

PURPOSE IN LIFE AND THE LIBERAL ARTS: AN INVESTIGATION OF
ANTECEDENTS, BARRIERS, AND PURPOSE AMONG AND BETWEEN
EMERGING ADULTS WITH AND WITHOUT A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE

by

Caroline Sowards

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The construct of life purpose and the vast array of associated positive outcomes has been widely studied in recent years. While research has contributed to the knowledge of the construct, there remains a gap in understanding how life purpose develops in emerging adulthood and what, if any, contribution a liberal arts education makes towards developing purpose. This quantitative, cross-sectional study utilized a survey instrument to explore family and social supports (PSSFa/PSSFr), religiosity (DSES), and gratitude (GQ-6) as antecedents to purpose (SOPS-2) and group differences between 308 emerging adults 20-30 years of age who did versus did not hold a degree from a liberal arts institution. Research questions explored group differences in dimensions and orientation of life purpose. Correlations between dimensions and orientations of life purpose and the antecedents to purpose of expressing gratitude, social and family supports, and religiosity/spirituality were also examined. Finally, socioeconomic status was examined as a barrier to life purpose, with a liberal arts degree examined as a partial mediator in this relationship. Participants with a liberal arts degree had higher levels on all dimensions and orientation of purpose. Further, antecedents of family and social supports, religiosity, and gratitude were each correlated with higher purpose levels. Lower SES predicted lower purpose levels. Finally, holding a liberal arts degree was found to partially mediate the relationship between SES and purpose. These findings have implications for higher education, positive psychology interventions, and social supports aimed at increasing life purpose among emerging adults.

Keywords: purpose in life, meaning, emerging adulthood, religiosity, liberal arts

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my parents who have instilled in me a love for lifelong education and serving others. I also dedicate this to my grandparents, most of whom were not educated traditionally, yet taught me to value education and make it a priority in my life. Finally, I dedicate this to all of my former teachers and professors who have mentored and guided me along the way, especially Dr. Don Poe and Dr. Deborah Burris who have always encouraged me to take this step and who have remained important encouragers in my doctoral journey.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The importance of having a purpose in life is evident by the expansive research showing associations of purpose with a plethora of positive associated outcomes (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Ozdogan, 2021; Sutin et al., 2023a; Sutin et al., 2023b; Yager & Kay, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020). Further, this importance has foundations in both biblical and in psychological theory (Erikson, 1968, Frankl, 2006, Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; *New International Version*, 2011; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2002). Research investigating purpose in life has increased significantly over the past 60 years and is a heavily researched topic today. From the introduction of the topic to present, researchers have established operational definitions (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a), investigated various orientations and dimensions (Anghel et al., 2021; Bronk et al., 2009; Hudig et al., 2020; Summers & Falco, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a), and identified potential antecedents and barriers to purpose (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2019a; Gong et al., 2020; Lo & Ip, 2022; Pfund et al., 2020; Pfund et al., 2022a). A wide array of positive outcomes associated with purpose have been researched, both for emerging adults who are searching for a purpose in life and adults who have achieved a sense of purpose in life (Bronk et al., 2020; Hielscher et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Ratner et al., 2023; Shiba et al., 2022).

However, most research among emerging adults has been correlational and exclusively conducted with college student participants (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022). While it is assumed that completing a liberal arts education encourages the identification of a life purpose (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023; Sullivan,

2016) little is known about purpose in life for emerging adults outside of a college setting. Additionally, no comparison between these groups has been conducted.

Therefore, researchers have begun to question the potential influence of college, and liberal arts education specifically, on purpose development (Deresiewicz, 2014; Sullivan, 2016). Further, if research reveals that a liberal arts education supports purpose development, barriers to accessing higher education may also pose as additional barriers to purpose development (Damon & Colby, 2022; Ryff, 2023). Thus, an examination of purpose in emerging adulthood including participants with and without a liberal arts education is needed (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022).

Background

Viktor Frankl introduced the importance of identifying purpose in life in 1946 with his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 2006). Frankl was a psychiatrist and a holocaust survivor who spent over three years as a prisoner in four Nazi concentration camps. His writings reflected on his time as a prisoner in these camps and his resultant understanding of meaning in life as a central motivational strength, even amidst dire circumstances. Frankl explained that meaning in life can be found by “doing a deed or creating a work,” “experiencing something or encountering someone,” or “facing a fate we cannot change...growing beyond ourselves...by changing ourselves” (Frankl, 2000, p. 141-142). Thus, if one can find meaning in life and focus on this meaning, one can transcend physical and environmental circumstances and find a source of hope and motivation no matter the setting (Frankl, 2006).

In addition to Frankl, Erikson highlighted the importance of developing a life purpose (Erikson, 1968). In his work he specifically pointed to the role life purpose plays

for adolescents and emerging adults as they attempt to resolve their identity crises (Bronk et al., 2009; Erikson, 1968). With these theories, Frankl and Erikson laid the foundation for the emergence of positive psychology, first introduced by Martin Seligman in 1998 (Seligman, 1998). The then president of the American Psychological Association charged fellow psychologists to embrace the study of human well-being and potential, which was countercultural to the then popular focus on mental illness (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman, 1998). Following this charge, Seligman proceeded to found a new subfield of positive psychology that resulted in new research topics and substantial advances in understanding constructs such as happiness, well-being, motivation, and meaning and purpose (Burrow et al., 2021). Additionally, Maddi (1970) provided a personality view of life purpose while Klinger (1977) viewed the construct from a cognitive-behavioral perspective. Finally, Ryff provided a social-developmental perspective of life purpose and included the construct of purpose in her theory of well-being (Ryff, 2023).

As evidenced in Frankl's writings (Frankl, 2000; Frankl, 2006) the importance of studying life purpose is founded in theological (Messer, 2021) and Biblical teachings (*New International Version*, 2011). While Frankl's theory was not theologically based, he wrote of an ultimate purpose in life which is guided by heaven (Frankl, 2006). Frankl also referred to his faith throughout his writings and described transcendence as an outcome of finding meaning and purpose in life (Frankl, 2000). Similarly, Messer (2021) described a theological view of ultimate and penultimate purposes in life. Biblically, these purposes are often described, in verses such as in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12 (*New International Version*, 2011) which states:

“...for we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

This verse explains that at death, Christians will gain a larger understanding, including meaning and purpose of life on earth (*New International Version*, 2011; 1 Corinthians 13:9-12). Personal or penultimate purpose is further described biblically in Genesis 47:50 when Joseph explains to his brothers that even their wrongdoings against him were purposeful for God (*New International Version*, 2011). Finally, 1 Peter 4:10-11 describes unique gifts from God given to each person, often described as callings or purpose (*New International Version*, 2011).

