). Percentages of females and non-white ethnicity are percent of surveyed interviewees by row (e.g., within each grade level).

demographic makeup of the surrounding region and to be gender balanced. Interviewees were randomly selected from survey takers. This study's sample comprised 238 interviewees who also completed survey sections addressing demographics and close relationships. See Table 1.

### Procedures

Middle school and high school students were recruited, surveyed, and interviewed through their schools. Survey administration included oral instructions and monitoring by researchers. Parental consent was obtained prior to survey administration and interviewing, and students assented on the first page of the survey. College students assented and completed the online survey on their own time without monitoring, and were interviewed at various locations. A small monetary incentive was given to interviewees.

### Measures

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for measures used in this study. We included three demographic descriptors. Grade level was used as a continuous variable. Gender was dichotomous (*female* = 1). Although ethnicity can signify many things (Phinney, 1996), ethnicity was reduced to a dichotomous

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, Reliability Alphas, and Correlations Among All Quantitative Variables ( $N = 1,244$  for Correlations Among Variables 1-6;  $N = 238$  for Correlations Involving Variables 7-11)

	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Grade level <sup>a</sup>	10.60	3.83	6-15	–					
2. Female (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.43	–	0-1	.08*	–				
3. Non-white ethnicity (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.67	–	0-1	-.06*	-.02	–			
4. Social desirability <sup>a</sup>	4.84	2.01	0-10	.01	.04	-.01	.54		
5. General family support <sup>a</sup>	5.58	1.27	1-7	-.25*	.04	-.03	.14*	.84	
6. General friend support <sup>a</sup>	5.38	1.18	1-7	-.01	.14*	-.01	.09*	.26*	.78
7. Intention dimension (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.63	–	0-1	.36*	-.11	.12	.10	.02	.16*
8. Engagement dimension (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.35	–	0-1	.39*	-.03	.01	.08	-.06	.08
9. Beyond-the-self reason dimension (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.54	–	0-1	.15*	-.09	.12	.18*	-.01	.12
10. Have all dimensions of purpose (%) <sup>b</sup>	0.26	–	0-1	.25*	-.07	.07	.16*	-.03	.10

Note: Reliabilities are italicized on the diagonal, where appropriate.

<sup>a</sup>Means and standard deviations are unstandardized, but correlations are calculated using standardized values.

<sup>b</sup>Means for dichotomous variables are percentages with the “1” designation (female, non-white ethnicity, and the four dimensions of purpose).

\* $p < .05$ .

variable (*non-White* = 1) because we were particularly interested in following up past studies’ findings regarding purpose’s relation to culture-straddling. For close relationship measures, we used the contextual general support scales of Benson and Scales’ (2009) Thriving Orientation Survey for family and for friends. Each scale included 5 items and was identically formatted with the stem “My family . . .” or “My friends . . .” followed by statements such as “Talks with me about my interests” and “Encourages me to develop my interests.” To control for social desirability bias, we included the short version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (10 items; see Reynolds, 1982).

## Interviews

The interview took approximately 45 minutes. Our interview protocol used a semistructured format (Maruish, 2008), based on Piaget’s (1926) clinical interview method, that has been used previously (Bronk, 2011; Colby & Damon, 1992). Interviews explored how youth themselves recognize and connect the dimensions of purpose within and among their life experiences.

Participants were asked to describe what they cared about and why, what supports and obstacles they encountered in relation to what they cared about, and how they projected themselves into their future lives. The protocol assured key topics were covered, but the interviewer could ask for stories and examples, definitions of terms participants introduced, relations between participants' current statement and previous statements made, and the reasons or motivations for their actions or beliefs. Six interviewers—White, of both genders, and 22 to 39 years old—were trained to create a safe environment for participants to share, to allow participants to speak most of the time, to diligently probe for reasons, and to refrain from asking simple yes/no questions or providing examples that might anchor participants' responses.

