

PURPOSE AND GOAL ORIENTATION IN ADOLESCENCE

A summary of Life Goal Selection Pattern and Purpose in Adolescence (Hung et al., 2023)

A CSCH Brief by Oscar Ruiz

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of profound change and transformation.¹ Widely recognized as a pivotal phase for identity and personality development, it's a period when various influences come together to give rise to complex behaviors and the formation of personally relevant goals². Researchers have highlighted purpose in life as a powerful indicator of positive youth development³, with higher levels associated with greater altruism⁴, personal agency⁵, and emotional well-being⁶. However, to date, few studies have explored the connection between adolescents' goal prioritization patterns and sense of purpose in daily life, and which types of goals, if any, are most likely to provide the most of it. To answer these questions, Hung and colleagues conducted a daily diary study with 213 9th-grade students in the Northeast United States examining the nature of their goals and their potential to provide a sense of purpose. This brief serves to summarize the key results from that study.⁷

Adolescence is an active time for identity formation and the emergence of commitments to personally meaningful goals. Are certain types of goals more predictive of purpose and a meaningful life than others?

Defining Goals and Purpose in Adolescence

Hung and colleagues first surveyed the literature to see how researchers before them had conceptualized sense of purpose and the diversity of life goals in adolescence. Drawing on definitions of life purpose by Ryff⁸, Scheier et al.⁹, and Damon et al.¹⁰, which encompass a sense of direction, personally meaningful life goals, and a self-transcendent dimension, the researchers identified four major types of life goals prevalent during adolescence: relationship-oriented goals, beyond-the-self goals, goals relating to religion, and self-oriented goals.¹¹

➤ Relationship-orientated goals

Goals that focus on building and maintaining positive connections with others, such as family, friends, and peers. These goals involve fulfilling roles as a good daughter or son, friend, and student, and are associated with a clear positive impact on the daily sense of purpose, particularly among youth.¹²

➤ **Beyond-the-self goals**

Goals that extend beyond individual interests and are dedicated to contributing to a cause or benefiting others. These goals often involve engaging in prosocial behaviors and actively participating in collective efforts for societal betterment. They are strongly linked to a sense of purpose in life, especially among youth actively involved in their communities.¹³

➤ **Religion-oriented goals**

Goals rooted in religious beliefs and practices, providing a framework for guiding individuals in their life pursuits and means of attainment. Higher levels of religiousness have been associated with an enhanced sense of meaning in life, particularly among adolescents.¹⁴

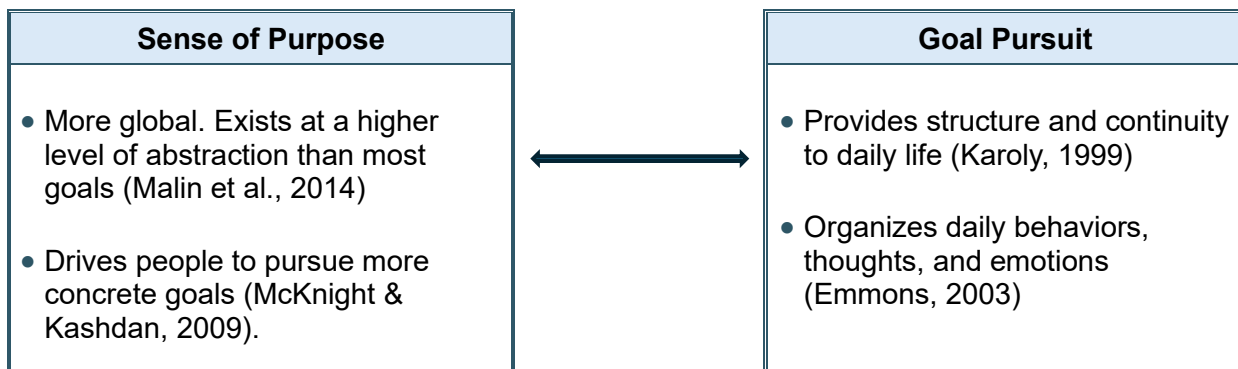
➤ **Self-oriented goals**

Goals centered on individual interests and personal needs, which may include activities aimed at fulfilling one's desires, such as relaxation and exercise. The link between self-serving intentions and purpose is weaker compared to other goal types. These goals may not contribute as significantly to an individual's sense of purpose, as evidenced by minimal correlation with meaningfulness in daily life activities. Limited empirical research exists on the association between self-oriented goals and purpose in adolescents' daily lives, necessitating further investigation into how these goals influence a sense of purpose.¹⁵

Variability in Sense of Purpose, Purpose & Goals as Bidirectionally Related

Citing seminal works in developmental systems theory, Hung and colleagues posit that an individual's daily sense of purpose may ebb and flow in response to their day-to-day experiences.¹⁶ They also note that while goals and purpose should be defined as distinct constructs, research appears to point to them being bidirectionally related. As a broader, higher-order motivational construct, purpose in life can orient attention and guide goal-directed behaviors.¹⁷ On a more granular level, individual life goals contribute structure to life, influencing daily decision-making and potentially impacting the sense of purpose in daily life.¹⁸

Bidirectional Relationship Between Sense of Purpose and Goal Pursuit



Research Questions

Hung and colleagues had two aims for their study:

Aim 1. Analyze patterns in participant profiles of self-reported life goals (i.e., relationship-oriented, beyond-the-self, religion-oriented, and self-oriented) to establish a classification system for assigning each participant to a respective class/group.