Thus, purpose in life has been studied historically from a variety of psychological perspectives (Erikson, 1968; Frankl, 2000; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Ryff, 1989; Ryff, 2023; Seligman, 1998). Much of the historical research has focused on how purpose buffers individuals against psychological illness or the negative effects of lacking a purpose in life (Erikson, 1968; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970). In contrast, most of the current research takes a positive psychology view of purpose, focusing on the development of purpose and positive outcomes associated with searching for and establishing purpose in life.

Current Research

Current research on life purpose has resulted in a more precise definition of purpose and a multidimensional, developmental view of the construct (Bronk & Damon,

2022; Damon et al., 2003; Damon & Colby, 2022; Bronk, 2014). In addition to associated positive outcomes, researchers have recently investigated potential antecedents and barriers to purpose development, especially within adolescence and emerging adulthood (Colby et al., 2022; Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022; Han & Dawson, 2021; Han et al., 2021; Malin, 2023). As such, current research has been primarily situated within academic settings, leading investigators to question if education, especially within the liberal arts, is an important antecedent to purpose development (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2019a; Gong et al., 2020; Lo, 2022; Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund & Hill, 2018). However, key figures in the fields of education and purpose have questioned the impact of these potential antecedents to purpose within the neo-liberal educational curriculum (Damon & Colby, 2022; Deresiewicz, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Sullivan, 2016). Therefore, further investigation of the effects of these potential antecedents and the presence of these within current liberal arts experiences is needed (Malin, 2023; Ryff, 2023).

Purpose Definition and Understanding

The most widely accepted definition of purpose was proposed by Damon et al. (2003), as “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” (p. 121). This definition provided a base for researchers to examine the orientations and dimensions of purpose and conduct research to differentiate the construct from similar ones such as meaning, goals, and prospection (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Bronk & Mitchell, 2022; Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Kashdan et al., 2022).

With guidance from this definition, researchers have recently focused on identifying the various dimensions (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-

Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c), orientations (Bronk et al., 2018; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Kuusisto et al., 2023; Wilson & Hill, 2023,) and types of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Han & Dawson, 2021; Wilson & Hill, 2023). Three widely accepted orientations of purpose in life have been identified: general life purpose, intrinsic self-focused purpose, and extrinsic “beyond-the-self” (BTS) purpose (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a). Further, researchers have identified differing dimensions of purpose in life: seeking purpose, emerging purpose or awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and not seeking purpose, often referred to as drifting (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Malin, 2023; Steger & Kashdan, 2007; Kuusisto et al. 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c).

Agreement on the dimensions and orientations of purpose led to the development of new measurement tools for identifying each (Anghel et al., 2021; Bronk et al., 2018; Burrow et al., 2021; Malin, 2023). For example, Bronk et al. (2018) conducted research which characterized orientations of purpose and identified clusters representing the various dimensions. As a result of this research, life purpose became measured in terms of purpose, which is self-focused, pro-social, and “beyond-the-self” (BTS), or some mixture of each. Malin (2023) took a unique approach to studying the multidimensionality of purpose by using a person-centered approach which revealed a more nuanced understanding of how purpose develops. Anghel et al. (2021), Bronk et al. (2018), Hudig et al. (2020), Malin (2023), Summers and Falco (2020), and Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2020a) each developed tools to classify dimensions of life purpose and to discern between pro-social and self-focused purpose orientations. Researchers in the field agree that purpose is multidimensional (Anghel et al., 2021; Bronk et al., 2018;

Bronk et al., 2021; Hudig et al., 2020; Malin, 2023; Summer & Falco, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a), develops and presents in a non-linear fashion (Hill et al., 2023), and is differentiated from the similar but overlapping constructs of meaning, goals, and prospection (Bronk & Mitchell, 2022; Kashdan, 2022; Ratner et al., 2021).

Research has discovered that when compared with purpose which is self-focused such as living life to the fullest or having a good career, beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose such as creating something new, serving God, and helping others (Bronk & Finch, 2010) is more strongly correlated with associated positive outcomes (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b). Specifically, the positive associated outcomes such as life satisfaction (Bronk & Finch, 2010), academic identity, and degree commitment (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b) are more strongly correlated with life purposes oriented towards benefitting the world or persons beyond the self than self-focused purposes. Therefore, adolescents and young adults who have developed a life purpose which goes “beyond the self” are more likely to experience positive associated outcomes (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Bronk, 2014; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b).

The significance of BTS purpose is also supported Biblically. For example, Colossians Chapter 3 instructs Christians to love and be charitable to others for the glory of God (*New International Version*, 2011). Similarly, Ephesians 4:1 teaches the importance of working mutually with love to serve the Lord and His will (*New International Version*, 2011). Finally, Proverbs 3 reminds Christians that the Lord provides protection and calm for those who remain in His wisdom (*New International*

Version, 2011). Thus, the increased positive outcomes associated with BTS purpose are evidence of biblical wisdom.

Correlates & Associated Positive Outcomes

Current purpose research investigates developmental stages from adolescence (Bronk et al., 2020; Hielscher et al., 2023; Ratner et al., 2023) through each stage of adulthood (Bundick et al., 2021; Damon & Colby, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2021). Various associated physical and psychological positive outcomes such as better sleep (McGowan et al., 2022) and increased positive social relationships (D'Ottone et al., 2023; Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund & Hill, 2022) have emerged.

For emerging adults specifically, research has connected searching for and identifying purpose with many positive associated outcomes beneficial in educational or work settings such as increases in motivation (VanRoo et al., 2023), resilience (Colby et al., 2023a, Lo & Ip, 2022; Ratner et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023), grit (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022b) and academic adjustment amongst hardship (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022b; VanRoo et al., 2023). Associated outcomes specifically related to academics include reduced academic misconduct (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022a), higher GPA and retention (Lo & Ip, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b), self-regulation and problem solving (Lohani et al., 2023), and grades in high school and college (Lo & Ip, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c). In addition to these positive outcomes, an increased relationship satisfaction through the first year of college (Pfund et al., 2022a), increased civic engagement and academic achievement motivation (Summers & Falco, 2020), and relationship satisfaction as a first-semester university student (Pfund et al., 2022a) have

also been found to be positively correlated with searching for purpose and identified purpose in life.

Other positive outcomes associated with an increased purpose though not exclusively within an educational setting include increased life satisfaction (Bronk et al., 2009) and subjective and eudemonic well-being (Ratner et al., 2023). Psychological benefits are also associated with life purpose such as reduced incidence of mental illness (Yager & Kay, 2023), lower rates of anxiety and depression (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Barcaccia et al., 2023; Hielscher et al., 2023), lower impulsive and risky behavior causing harm to the self (Ratner et al., 2021b), lower risk of drug misuse (Kim et al., 2020), and lower rates of loneliness (Hill et al., 2023a). Finally, increased self-regulation and avoidance of negative behaviors (Lohani et al., 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022), reduced gambling disorder symptoms, and overall increased psychological flourishing (Zhang et al., 2020) have been associated with an increased sense of purpose in life among emerging adults.