### *Statistical Analyses*

*Data screening.* Multiple imputation procedures (ICE program in Stata 10.1; Royston, 2005) were conducted to handle the small number of missing data (<5%; Acock, 2005). We also checked for violations of regression assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

*Logistic regression.* Statistical analyses examined the association between survey responses and the presence of the three dimensions of purpose. Logistic regression in Stata 10.1 was used because the dimensions of purpose outcome variables were dichotomous. Based on the qualitative coding that determined participants' forms of purpose (see below), dimensions of purpose were coded as present (1) or absent (0). For example, dream, which is a beyond-the-self intention that a youth has not yet engaged, was coded 1 for intention, 0 for engagement, and 1 for beyond-the-self reasons.

Logistic regression estimates parameters that maximize the likelihood of observing sample data. Each dimension of purpose was regressed stepwise on demographic variables, social desirability, and social supports. We report only best models, which were chosen based on parsimony, pseudo- $R^2$  value, a statistically significant likelihood-ratio test and larger reduction in Bayes' information criterion comparing nested models, and the model's ability to classify adolescents based on the ROC curve. The ROC plots the relationship between true-positive and false-positive classifications. Values above 50% increase ability to discriminate cases above chance, and values above 70% are considered acceptable models (Pagano & Bauvreau, 1993).

Effect sizes are reported as odds ratios. When the predictor variable is categorical (e.g., gender or ethnicity), if the odds ratio is greater than 1, youth

in the specified group (e.g., female) are more likely to have that dimension of purpose than those in the reference group (e.g., male), and vice versa if the odds ratio is less than 1. When the predictor variable is continuous, the odds ratio signifies the incremental odds of having the dimension of purpose (e.g., engagement) for each one-unit difference in the predictor variable (e.g., family support score; Afifi, Clark & May, 2004).

### *Qualitative Data Analyses*

*Data coding.* Interviews were recorded then transcribed with identifying information removed. We conducted two qualitative content analyses (Boyatzis, 1998): one analysis coded interviews holistically for what form of purpose (or precursor) the adolescent demonstrated, and the other analysis coded particular statements as signifying social supports for the focus adolescents named as most important to them. Each coding process is described below.

*Forms of purpose coding.* As part of an earlier study, three researchers coded transcripts using a four-step process (see Moran, 2009, for a more detailed description):

1. Determine the one most important focus the participant wanted to accomplish.
2. Highlight statements providing evidence of current and future actions related to the focus, as well as reasons for those actions.
3. Assess how connected the focus was to other aspects of the participant's life.
4. Judge whether the reasons given were intended to benefit only the self or others as well.

Based on the above steps, coders judged the form of purpose via a process of elimination. If the focus had no intention to continue into the future, or the reason was only to benefit the self, and the participant had taken no action to realize the focus, the form was coded nonpurpose. If an intention was specified, the reasons were strictly self-oriented, and there were current and future planned actions, the form was self-oriented life goal. If the primary reason was beyond the self and there were no current actions, the form was coded beyond-the-self dream. If the primary reason was beyond the self and there were current and future planned actions, the form was coded purpose.

At each step, two coders independently coded each interview, which resulted in sufficient reliability (Cohen's kappa = .70; Fleiss, 1981). They then came to consensus before proceeding to the next step by presenting evidence from the interview for their assigned codes. Agreement was needed because subsequent steps required coders to code the outcomes from earlier steps. If the two coders still could not agree, which rarely occurred, a third coder would independently code the interview and, considering the other coders' evidence as well, make a determining judgment.

**Social supports coding.** In a separate coding phase 2 years later, three researchers coded interview statements for any social supports the adolescent articulated. Two of these coders were also coders for the earlier forms of purpose but did not necessarily code the same interviews as in the earlier phase. Social supports were defined as any environmental aspect that participants perceived as supporting them. This coding included but extended beyond the social-structural supports and close relationships of the statistical analyses. For interviews coded as purpose, dream, or life goal identified in the forms analysis (60% of interviews), two types of social supports could be coded: social supports that supported them generally and social supports that aided them specifically in pursuing their purpose, dream, or life goal. Interviews that were coded nonpurposeful (40%) could be coded only for general social supports.

