Purpose in Life
Evidence of a Psychological Resource

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Purpose as a Prescription

If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Everything on the earth has a purpose, every disease an herb to cure it, and every person a mission.

Mourning Dove

The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose.

William Cowper
What do we say about purpose?

RICK WARREN
THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE
WHAT ON EARTH AM I HERE FOR?

2002

LOCKDOWN

2010

The Path to Purpose

Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life

WALTER DEAN MYERS

William Damon

2008
Purpose: Defining Characteristics

❖ Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning.
❖ promotes optimal resource allocation (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009)

❖ “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)
How do we measure purpose?

Purpose in Life Scale (Carol Ryff, 1989)

❖ I enjoy making plans for the future bringing them into reality.

❖ My daily activities never seem trivial and unimportant to me.

❖ I am active in carrying out the plans I set for myself.

❖ I have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life.

❖ Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.
How do we measure purpose?

Purpose in Life

Individuals who score higher on measures of purpose in life are rated as more attractive by others.
Recognizing purpose when we see it

Purposeful people have greater interpersonal appeal

- Attractiveness & Likeability
- Potential for Friendship
- Interest in Conversation

Stillman et al (2010) SPPS
Where Does Purpose Come From?

Three pathways to purpose in life:

1. Proactive Development
   - Sustained, effortful, and gradual exploration
2. Reactive Development
   - Transformative life events
3. Social Learning Development
   - Observing others engage in meaningful work

Hill, Burrow, & Sumner (2014); Kashdan & McKnight (2009)
What good is Purpose?

Purpose is a component of psychological well-being
(Ryff, 1989)

Purpose is an indicator of human flourishing
(Fredrickson & Losada, 2005)

Purpose associated with:
- + Other PWB indicators
  (Ryff, 1989)
- + Positive Affect and - Negative affect
  (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992)
- + Happiness
  (McGregor, McAdams, & Little, 2006)
- + Generativity and Personal Growth
  (Hill and Burrow, 2010)
- - Impulsivity
  (Burrow & Spreng, 2016)
Purpose and Longevity

Boyle et al. (2009) Psychosomatic Medicine
Purpose is a good thing to have

- Lower risk of Alzheimer's and cognitive decline
  Boyle et al (2009)
- Reduces somatic symptoms
  Ishida & Okada (2006)
- Lower risk of stroke
  Kim et al (2013)
- Lowers risk of myocardial infarction
  Kim et al (2013)
- Reduced effects of neurotoxicity
- Speeds recovery from knee surgery
  (Zautra & Smith, 2004)
Methods

- *N = 116* undergraduates (58% female)
  - 8% Black, 15% Latino, 18% Asian, 60% White

**Purpose Prime**

1. Define what it means to have a sense of purpose.
2. What is your purpose in life?
3. Where does your sense of purpose come from?

**Control Prime**

1. List the most recent movie you’ve watched.
2. Which actors/actresses were in the movie
3. Describe the plot of the movie.

**Train Phase:**

- Rode metro-train for 14 consecutive stops
- At each stop, indicated NA: “distressed”, “nervous”, “alone”
- Marked “X” on sliding scale anchored with: *Not at all – Extremely*
Data Reduction

- **Independent Variable:**
  - % ethnic out-group
  - $M = .63$
  - *Range* = .22 – .98

88% of assessments included all 4 ethnic groups

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Findings

Burrow & Hill (2013). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*
Purpose and Perception

❖ Motivated perception
❖ We see the world we are motivated to see.
❖ Available resources make environments seem more actionable
Purpose and Perception

Degrees Overestimated

Low Purpose
High Purpose

Low Effort
High Effort

Appraised Effort

Thank You!