A wide range of constructs and behaviors correlated with life purpose have been investigated in recent years. Though these behaviors and constructs are not suggested as antecedent to life purpose, further research utilizing appropriate methodology may identify them as such (Malin, 2023; Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b). Behaviors and constructs correlated with life purpose include physical activity (Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021), morality, self-esteem, and compassion (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b). Pertinent to the study conducted, education (Boylan et al. 2022; Hill et al., 2023a; Ryff, 2023), religion (Upeneiks & Schieman, 2022), social connection and relationships (Pfund et al., 2022a; Weston et al., 2021b),

support from family members and mentors (Damon & Colby, 2022; Gong et al., 2020), and practicing gratitude (Bronk et al., 2019a), are also positively correlated with life purpose.

Purpose and Religion

The correlation between purpose in life and religiosity introduced by historical theorists and research continues to be supported by current research findings (Bronk, 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Damon and Malin, 2020; Upenieks & Schiemann, 2022). The overlapping constructs of purpose and religion were referenced in Viktor Frankl's (2000; 2006) writings and theory. Frankl wrote about ultimate meanings in life, which he described as a spiritual meaning directed by God (Frankl, 2006). Current research has continued to investigate these related constructs (Bronk, 2014; Chen et al., 2020; Damon and Malin, 2020; Upenieks & Schiemann, 2022). Specifically, current research has found positive correlations between life purpose and religious service attendance (Chen et al., 2020), religious purpose types (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020), and religiosity and flourishing (Upenieks & Schiemann, 2022). Research on these correlations continues, and new models and theories attempting to explain the nuanced relationship between these constructs are emerging (Boylan et al., 2023; Dobrow et al., 2023; King et al., 2023).

Thus, the relationship between life purpose and religion is clear. Current research provides evidence for the connection between these constructs and numerous positive outcomes (Boylan et al., 2023; Upenieks & Schieman, 2022). However, further research is needed to understand the nuanced relationship and potential causal inferences more clearly between purpose in life and these associated positive outcomes.

Emerging Adulthood

Erikson first proposed the idea that the search for purpose begins in childhood and continues through adolescence, developing from exploration to commitment as an individual develops their sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). Current research provides evidence for this developmental process and suggests that purpose development continues through emerging adulthood (Hill & Burrow, 2012). Indeed, emerging adulthood is now viewed as a central period for purpose development (Hill et al., 2019).

Though further study is needed, researchers hypothesize that the development of specific cognitive abilities such as prospection and underlying developmental capacities developed during this time of life are related to the emergence of seeking purpose in life (Bronk & Mitchell, 2022). From an Eriksonian view, the development of life purpose is related to identity development (Erikson, 1968; Bronk et al., 2009; Hill & Burrow, 2012) and the development of morality (Han, 2021). Developing life goals helps to inform identity and vice versa (Bronk, 2014; Hill & Burrow, 2012). While Erickson purported that identity and purpose commitment occur at late adolescence, modern developmentalists suggest these life tasks continue into a new stage termed emerging adulthood (Anghel et al., 2021; Arnett, 2000; Eriksson et al., 2020) which now continues to age 30 (Damon & Malin, 2020; Malin, 2023). Thus, emerging adulthood continuing to age 30 is the essential stage for studying the development of this construct.

Liberal Arts Experiences as Antecedents to Purpose Development

The research on potential antecedents to purpose has led to the development of interventions aimed at increasing purpose among youth (Marangas et al., 2024; Mendonca et al., 2023; Ribiero, 2023; Riches et al., 2020; Ruini et al., 2023).

Theoretically, many potential interventions may increase a sense of life purpose (Malin, 2023). Interestingly, most of these experiences are typical of college student life, especially in the liberal arts (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023).

For example, the following experiences provided by a liberal arts education have been positively associated with increased purpose in life: exposure to diverse others (Malin, 2023; Reis et al., 2022), mentoring, advising, and receiving informative feedback (Malin, 2023; Gong et al., 2020), service to others (Reis et al., 2022) religion and spirituality (Campanario et al., 2022; Dobrow et al., 2023), social supports (Damon & Colby, 2022; Gong et al., 2020), service learning (Reis et al., 2022), involvement in deep discussions and perspective taking (Malin, 2023), future planning (Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2022), and church attendance and closeness with God (Upenieks, 2022). Additionally, the following are correlated with life purpose, though not intentionally part of a liberal arts curriculum: practicing gratitude (Bronk et al., 2019a), increased morality (Han, 2021), and having stable parental relationships (Hill et al., 2019). Thus, future research can focus on many potential intervention techniques to increase an individual's search for or identification of life purpose. However, whether these relationships are causal is yet to be determined as some constructs are inherently easier to manipulate than others.

Additionally, many of the proposed antecedents to purpose are supported Biblically and were exhibited by Jesus (*New International Version*, 2011). These include gratitude (Colossians 4:6), exposure to and acceptance of others (James 2:1-4; Acts 10:34-35), and mentorship (Titus 2:3-5; Proverbs 27:17).

Barriers to Purpose

Several recent studies have analyzed potential barriers to purpose (Burrow et al., 2021; Bronk et al., 2019b; Liang et al., 2017). For example, low SES status and marginalization have been suggested as potential barriers to living a life of purpose (Ryff & Kim, 2020). However, research conducted by Burrow et al., (2021) revealed positive outcomes were associated with an increased sense of purpose among these lower SES populations. Further, study participants reported that sense of purpose in life served as a motivator in life despite their experiences living in poverty. Similar results have been found in other studies of marginalized and impoverished individuals (Bronk et al., 2019; Echeverria et al., 2021; Liang et al; 2017; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2023).