- **Latent Class Analysis (LCA)** was employed to identify classes of students with distinct patterns in self-reported life goals, including relationship-oriented, beyond-the-self, religion-oriented, and self-oriented goals. Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is a statistical method used to identify hidden groups, or "classes," within a larger population based on patterns of responses to different variables. It helps researchers categorize individuals into meaningful groups that share similar characteristics or behaviors, even when those groups are not directly observed.

Aim 2. Explore how different combinations of life goals among participants are linked to variability of daily purpose and mean level of purpose.

- The study measured the variability of daily purpose and mean level sense of purpose in life among the participants using a daily diary approach. Participants were asked to report on their sense of purpose once a day for 3 weeks in the spring of 2022. The variability of daily purpose was calculated by the standard deviation of each individual's purpose scores over 15 days. This allowed the researchers to assess the day-to-day fluctuations in the participants' sense of purpose.
- The study also examined the mean level of purpose by averaging the daily sense of purpose scores over the 15-day period. This provided insight into how purposeful the youth felt on a daily basis compared to their peers, allowing for an understanding of the average level of daily purpose among the participants.

Findings

Aim 1: Class membership identification

The study identified four distinct classes of goal selection patterns that differed according to participants' propensity to prioritize goals that extend beyond the self and ones related to religion, the self, and social relationships.

Four Classes Identified in the Latent Class Analysis of Goal Selection Patterns Among Adolescents

- 1. Self and Inner Circle group (24% of the sample):** This class showed the highest probability of selecting self-oriented goals and goals related to personal relationships, with a very low probability of selecting beyond-the-self and religion-oriented goals.
- 2. Inner Circle group (34% of the sample):** This class had the highest probability of selecting goals related to personal relationships.
- 3. Other-Oriented group (18% of the sample):** This class showed the highest probability of selecting beyond-the-self goals, indicating a focus on goals related to the larger community or beyond oneself.
- 4. Self-Oriented group (24% of the sample):** This class indicated the highest probability of selecting self-oriented goals, with a lower probability of selecting goals related to personal relationships and beyond-the-self goals.

Aim 2: Associations between class membership and sense of purpose

Daily variability in purpose

The findings suggested there was day-to-day variability in daily purpose within each individual. Results also indicated that the identified classes did not differ significantly in their day-to-day variations in overall purpose, daily personal meaningfulness, daily goal orientation, or daily beyond-the-self purpose. Essentially, class membership did not show distinctions based on the fluctuation in individuals' daily sense of purpose.

Mean level purpose

The classes did not exhibit significant differences in their overall sense of purpose, goal orientation, or beyond-the-self purpose. However, a notable difference emerged in students' personal meaningfulness between classes. Specifically, students in the *Other-oriented* group reported higher personal meaningfulness compared to those in the *Self and Inner Circle* group. This suggests that students in the *Other-oriented* group perceived their sense of purpose as more meaningful than their counterparts in the *Self and Inner Circle* groups. No other comparisons between groups showed statistically significant differences.

Overall Summary

The study revealed several key findings regarding the association between different goal orientations and overall sense of purpose in adolescents:

- 1. Equifinality:** The findings reflected the developmental concept of equifinality, suggesting that adolescents' sense of purpose might be actualized through the pursuit of varying sets of specific goals. Even the group that homogeneously selected zero beyond-the-self goals reported an average daily sense of purpose near the midpoint of the scale, indicating that adolescents' sense of purpose can be realized through diverse goal pursuits.
- 2. Others-Oriented Goals:** The study indicated higher perceptions of purpose as being meaningful among the *Others-oriented* goal group compared with the *Self and Inner Circle* group. This finding is consistent with previous research, suggesting that youth with relationship-oriented goals may experience stronger role fulfillment, which can contribute to the meaningfulness of their sense of purpose.
- 3. Beyond-the-Self Goals:** The commitment to something larger than oneself was found to be an essential component of purpose. Prosocial tendencies and involvement in collective action to benefit society were positively associated with purpose in life among adolescents. This suggests that goals focused on the larger community can promote a sense of meaning in life.
- 4. Self-Oriented Goals:** In contrast, self-oriented goals may be less beneficial to one's purpose and other positive outcomes than relationship-oriented and beyond-the-self goals. The study suggested a weaker association between self-serving intentions and purpose compared to other-serving intentions among adolescents.

These findings highlight the importance of considering the diverse goal orientations of adolescents and their potential impact on the development of a sense of purpose. The study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between goal selection patterns and the overall sense of purpose in adolescents.

For more information about this research see the full journal article:

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