Statements related to social supports were coded along two dimensions: supplier and function. Suppliers were *who* provided the support, such as family, friends, another adult (e.g., a coach or family friend), and institutions such as churches, schools, the media, or other organizations (e.g., arts, service, military, or sports). Functions described the specific *benefit* provided, such as cognitive benefits like giving information, emotional benefits like encouragement or empathy, social benefits like helping reputation or power, material benefits like supplying money or tools, and structural benefits like norms or laws.

**Comparative analysis.** To answer Research Question 2, we used comparative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) across the forms of purpose. Over several iterations, we compared social supports mentioned by adolescents in each form of purpose. We noted supports that were found in some forms but not others, or provided different benefits in one form than others, or were construed differently across forms. In particular, we explored how social supports differed for youth with fully developed purpose than youth with precursor forms, such as self-oriented life goals or *beyond-the-self* dreams, and we focused most closely on social supports that specifically supported the adolescent's purpose, life goal, or dream.

**Table 3.** Best Fitting Logistic Regressions of Intention, Engagement, and Beyond-the-Self Reasons Dimensions, and Integrated Purpose on Grade Level, Social-Structural Supports, and Close Relationship Supports ( $N = 238$ )

Predictor	Intention		Engagement		BTS Reasons		Purpose	
	OR <sup>a</sup> (SE)	Beta	OR (SE)	Beta	OR (SE)	Beta	OR (SE)	Beta
Grade level	2.42** (.39)	.89	2.40** (.36)	.88	1.35* (.19)	.30	1.80** (.29)	.59
Female								
Nonwhite ethnicity	1.99* (.62)	.69						
Social desirability					1.44* (.20)	.36	1.40* (.22)	.34
Family support								
Friend support	1.50* (.23)	.40						
Log likelihood	-133.75		-144.78		-147.80		-126.30	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.14		.12		.04		.07	
Likelihood ratio test	45.01**		38.69**		12.21**		20.43**	
$\chi^2$ df	3		1		2		2	
Area under ROC curve <sup>b</sup>	72%		72%		63%		69%	
Correctly classified cases	68%		67%		65%		73%	

<sup>a</sup>OR = odds ratio, a measure of effect size.

<sup>b</sup>Area under the ROC curve signifies the power of the model to discriminate between having or not having the dimension of purpose; the value represents the percent of cases the model assigns a higher probability to a correct case than to an incorrect case.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Results

### How Do Social Supports Relate To Each Dimension of Purpose?

In this sample, almost two-thirds of youth articulated an intention, but only about half gave beyond-the-self reasons, about one-third acted on that intention, and one-quarter had integrated the three dimensions. Table 3 shows the best fitting logistic models.

Whether purpose or its dimensions were described by youth seemed primarily a function of development, as indexed by grade level. Average youth in higher grades were almost 2-1/2 times more likely to describe an intention and engagement in their interviews than sixth graders were. For engagement, beyond-the-self reasons and integrated purpose, grade level showed

the *only* effect. Youth in higher grades were 35% more likely to express beyond-the-self reasons and 80% more likely to express all three dimensions of purpose, than younger youth. This pattern of stronger relationships between grade level with intention and engagement than with beyond-the-self reasons may suggest that, as youth age and become more educated, there is a stronger general developmental pathway for youth to increasingly plan their futures for themselves and to gain practical skills through engagement in activities than there is for youth to consider the expected effects on others of those plans and activities, (see also Moran, 2009).