Work, especially for blue-collar workers, has also been examined as a potential barrier to living a life of purpose (Yemiscigil et al., 2021). Indeed, this has been evidenced in theological arguments since the Lutheran and Calvinist views of work and vocation first emerged (Androne, 2020; Calvin & Van Andel, 2004; Luther et al., 1915). This argument stemmed from the divergent belief regarding whether vocation and work can simultaneously fulfill God's calling in an individual's life (Androne, 2020). Current research suggests that individuals are likely to choose work which is related to their purpose in life (Lewis, 2020; Yemiscigil et al., 2021) and that purpose in life is correlated with decreased work-life tension (Sutin et al., 2023b). Thus, if viewed as the same entity, individuals not in purposeful job roles may see life as less purposeful (Yemiscigil et al., 2021). Whereas, when viewed separately, work may not be viewed as the only outlet for living a life of purpose. Accordingly, work may emerge as a barrier for those who are not able to pursue vocation and purpose through employment (Bronk, 2014; Yemiscigil et al., 2021). Thus, it is possible that inaccessibility to college and the liberal arts may also

serve as a barrier to pursuing a life of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Ryff & Kim, 2020). This is exemplified in the results of research by Yemiscigil et al (2021), which found that when retirement resulted in an increased purpose in life, this increased purpose was associated with 36% reduced likelihood of having graduated from college and a 44% reduced likelihood of satisfaction with jobs before retirement. Based on the implications noted by the Yemiscigil et al (2021) study, more job options and flexibility for college graduates may provide more access to purposeful work

Key researchers in the field have pointed to the inaccessibility of higher education as a potential barrier to purpose development (Ryff & Kim, 2020). Traditionally, a liberal arts education has been viewed as a promoter of greater purpose in life (Deresiewicz, 2014) and recent research supports this view (Anghel 2021; Colby, et al., 2022; Colby et al., 2023b; Malin, 2023; Ryff, 2023) However, questions regarding the truth of this concept have emerged (Burrow, 2023; Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023). Nonetheless, if liberal arts education is promotive of purpose, it could at once be an antecedent for some and a barrier for others (Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022; Ryff & Kim, 2020). There is some support for this belief in research that has found associations between level of education and awareness of purpose (Mei et al., 2020). However, other research has found no correlation between the two (Sumner, 2016). Thus, further research in this area of purpose study is needed (Ryff, 2023; Ryff & Kim, 2020).

Further complicating this point, the experiences within a liberal art setting which are potential antecedents of purpose are not isolated to higher education and may be experienced by emerging adults who do not pursue higher education or go to a liberal arts college or university (Malin, 2023). However, there is no research exploring these

experiences among emerging adults not enrolled in a liberal arts institution. Finally, there is limited research comparing purpose development among and between emerging adults who have graduated from a liberal arts college or university and those who have not graduated from a liberal arts college or university.

Problem Statement

The positive outcomes associated with searching for or identifying a life purpose during emerging adulthood are clear (Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Ryff, & Kim, 2020). However, research demonstrating these associated positive outcomes has primarily been conducted among adolescents and emerging adults within academic settings (Colby et al., 2023a, Lo & Ip, 2022; Ratner et al., 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023). Further, though it is assumed that a liberal arts education is promotive of purpose development, there is scant research comparing life purposes between emerging adults who have completed a liberal arts education with those who have not completed a liberal arts education (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023).

Most potential precursors associated with searching for or identifying purpose are experiences typical of college such as exposure to diverse others, mentoring, advising, receiving informative feedback, involvement in deep discussions, and perspective-taking (Malin, 2023; Gong et al., 2020; Reis et al., 2022). However, many late adolescents and emerging adults do not pursue traditional higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). If the college experience is indeed promotive of an increased sense of purpose, there may be a difference between purpose development and dimensions observed between emerging adults who graduate from a liberal arts college or

university setting and those who do not graduate from a traditional liberal arts college or university (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023). Indeed, Malin (2023) has recently described this gap in the research and pointed to the need for further research focusing on this aspect of research on life purpose.

Additionally, many emerging adults who are not pursuing higher education would be assumed to be working full-time (Cohen-Scali et al., 2022). As seen in research regarding the effects of retirement on life purpose, different types of work either contribute to or present a barrier to pursuing life purpose (Bronk, 2014; Cohen-Scali et al., 2022; Weston, et al., 2021a). Though purpose and occupational goals are different, they can and often do overlap (Yuliawati et al., 2022). However, work could emerge as a barrier to pursuing life's purpose for many, especially those of lower socioeconomic status (Bronk et al., 2009; Burrow et al., 2021; Cohen-Scali et al., 2022; Yemiscigil et al., 2021). For example, according to Yemiscigil et al. (2021) a full-time job unrelated to one's purpose in life may prevent someone from being able to pursue their true purpose. Additionally, repetitive and monotonous work such as production work is negatively correlated with purpose and meaning (Soren & Ryff, 2023). However, research examining the relationship between work and purpose in life is limited (Bronk et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2021). Thus, it is not yet known how working might affect the life purpose of emerging and young adults.

Finally, as researchers have identified life purpose as multidimensional, it is essential for future research to include measures of the various dimensions of purpose to gain a better understanding of how life purpose develops across emerging adulthood (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a). Future research, including

measures of each dimension, could reveal essential differences in purpose between these groups; and, whether correlations persist across the various stages of emerging adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a). For example, it is unknown whether the increase in purpose associated with college persists in the later stages of emerging adulthood (Kiang et al., 2020; Malin, 2023; Maranges et al., 2024).

Researchers in the field have begun to examine how purpose develops across emerging adulthood and whether it is tied to natural development, interventions, or other influences such as education or work (Anghel et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2023; Malin, 2023). Thus, this research study examines the relationships between dimensions of purpose across emerging adulthood and the similarities and differences in how life purpose develops between these groups.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative, correlational study is to examine the relationship between purpose in life and liberal arts educational experiences by comparing purpose dimensions among and between emerging adults who have completed a degree program at a liberal arts college or university and emerging adults who did not attend a liberal arts college or university. Dimensions of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose are assessed between and within these two groups across emerging adulthood from 20-30 years of age. Further, life experiences shown in prior research to be potential correlates, barriers, and predictors of life purpose are analyzed.

Research Question(s) and Hypotheses

RQ1: Do emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose?

Hypothesis 1(H₁): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose.

Null hypothesis One (H₀): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university do not differ in levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose

RQ 2: What is the relationship between age and levels of awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): There is a positive correlation between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis two (H₀₂): There is no relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 3: Does holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderate the relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderates the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis three (H₀₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university does not moderate the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 4: What is the relationship between the potential antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 4 (H₄): There are positive relationships between potential antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Four (H₀₄): There are no relationship between antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 5: What is the relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 5 (H₅): There is a positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Five (H₀₅): There is no relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 6: Is the positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university?

Hypothesis 6 (H₆): The relationship between low SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

Null hypothesis Six (H₀₆): The relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is not be mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The study conducted has assumptions, limitations and potential challenges. One assumption of the study is that participants were able and willing to answer questions truthfully and honestly (Wright, 2023). Assuming that participants have similar definitions of purpose, barriers, and antecedent experiences, comprehension and standardization is an additional assumption. Definitions and examples of experiences were provided to minimize the threat to internal validity posed by this assumption (Peytchev, et al., 2010). Prolific was used to collect data. Prolific is an online recruitment

platform for survey research which assists with online data collection for research using human subjects (Albert & Smilek, 2023; Douglas et al., 2023). Prolific connects participants to research studies and upon completion, participants receive modest compensation for participation (Albert & Smilek, 2023).