Culture-straddling, a social-structural support indexed by labeling oneself as belonging to a non-White ethnic group, also had moderate explanatory power for the intention dimension. Non-White youth were two times more likely than White youth to describe an intention. This finding supports the contention that youth who grow up in two cultures—the dominant culture and their ethnic culture—may have an advantage in that the juxtaposition of the two cultures increases their awareness of a wider array of possibilities, or the tension between the two cultures heightens their self-reflection and recognition that they must choose or integrate a purpose and/or identity (i.e., they cannot take a cultural identity for granted; Cooper et al., 1998; Martinez & Dukes, 1997).

Support from close relationships showed explanatory power only for the intention dimension. When family support and friend support were input independently into separate models, both were statistically significant. However, when input into the same model, controlling for each other, only friend support remained statistically significant. Controlling for grade level, ethnicity, and social desirability, we would predict a 50% increase in the odds of articulating an intention between youth with a one-point difference on the friend scale. That is, youth who strongly agreed versus moderately agreed that their friends noticed, encouraged, and engaged with the youth's interests would be 50% more likely to express an intention. Peers who also "get into" the same types of accomplishments helped youth see themselves continuing to strive for that accomplishment in the future, which has also been found in other research (Patrick et al., 1999).

Thus, Hypothesis 1 (grade level) was fully supported, and Hypothesis 3 (non-White ethnicity) was supported for intention but not beyond-the-self reasons. Hypotheses 2 (gender) and 4 (family support) were not supported. Hypothesis 5 (friend support) was not supported because we expected associations with engagement and beyond-the-self reasons based on past research. However, a statistically significant finding occurred for intention.



## How Do Youth Use Social Supports To Develop Their Purposes?

Research Question 1 illuminated how different supports affected the likelihood of the three dimensions of purpose. Yet the findings tell us little about how youth themselves make sense of and perhaps integrate different supports into a more cohesive network of affordances honed to their particular purpose content. In particular, how do social supports buttress youth's specific purposes, and how do young people perceive and engage with those supports?

For this qualitative analysis, we did not decompose the forms of purpose into their constituent three dimensions, but rather used the forms of purpose to categorize youth and analyze different patterns of interaction with social supports across these categories. We analyzed differences in support that youth with integrated purposes reported compared to youth with all other precursor forms of purpose.

*Family support was foundational.* Family was the most frequently mentioned social support for the majority of youth in all forms of purpose. Family provided emotional, cognitive, and monetary resources. This generalized support was particularly prevalent among purposeful youth. Family provided a "sense of place" that enabled them to take risks as well as a safe haven for retreats after mistakes: "Obviously, my family is never going to leave me for my whole life. It's my roots, gives me something to fall back on."

This finding may seem surprising given that family support was not statistically significant in the quantitative models. This discrepancy may be explained by the content of the survey questions. They asked about general support and encouragement of focal interests, whereas the spontaneous comments of youth emphasized a general support of well-being, a type of support prior to but not focused on purpose development. Some youth spontaneously described how their parents did provide supports particular to prosocial orientation, as discussed below. But prosociality was not a focus of the survey questions and, thus, such support likely would not be modeled from youth survey responses.

Some youth with purposes received particular encouragement for beyond-the-self pursuits. Parents modeled prosocial values or were responsive to the youth's own beyond-the-self inclinations: "They influence me to be a better person . . . how to make things better so I can influence people in a good way." A young man committed to reducing poverty noted that his dad "teaches

me all the injustice that's going on right now, or has been going on in history." Parents also helped youth with purposes more directly by contributing money for volunteer projects or to donate to charities. A college student planning to be a teacher received an allowance from her parents to volunteer with children. A high school student said her parents bought her books and materials related to her career interest working with animals. These supports not only provided financial resources, they also sent cues that the youths' goals were worthy of pursuit.

Youth with precursor forms of purpose, on the other hand, received messages that may have motivated them away from helping others. Youth pursuing self-oriented life goals, like purposeful youth, reported more general emotional support from family than nonpurposeful youth and dreamers, suggesting that this type of family support is broadly important to help young people engage any goals. However, self-oriented goal pursuers also were motivated by a desire to make their parents happy and proud. Their parents encouraged personal success and well-being, rather than contribution beyond the self, primarily through educational goals.