Additional limitations and potential threats to internal validity are inattention and the potential for non-human participants, otherwise known as bots (Albert & Smilek, 2023; Douglas et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022). However, compared with traditional pen-and-paper surveys, respondents tend to have better attention during completion of online surveys (Wright, 2023). Additionally, attention checks are built into the Prolific survey, as are screening tools to reduce non-human participants. In comparison with other survey platforms, Prolific is superior in managing these potential threats when compared with other similar platforms (Albert & Smilek, 2023; Douglas et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022).

Other limitations of the study include those related to methodology and generalizability. First, the study is correlational, not experimental. Thus, any relationships found between the variables do not suggest causation (Mohajan, 2020). Though the results may be informative, future studies will need to employ experimental methods to identify and determine variables that influence purpose. Further, generalizability is limited depending on the participants who complete the study. However, research suggests results using the Prolific platform have good external validity overall (Péer et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Additionally, these results may not be generalizable to emerging adults in the US who do not often use technology, as Prolific users represent individuals who are comfortable with and often using technology such as the Prolific platform (Wright, 2023). This is similar to traditional sampling bias with pen-and-paper,

mail-in, or telephone surveys and research suggests that this bias is no greater among online surveys than traditional survey methods (Kees et al., 2017). However, research has found Prolific to provide higher quality, nationally representative samples than other online research platforms (Newman et al., 2021). Further, results are not generalizable to emerging adults in other distinct sub-cultures or countries.

Methodologically, the cross-sectional design is another limitation of the study. Though this method allows for a better understanding of how a sense of purpose might develop across emerging adulthood, longitudinal research will be needed to understand how this construct develops across time. Finally, survey biases, including social desirability, response, and volunteer biases, are weaknesses of any survey-based study (Mohajan, 2020). Research shows that these threats can be reduced by reminding participants of such biases and asking them to answer truthfully (Hong & Chiu, 1991; Setiawati et al., 2024). Additionally, the validity for the measurement tool used in this study has been established through prior research (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a).

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

The study of purpose in life is rooted in and best understood through the theories of Frankl, Erikson, and Lerner's (1995) theory of positive youth development (Bronk, 2014; Erikson, 1968; Frankl, 2006; Lerner, 1995; Mariano & Going, 2011). Frankl, the founder of the study of meaning and purpose in life, laid the foundation for understanding the importance of finding a purpose in life to avoid existential crises (Frankl, 2006). He wrote extensively on how one finds a purpose in life and subsequent beneficial meaning (Frankl, 2006). Eriksonian theory is relevant to the study of sense of purpose as his

theory highlighted the importance of the adolescent period of identity development (Erikson, 1968). Research on sense of purpose has found that identifying life purpose develops in late adolescence and early adulthood, much like the sense of identity (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2014). Lerner's (1995) theory of positive youth development (PYD) reexamined the development of youth, urging a change from perspectives of deficit to perspectives of strengths and flourishing. When explaining his theory, Lerner (1995) pointed to the development of a sense of purpose as promotive of positive behavior change in the lives of adolescents, leading to meaningful lives with direction.

Relatedly, recent research addressing relevant cognitive developmental milestones and neurological development during emerging adulthood suggests this might be related to prospection and purpose development (Bronk et al., 2022; Riveros & Immordino-Yang, 2021). This new perspective examines how adolescent development, and cognitive abilities promote the development of construals such as sense of purpose, as well as how engaging in prospection might encourage brain and cognitive development (Bronk et al., 2022).

Finally, there are robust theological and biblical foundations for this study (Frankl, 2006; Messer, 2021; *New International Version*, 2011). Frankl referred to religion in connection with meaning and purpose in his early writings (Frankl, 2000) and later overtly referenced spirituality, God, and transcendence when describing ultimate meanings in life as "up to heaven" (Frankl, 2006, p. 147) a concept that he proposed remains a mystery until death (Frankl, 2006). This is supported biblically in 1 Corinthians 13: 11-12 which teaches Christians that true understanding of our lives will come at spiritual resurrection rather than during earthly life (*New International Version*, 2011).

Theologian Messer (2021) studied purpose from a Christian theological perspective regarding flourishing. He wrote about purpose as living out a calling from God. Similar to Frankl, he wrote about momentary purpose in life and ultimate purpose, which he termed ultimate and penultimate purposes. Biblical support for ultimate and penultimate purpose can be found in 1 Corinthians 15:58 where Christians are encouraged to work hard on earth with the knowledge that the Lord calls upon each of person to live specific purposes in addition to His ultimate purpose (*New International Version*, 2011).

Finally, the theoretical constructs around living purposeful lives connecting with others are supported both biblically and theologically as well. Biblically, God's children are called to answer the Lord's call in their individual lives (1 Corinthians 7:17). Further, they are called to love one another and help each other as Christians (Galatians 6:2). Recognizing life's purpose and living a life that is pleasing to the Lord (Ephesians 4:1) honors Him. As evidence of this, Dobrow et al. (2023) found that extrinsic meaning and purpose are related to eudemonic well-being while intrinsic goals are more strongly correlated to hedonic outcomes. This further supports the research findings connecting benefits of BTS purpose, which is reflective of God's call to love one another. Throughout the New Testament, references to God's calling on individual lives are situated within social constructs (*New International Version*, 2011, Ephesians 4:1 and Galatians 5:13). In these references God is calling individuals into fellowship with the Christian community and with the Lord Himself.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of definitions of terms that are used in this study.

Antecedents to Purpose – Antecedents to purpose is defined as “factors that predict purpose” (Nakamura et al., 2022, p. 2).

Altruistic Purpose – Altruistic purpose is defined as people’s aspirations to make a positive difference in society (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2021).

Awakening to Purpose – Awakening to purpose is defined as “people’s active engagement in the process of exploring their purpose in life” (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a, p. 1205).

Awareness of Purpose – Awareness of purpose is defined as “the subjective sense that one’s life has a purpose to fulfill and having the clarity about one’s purpose in life” (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a, p. 1205).

Barriers to Purpose – Barriers to purpose is defined as challenges restricting a person’s ability to pursue or adopt purpose (Lewis, 2020).

Emerging Adulthood – Emerging adulthood is defined as persons aged 18-30 who are “in transition between the dependency of childhood and the responsibilities and commitments of adulthood” (Anghel et al., 2021, p. 603).

Liberal Arts College or University – Liberal arts college or university is defined as an institution that has “academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, mathematics, and social and physical sciences as distinct from professional, vocational or technical subjects” (Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 472).

Life Purpose – Life purpose is defined as “a stable and generalizable 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).

Significance of the Study

The gap in research regarding purpose among non-college emerging adults is clear (Malin, 2023). This study begins to fill this gap by providing a novel study of life purpose across this developmental period within this group. There is no robust, recent research comparing life purpose between emerging adults with traditional, liberal arts college degrees and those without; nor is there significant research on potential antecedents of purpose (Burrow, 2023). This study intends to examine differences between these groups. If differences exist, further research will be needed to examine how, why, and for whom. This research encourages further study among and between these groups, which can lead to a better understanding of how a liberal arts education might impact purpose development, if these impacts persist over time, and if interventions could be developed to positively impact emerging adults who do not pursue traditional higher education.

Summary

In conclusion, though substantial research related to life purpose exists, many gaps remain. One gap, identified in current research, is the lack of information on the relationship between life purpose for those who have graduated from a traditional, liberal arts college or university and those who have not attended or graduated from a traditional liberal arts college or university. This study aims to examine this research gap.

This chapter has addressed the historical background of the study and relevant current research findings related to the constructs included. Additionally, this chapter described the problem statement, research questions, and hypotheses of the study. The assumptions of the study were described as well as the limitations of the study including threats to validity and attempts at reducing these threats. The theoretical foundations of

the study were included, as were the definitions and the significance. The next chapter will detail the literature review conducted in preparation for the study. The literature review chapter will include an explanation of the search strategy to identify relevant historical and current research, constructs, and biblical foundations of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature review includes the search strategy used in collecting the relevant research, an overview of the historical foundations, and a review of the current research on life purpose. I divide historical research by theorist, while separating the current research by topic. I provide definitions of purpose and related constructs, dimensions of purpose, positive outcomes associated with life purpose, purpose development during emerging adulthood, barriers and antecedents to life purpose, and religion and purpose. Finally, the Biblical foundations of the study are provided.

Description of Search Strategy

My literature search strategy included keyword searches in databases and reviewing books and articles for other pertinent references. I conducted biblical research by searching databases using keywords and web-based tools to find relevant scripture.

I used the following keywords in the literature search: life purpose, sense of purpose, sense of purpose in life, meaning in life, life meaning, purpose development, purpose and college, purpose in emerging adulthood, correlates of purpose, antecedents to purpose, meaning in emerging adulthood, correlates of meaning, purpose in the Bible, vocation, vocation and meaning, vocation and purpose, and vocation in the Bible. I searched these keywords in books and databases available through the Jerry Falwell Online Library search tool, including Ebsco Quick Search, ProQuest Central, Summon, Google, and Google Scholar. I discovered additional relevant research by reviewing the references listed in relevant sources. Then, I searched literature citing these references to

identify other relevant literature. I did not use any delimitations in the discovery of additional research.

I conducted Biblical research using the Jerry Falwell Online Library search tool “search all” to identify relevant articles and books, searching through Ebsco Quick Search, ProQuest Central, Summon, Google, Google Scholar, and King James Bible Online. The key words I searched for included life purpose, sense of purpose, sense of purpose in life, meaning in life, life meaning, vocation, vocation and meaning, vocation and purpose. I conducted a review of references and cited literature for research articles and relevant texts. I did not use any delimitations in the discovery of additional research.

Review of Literature

Foundational researchers such as Erikson, Seligman, and Ryff studied concepts related to life purpose. However, Viktor Frankl is credited with introducing the study of purpose and meaning. The evolution of this concept can be traced through philosophical perspectives and alternative definitions. Different dimensions of purpose in life developed as research began to focus on life purpose as well as antecedents and barriers to finding purpose in life. While various terms have been used interchangeably in the literature, for the purposes of this study, purpose in life was utilized as the overarching term encompassing meaning, purpose, and meaning in life.

History and Background

The study of meaning and life purpose can be found throughout psychology’s history from differing perspectives and theories. Existentialist Frankl (2006) introduced the importance and benefits of searching for meaning in life. Psychoanalyst, Erikson (1968) researched the centrality of meaning for optimal development. Maddi (1970)

approached the topic from a personality viewpoint while Klinger (1977), examined both personality and social cognitive viewpoints. Ryff (1989) viewed the topic from a social-developmental psychology viewpoint, and Seligman (1998) addressed the perspective of positive psychology. While each theory is unique, essential similarities and differences exist and will be discussed in the following sections.

Frankl: An Existential View of Life Purpose

Viktor Frankl (2006) first introduced the modern concept of life purpose with his seminal book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl's work was developed and honed through his experiences during World War II as a prisoner in four concentration camps over three years. His writings also introduced logotherapy, a therapeutic method for guiding clients to discover life's meaning, avoid existential dread, and live purposeful lives.

Frankl's writings proposed a different view of psychology and well-being at a time when the Freudian view was widely accepted. Rather than viewing the search for meaning in life as a sign of neurosis, Frankl stated that this search is an integral part of being human and a primary motivation for life (Frankl, 2000). Frankl proposed that meaning in life is central to human strength and flourishing, no matter the external circumstances. This belief may have contributed to his survival in the concentration camps and the avoidance of what he termed the existential vacuum.

Frankl also contended that finding meaning in life is not solely for those in dire circumstances but is equally essential for those searching for happiness in a seemingly mundane and meaningless existence (Frankl, 2006). Indeed, Frankl compared suffering to gas in that gas fills a void no matter how large. Likewise, individual suffering, no matter

the volume, cannot be compared between people because it overtakes the person regardless. Further, Frankl explained that no human needs to avoid all suffering or to have a tensionless life. Instead, one needs to find meaning in the suffering. Frankl coined the term “will to meaning” (Frankl, 2000, p. 139) to explain the basic, and solely human need to find meaning in life and in difficult circumstances. As such, he proposed three primary experiences that lead to meaning in life: “doing a deed or creating a work,” “experiencing something or encountering someone,” or “facing a fate we cannot change...growing beyond ourselves...by changing ourselves” (Frankl, 2000, p. 141-142).

Frankl wrote many other books describing his existential theory and the resulting therapeutic approach, logotherapy, which focuses on assisting clients as they search for meaning in life. He later wrote of research focused on examining his theory empirically and investigating positive outcomes associated with finding meaning in life. Indeed, his theories not only spurred research in the field of meaning and purpose but also the first measurement tools for assessing one’s meaning and purpose in life, the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Frankl, 2006). Using this measurement tool, researchers provided empirical support for Frankl’s theory of the will to meaning (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Since then, over fifteen measures of meaning and purpose have been developed, and countless research studies have been published demonstrating the associated positive outcomes of having a meaning or purpose in life (Malin, 2023).

Erikson: A Psychoanalytic View of Life Purpose

Though Frankl is widely known for introducing the study of meaning and purpose (Damon et al., 2003), other important historical figures also promoted this field of

research. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Erik Erikson pointed to the importance of living a life of meaning and purpose as well (Erikson, 1968). This can be seen through each step of his theoretical model, beginning with the successful resolution of the initiative versus guilt stage resulting in development of a sense of purpose. In fact, Erikson believed purpose was integral to the successful resolution of each stage of psychosocial development from identity development in adolescence and early adulthood to generativity via a commitment to future generations (Erikson, 1968).