Dreamers were motivated by family financial struggles. Some felt encouraged to move beyond the difficulties their families faced. One young man conveyed "my family's been through some rough times. When I grow up and have a family, I guess I don't want to have to put them through that." Others emphasized success as a way to pay back their hard working parents: "when I see my dad come from working and just tired that motivates me to work harder on my schoolwork." Family situations motivated these youth to think about the future, but did not provide the more direct support needed to enact their dreams in the present.

*Opportunities to act prosocially.* Opportunities are environmental affordances that enable a person to act. A social relationship or organization can provide or even require activities, but for such activities to be opportunities, young people must see the activity's future potential and make the activity personally meaningful (Larson, 2006). Compared to the precursor forms, youth with purposes mentioned specific opportunities as supports for their aims. A young man who makes films about public health issues such as HIV explained his start: "One of my teachers was associated with them [a film making organization], and he asked me did I want to help out with them . . . Every year I did another project with them, either behind the camera, co-directing, co-writing, producing." Another student stoked his passion to teach music by helping his own music teacher lead an after-school program: "I just love seeing the joy on their [student's] face when . . . they can finally get it

and play it.” A young woman found support for her aspirations to teach through the opportunity to volunteer with kids: “When you’re volunteering, you get to see them more in a relaxed atmosphere and they can be kids.” Teachers or institutions offered these activities, but youth connected them to future goals and developed them into beyond-the-self pursuits.

Some youth with purposes *initiated* opportunities. A ninth grader who wanted to be a medical researcher, after learning she was not old enough to volunteer with animals, “focused more on people . . . such as elderly people. I could go sing for them within choirs . . . do stuff for people indirectly, such as wrapping gifts for people during the holidays.” Some found people in need and proactively helped: standing up for schoolmates who were teased, listening when friends needed to talk, or assisting an elderly neighbor. As one young woman reflected, “When I’m with my neighbor across the street, I’m a teacher and a big sister, and kind of like a mom figure.”

Youth with purposes, especially those of non-White ethnicities, also showed initiative for beyond-the-self activity through proactive response to adversity. Rather than avoiding challenges, these youth used the challenge as an impetus to change some aspect of their community. A young woman credited her own difficult immigrant experience as a source for her career goals in nursing and education: “I didn’t know the language. But I knew enough verbal cues to know I wasn’t accepted . . . Whenever I see a kid who’s having trouble with something . . . I tutor, and I make sure that I tell my students, I’m not just your tutor. I’m here for you to come to, to talk to.” A young man who emigrated from Peru observed, “I lived around people who walked barefoot, you know, and struggle all their lives to give their children everything.” This perception influenced him to eradicate poverty as his purpose.

*Institutional contexts of support.* Youth with purposes were more likely to perceive and integrate support from a variety of suppliers, including institutions. All of these social supports pointed in the same direction, clarifying the “compass” aspect of a purpose. Religion and community service organizations, and to a lesser extent school, served as core contexts that provided multiple types of support for their purposes. These institutions functioned differently for different youth: for some, they provided information or knowledge; for others, they provided friendship; and for still others, they provided social structure. But for a few of the youth with purposes, these contexts became integrated. They synthesized these contexts and their functions into a *cohesive foundation* for launching and maintaining their specific life purposes. They particularly supported the beyond-the-self dimension of purpose.

Whereas youth with self-oriented life goals mostly saw church's social opportunities, and dreamers and nonpurposeful youth, if they talked about church at all, focused on moral lessons, youth with purposes viewed religion and faith-based institutions—in particular, religious youth groups—as an integrating structure. Churches organized social activities and networks to learn beyond-the-self values, build connections with others who shared their values, and engage in outreach activities, mission trips, and mentoring of younger children. Youth felt not just organizationally, but also emotionally, supported by their religion. One young woman described her youth group as “a support group for Christ, you know somebody else is going through what you're going through.” Religion also had a comforting effect that made helping others less stressful. As another young woman explained, “I can actually do all of these things, it's possible that I can and it's just really neat how I can actually go into it like all the stuff that my God did for people.”

Nonprofit organizations and community groups similarly provided an integrated network of support. Many purposeful youth took advantage of volunteer experiences that developed empathic reactions to the misfortunes of others, future goals, new pathways for further opportunities to act, and encouragement through positive feedback from those helped: “It's that emotional attachment as well as just the feeling that you get from actually helping someone, to me, is like the best feeling I've ever had. And that's why I decided to go into children's psychology.” Thus, youth who engaged in community service found multiple layers of support for their beyond-the-self inclinations.

Many youth with purposes found supports in school for their future goals. Whereas other youth spoke generally about education being important for the future, youth with purposes recognized the specific ways that education was integral to their specific aims. Teachers were a source of information, opportunity, and encouragement: “I originally got the idea [to run for student government] from Dr. C . . . I plan to go to law school after here.” Courses and extracurricular activities provided specific activities for previously vague interests: “I took child development courses and then that just opened up a whole new window for me.” Students with purposes integrated the educational context into their larger aims. One young man described, “Why I came here is to educate myself and become a person who will change a country, who will make a difference.”

In summary, compared to youth with precursor forms of purpose, youth with purposes involved family specifically in the pursuit of beyond-the-self activity or their specified purpose; recognized, proactively sought, or

sometimes even created opportunities to engage those purposes; and integrated social supports into a more cohesive system of supports for their particular purposes.

## Discussion

This study combined closed-ended questionnaire responses with open-ended interview responses to address how youth made sense of their families' and their friends' support for what the youth expressed as their specific purpose (or precursor main focus). These two data sources provided complementary views. Statistical analyses support that purpose is a developmental phenomenon—that age is a stronger influence on articulating a purpose than social supports are. Qualitative analyses provide a more nuanced picture of how youth recognize support from various sources and, with the most advanced youth, proactively integrate these sources into a custom-designed network of support for the youth's specific purpose. In this discussion, we highlight how these results enlighten our understanding of how youth make sense of social supports from the perspective of their own purposes, and areas where more examination is needed.

We return to the overarching question of our investigation: what is the relationship between perceived social supports and a youth's *self-specified* purpose? First, growing up seems the biggest support for youth to articulate their purposes. Older youth with more education were more able to describe their intentions, engaging activities, reasons (beyond-the-self or self-oriented), and how these three dimensions interwove. These findings are not surprising, as older youth have stronger cognitive abilities, are offered more opportunities, and tend to have more access to a wider circle of social groups. These findings suggest that purpose may develop in tandem with, or as a particular manifestation of, other related developmental constructs, such as future orientation (Nurmi, 1991), opportunity recognition (Yates & Youniss, 1996), and prosocial reasoning (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

Second, social-structural features—in particular, ethnicity—affect purpose development. Although much research has emphasized how ethnicity has been associated with risk factors (e.g., Armenta, 2010; Burrows & Ong, 2010), our findings support other researchers who found an ethnic background different from the dominant culture can be perceived as advantageous for articulating a self-defined intention to pursue a particular future course (Cooper et al., 1998; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Many non-white youth expressed purposes that clearly were drawn from their experiences as minorities or immigrants, which stimulated them to promote change if they or loved

ones experienced discrimination or suffering, or to share a beloved aspect of their home culture with others to promote understanding and harmony, or to bring resources from the dominant culture to improve their home cultures.

Once development and social structures have been considered, whether youth perceive support for their specified purposes from close relationships may depend, in part, on how researchers ask. Our survey questions asked about support and encouragement for focal interests in general, whereas interview questions asked how family and friends felt about each focal interest youth expressed. That is, interview questions were anchored, whereas survey questions were not. Existing general support scales may not provide a sufficient focus on purpose or its dimensions to meaningfully capture relationships between specific supports and specific purposes. Perhaps questionnaires that first anchor youth to a particular intention and then ask specifically about different types of support may be more useful. Yet, such questionnaires suffer the same drawbacks of other list measures by suggesting to youth social supports that the youth themselves do not perceive in their environment (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Massey et al., 2008). So results may be difficult to interpret.