Maddi: A Personality View of Life Purpose

Salvatore Maddi (1970) developed a personality-based theory of the search for meaning. In his paper, he argued that the search for meaning relies on the core personality, which is inherent among all persons. Thus, Maddi asserted that the search for meaning is compelled by human nature. He posited that individuals either develop an independent, internal basis of meaning and purpose in life or an external, conformity-based sense of meaning. Individuals who find meaning independently, from within, experience control and well-being. Alternatively, individuals who conform to a meaning stemming from societal expectations feel no choice in their meaning. Conformity may result in a loss of meaning, especially in the face of stress. This combination of conformity-based meaning and stress leads to what he termed “existential sickness,” displayed by nihilism, crusadism, or a vegetative state, which further lead to what he termed “psychological death” (Maddi, 1970, p. 141).

Klinger: A Cognitive-Behavioral View of Purpose and Meaning

Klinger (1977) approached purpose in life from a personality viewpoint, focusing more heavily on the social cognitive effects of meaning on motivation and behavior.

Klinger cited the importance of having meaning in life and the threat of the existential void when life is meaningless. His approach focused less on theory and more on research supporting these ideas and the various behaviors that can result from a life devoid of meaning.

Ryff: Keys to Psychological Well-Being

After years of researching human development, personality, and social psychology, Ryff (1989) began exploring psychological well-being from a social-developmental perspective. She developed the Scales of Well-Being (SWB), which addressed aspects of research on human functioning, such as engaging in life purposefully, self-knowledge, and realizing personal strengths and abilities (Ryff, 2023). According to Ryff (2023), psychological well-being was comprised of six core dimensions, theoretically founded in theories of historical psychological figures from various perspectives including psychoanalytic and humanistic. Ryff's six dimensions of well-being includes purpose in life. In fact, one subscale in the SWB measures purpose in life (PIL) (Ryff, 2023). Ryff's theory, scales, and PIL Subscale have been widely used in current life-purpose research (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2022; Ratner et al., 2021b).

Seligman: A Positive Psychology View of Life Purpose

Finally, though positive psychology departs from existentialism and psychoanalytic theories by focusing largely on human strengths and flourishing rather than neurosis and existential void (Gillham & Seligman, 1999), the emergence of this field furthered interest in the study of meaning and purpose. Seligman (1998), the then-president of the American Psychological Association charged his fellow psychologists to embrace the study of human well-being and potential. This approach contrasted with the

traditional view of mental health which focused on the dysfunctions of human behavior (Gillham & Seligman, 1999). His charge resulted in a new way of viewing the study of psychology and, thus, resulted in a surge of new research addressing constructs relevant to human flourishing. Along with this new wave of research, the study of meaning and purpose experienced a revival (Burrow et al., 2021). Seligman wrote of the importance of meaning in life to authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002). He believed that an essential part of living a happy life is relying on an individual's strengths which promote positive aspects of society, including knowledge, goodness, and power (Seligman, 2002).

Conclusion to Historical Foundations

Despite approaching the topic of life purpose from different perspectives, the previous authors provide similar views across several key aspects. First, seeking and finding meaning and purpose in life is valuable (Erikson, 1968; Frankl, 2000; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Ryff, 1989; Ryff, 2023; Seligman, 1998). Second, while many individuals find meaning, a significant enough percentage do not and, thus, face negative consequences (Erikson, 1968; Klinger, 1977; Madi, 1970; Seligman, 1998). Finally, the search for meaning is inherent to the human experience (Erikson, 1968; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Seligman, 1998). Individually, these authors formed the historical foundation of the research on PIL, developed theoretical approaches, and created assessments to measure their individual concepts regarding PIL (Bronk et al., 2023; Malin, 2023).

Current Research

Current research on life purpose has expanded upon the theories and research from the historical foundations (Malin, 2023). However, current research has primarily

focused on developing appropriate operational definitions of purpose in life and differentiating this construct from similar, often overlapping ones. This has resulted in a variety of scales and instruments to aid in future research (Bronk et al., 2018; Hudig, 2020; Malin, 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). Further, current research has empirically investigated the associated positive outcomes of living a life of purpose (Bronk et al., 2020; Hielscher et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Ratner et al., 2023; Shiba et al., 2022). Finally, researchers are investigating the potential antecedents to, barriers from, correlates of, and possible interventions to increase life purpose, especially among emerging adults (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2019a; Gong et al., 2020; Lo, 2022; Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund & Hill, 2018). A primary focus of this research is on experiences salient to a liberal arts education (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022b). However, researchers are beginning to question if the current curriculum in liberal arts settings continues to be promotive of purpose development (Damon & Colby, 2022; Deresiewicz, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Sullivan, 2016). If so, issues remain regarding equity and access to this purpose-relevant experience (Ryff, 2023).

Defining and Differentiating Life Purpose

No single, agreed-upon definition of purpose was established in the historical research. However, an operational definition is necessary for research to move from theoretical to applied, and to move the research forward with time (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Bronk et al., 2023). Since the early 2000s researchers have focused on establishing an operational definition of life purpose and on differentiating purpose from similar, overlapping constructs such as meaning, goal-directedness, and vocation. Relatedly,

several definitions have been proposed including those with terms such as meaning (Ryff, 1989), life-aim, and goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009, p. 242).

Many authors, including those of the foundational research, refer to meaning and purpose interchangeably (Frankl, 2006; Ryff, 1989). However, current researchers have differentiated the two (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Bronk & Damon, 2022). Some have conceptualized meaning as a part of or interchangeable with purpose, while others have conceptualized purpose as a dimension of meaning (Baumeister, 1991; Martela & Steger, 2023). Still others point to meaning and purpose as bidirectionally associated (Ryff 1989; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). From each perspective, the two constructs are differentiated, while recognizing their overlapping nature (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a). There is widespread agreement on the distinction between meaning and purpose in that, identifying a life purpose leads to finding larger meaning in life (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2022; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). However, there are additional aspects of purpose that further delineate it as a construct separate from meaning including a prosocial contribution to the world “beyond-the-self” (BTS) (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023), and a connection to an overarching life goal (Ryff, 1989).

Life goals and purpose overlap; however, associations with overarching and meaningful life goals are unique to the purpose construct (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Ryff, 1989). Importantly, a delineation of goal-directedness is not sufficient for defining purpose, as a goal with no great significance is not indicative of a greater purpose (Damon et al., 2003). Thus, goals and purpose are also separate, yet overlapping constructs. Current researchers also include an ethical and moral aspect of the definition of purpose, particularly identifying purpose from goals or aims by the inclusion of a

benefit to the world apart from the individual (Damon et al., 2003; Bronk & Damon, 2022).