It is plausible, as the statistical models show, that, during adolescence, friends are more general supporters of interests (Patrick et al., 1999) and friend support may be more top-of-mind (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), which could be captured in a general survey measure. The kind of support provided by family regarding intentions—such as “get an education” or “work smart”—may be provided just as well if youth are in what parents call “the right group.” But the kind of support provided by friends, such as sharing secrets, may not be available from family, so friend support is reported more strongly. Furthermore, the kind of support friends provide may be more future oriented as youth try to plan their future ambitions in light of their current social networks, such as choosing colleges based on where their friends are going.

The kind of support and encouragement provided by family, especially the “they will always be there” type, may be taken for granted and not linked to youths’ specific interests. For some youth, family or parental expectations may differ from their own interests or ambitions and not be considered relevant in response to a general survey question. But in interviews, when youth are given the time to describe when and how family are involved in the youth’s pursuits, it becomes apparent the supportive role family plays. Thus, family was an emphasis in interviews but not surveys. Parents were singled out as major contributors to both what the youth’s purpose was and how it was pursued, whereas friend support tended to be couched within the core contexts of support—as part of church youth groups or volunteer work, for example.

The middle level of social supports—the institutions between the social-structural supports latent in demographic categories and the interpersonal supports of close relationships—may need an increased focus. Such institutional supports have been included in research on purpose and positive youth development (e.g., Mariano & Damon, 2008; Shamah, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). But they tend to be measured in the same generalized, “sense of” school achievement, community service, or religiosity as criticized above. Our qualitative analysis provides a few clues for how these institutional supports might be better addressed as not only venues, settings, or contexts for purpose, but as building blocks to be integrated by the youth *based on their developing specific purpose*. That is, these institutions should be careful not to overly standardize and prescribe what purposes youth must assume, which could lead to ethical issues (Schachter & Rich, 2011). Rather, they could form a supportive network for youth to find their specific purpose themselves (Larson, 2006).

For example, religion may be a particularly fruitful institutional support that provides both a relatively comprehensive meaning system and a social context that helps individuals navigate and interpret life experiences (Silberman, 2005), and youth can see that there are other “youth like me” engaging in worthwhile tasks (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). Still, religion as a social support may reinforce two youths’ purposes differentially as one focuses on purpose as given by God or as a call to serve God, whereas the other interprets the religious institution as a vehicle for helping the less fortunate. Thus, measures must probe deeper than whether the institution is present in the youth’s life and examine how the institution is perceived and used as a social support for the *youth’s* purpose (see Mariano et al., 2011).

Schools as an institutional setting for purpose development were notably weaker than expected in interview discussions with youth in our sample. Many youth did include education as an aspect of their purposes (e.g., “finish my education,” “go to college,” “do well in school”), but fewer than expected discussed school as a *venue* for supporting their more long-term goals beyond a general “get a good job.” A review of 465 scholarly articles showed that both researchers and youth believe that school can be a fruitful place for discovering possible pathways, engaging skills, and understanding the impact of one’s behavior on others (Koshy & Mariano, 2011). Intention in terms of future focus and plans (especially career related) and opportunities to engage activities that may lead to purpose seem a good fit for schools. Yet, a study of African-American girls found that school as a support was more often mentioned by nonpurposeful youth than purposeful youth (Mariano et al., 2011). These researchers suggest that purposeful youth, who have already



framed a beacon for their lives, may be less dependent on school as a support for their aspirations. Our findings propose that school may not be singled out as a support for purposeful youth but rather integrated into a network of institutional foundations.

Few schools consider development of youth aspirations as their central mission, although several programs address the beyond-the-self dimension, including character education, service learning, and civic engagement (Koshy & Mariano, 2011). Some researchers propose that more can and should be done in the schools to help youth determine their aspirations, purposes, and the identities that those purposes support (Schachter & Rich, 2011). For example, the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations helps schools focus on strategies to improve school support for youth to become better *individuals* not just learn *skills* ([www.qisa.org](http://www.qisa.org)). Purpose researcher Michael Steger and his colleagues have designed and tested a curricular unit for purpose development related to career choice, focusing particularly on the beyond-the-self dimension (Dik, Steger, Gibson, & Peisner, 2011).

### *Limitations and Implications for Future Research*

Our results are not conclusive. Rather, they provide an intriguing launch for further research. Despite the insights of this study, there are a few limitations. As mentioned above, more nuanced measures, a more comprehensive accounting of environmental affordances, and more interactive modeling of the youth's purpose-as-reference and social supports are called for. There is a need for better measures or methods to more deeply and qualitatively investigate the ways *specific* social supports affect *specific* purposes. In particular, better measures that more clearly assess beyond-the-self-ness may be helpful. In the positive psychology and positive youth development framework, purpose conceptualizations tend to assume self-orientation as the norm and only required a sense of future-directedness and personal meaning (see Moran, 2009).

Our statistical models, which computed the probability that a particular youth will express each dimension of purpose, do a fair job of classification. The number of youth that the models correctly classified ranged from 63% for beyond-the-self reasons to 72% for intention and engagement. The model for fully integrated purpose correctly classified 69% of youth. These percentages suggest that there are other variables that should be considered, especially for beyond-the-self reasons. Additional social supports may be addressed, such as school and community institutions as well as additional close relationships like favorite teachers or coaches, or non-friend peers



(Mariano et al., 2011). Further exploration of social-structural supports could be pursued through measures more nuanced than gross demographics, such as acculturation level or socioeconomic awareness (Gutman et al., 2011). With any social support, it is important that the measures assess not just the presence of the support in youths' lives, but the interaction of supports, in the context of other supports, with each youth's developing purpose.

## Conclusion

The strong role played by development, together with the differential perspectives on family and friend support, implies that the relationship between purpose and social supports may be complex. Purpose and social supports may influence each other. Youth make sense of the social supports available in their environments in light of their budding purposes, and may refine their purposes based on further engagement with social supports. Youth who are further along integrating the dimensions into a fully developed purpose enjoy an additional advantage. As intentions become clearer through engagement or through seeing the effects of one's actions on others, adolescents more effectively seek specific supports to continue their specific purpose's development. They initiate and anticipate. This is the picture found in descriptions of gifted and talented youth, including purpose exemplars (Bronk, 2011), who tend to have strong focus and self-direction (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Patrick et al., 1999). Thus, our study echoes Benson and Scales' (2009) claim that youth can become "significant resources for creating environments that enable their own positive development."

Our study provides a different perspective from other research, such as Lerner's 5 C's model, which posits the C's as orthogonal, with separate developmental paths and without the requirement for all C's in order for youth to be on a "path to a hopeful future" (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007). Damon et al.'s (2003) configural model posits that, for youth to have a purpose, all three dimensions must be present, cohere, and reinforce each other. The interaction of the dimensions may catalyze further development of the youth's purpose. What may be critical for purpose is that involvement with social supports must be internalized or "made one's own" as significant personal meanings so that youth can gain a sense of quest and destiny that "this is *my* purpose; *I* am the only *one* who can do this" (Emmons, 1999; Steger, 2012). Social supports become integrated into a custom network for supporting the youth's specific purpose, not just the youth's development in general.

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## Note

1. Several variables exhibited univariate skewness, so we estimated models twice, once with their raw scores and once with their appropriately transformed scores. Since the models with transformed scores were not substantively different from models with raw scores, we reported raw score models for ease of interpretability.

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