Definitions of purpose have varied across time and theorists. However, most definitions include aspects of meaning, goal-relatedness, and commitment (Bronk, 2014). Additionally, many researchers and theorists, including Frankl with his focus on noetic purpose, point to a prosocial aspect of purpose as well (Damon et al., 2003; Bronk, 2014). The most broadly adopted definition of life purpose among current researchers includes each of these dimensions (Bronk, 2014). This definition, proposed by researchers at Stanford University defines purpose as “a stable and generalizable 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). This definition encompasses the goal-relevant aspect of purpose and the prosocial aspect important to many researchers today. More recently, Damon & Colby (2022) revised the definition to include the aspect of commitment, which differentiates purpose from meaningful actions that are not intentional. This also differentiates purpose from other meaningful short-term goals or brief efforts towards accomplishment in that it requires the commitment to be stable and continuing across a period. Further, this definition highlights the importance of purpose being meaningful to the individual. Thus, purpose cannot be imposed upon someone or assigned. Finally, this definition requires that a purpose be beneficial to the world beyond the purposeful individual, whether benefitting others, society, or a domain important to the individual such as art or literature. This dimension of purpose is referred to as “beyond-the-self” (BTS) purpose across researchers (Damon & Colby, 2022, p. 187). Importantly, this BTS dimension further delineates purpose from meaning and is

associated with increased benefits compared with other dimensions or types of purpose (Bronk & Finch, 2010).

The Damon and Colby (2022) definition of purpose aligns with the general understanding of the construct held by adolescents and adults in the public (Anghel et al., 2021; Ratner et al., 2021a). For example, Ratner et al. (2021a) used content analysis of prompted writing samples on either purpose, meaning, or a control topic to examine adolescent and young adult conceptions of purpose. The results support the validity of this definition. This study provided support for differentiating meaning from purpose, as content analysis revealed differences in descriptions of the two. Further, the analysis revealed adolescents and emerging adults have similar views of purpose (Ratner et al., 2021a).

Thus, though a single definition has not been adopted by all current researchers in the field, there is wide agreement regarding four important aspects of purpose: commitment, goal-relatedness, prosocial purpose, and meaning (Damon et al., 2003; Damon & Colby, 2022; Bronk, 2014). Current researchers have established purpose as a different, though often overlapping, construct from meaning, life satisfaction, goals, and vocation (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a). Finally, recent research has supported the current definition of purpose by demonstrating alignment with the average lay-person's conception of the construct and participants' intended meaning when discussing life purpose (Anghel et al., 2021; Bronk et al., 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a).

Dimensions, Orientations, Profiles, and Types of Purpose

Historically, life purpose was viewed as a unidimensional or binary construct with theorists and researchers describing purpose in terms of high and low levels or presence and absence of purpose (Kashdan et al., 2023). Prior to the positive psychology movement, purpose deficit and associated psychological impairments were the focus of research (Bronk, 2014). Thus, historical research focused primarily on levels and absence of purpose. In contrast, current research has focused on the development of purpose, revealing that purpose is multidimensional and complex, and has extended understanding beyond a binary view (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022b). Current research explores varying dimensions or levels of purpose and various orientations of purpose, typically deemed intrinsic and extrinsic, which together create individual purpose profiles (Kuusisto et al., 2023; Wilson & Hill, 2023). Varying purpose types have also begun to be studied more recently (Bronk, 2014; Han & Dawson, 2021; Wilson & Hill, 2023). Additionally, current research explores how purpose develops across ages (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023). Results have revealed that life purpose is multidimensional (Malin, 2023), non-linear (Pfund & Lewis, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022b), and dynamic and ongoing (Ryff, 2023).

Crumbaugh (1977) developed the first purpose measure incorporating a measure of seeking purpose as opposed to assessing level of purpose in a binary way alone, to compliment the previously developed Purpose in Life Test (PIL). The development of this tool, the Seeking of Noetic Goals Test (SONG) marked a change in perspective among researchers regarding the dimensions of purpose (Bronk, 2014). The SONG was initially created as a measure for use with individuals lacking purpose, with a predicted inverse relationship between the two variables (Crumbaugh, 1977). Later research

revealed that when used with adolescents, scores on each variable can be simultaneously high (Bronk et al., 2009). Thus, seeking purpose and existing levels of purpose emerged as two distinct variables often resulting in different measures of each within the same participant (Steger & Kashdan, 2007). A singular tool to assess both current presence and the search for meaning, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MILQ) was later developed (Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Work with the MILQ provided further evidence that adolescents and emerging adults often score high on measures of current presence of purpose and seeking purpose simultaneously (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Steger & Kashdan, 2007). Importantly, associated outcomes of searching for purpose differ between developmental age groups. For example, research suggests that searching for purpose is correlated with positive outcomes during adolescence and emerging adulthood and negative outcomes for older adults (Bronk et al., 2009). Thus, purpose is multidimensional, differing from solely a presence or absence of purpose (Bronk, 2014).

In addition to exploring different dimensions of purpose development, researchers aim to understand the different orientations and domains of life purpose. Current research examining lifegoals and aims suggests that purpose-related goals can be intrinsically and extrinsically focused and are at times domain specific such as career-focused, family-focused, or religiously focused (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022b). A variety of purpose orientations have been cited in recent literature; however, most of the recent research divides purpose into a version of four orientations: Self-focused (intrinsic), other-focus (extrinsic or BTS), self-and-other focused, and drifting or non-existent (Kuusisto et al., 2023). For example, Bronk & Finch (2010) surveyed adolescents about life purpose then used cluster analysis to identify

purpose dimensions. Four primary purpose types emerged: no purpose, self-focused purpose, other-focused purpose, self-and-other focused.

Bronk et al. (2018) also researched types of purpose among adolescents. Specifically, they created the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS), a survey for use with adolescents. This tool was designed to measure three dimensions of purpose: goal-related purpose, purpose with personal meaning, and purpose with a "beyond-the-self" orientation. Extending this research theme, Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2020a) developed a measure categorizing purpose into three dimensions. The dimensions reflect the presence of purpose and additional domain-specific dimensions to organize purpose types. Using this measure, levels of purpose dimensions are measured in terms of awakening to purpose or awareness of purpose. Purpose orientations are categorized in terms of other-focused, self-focused, and career-focused.

Malin (2023) and colleagues at the Stanford Center on Adolescence used a student-centered approach to understand purpose dimensions among emerging adults. Researchers collected surveys including open-ended questions to investigate college-student purpose orientations. Results were then analyzed using confirmatory-factor and latent-class analyses. Indicators of purpose and meaning, action toward purpose, and BTS purpose were used. Latent class analysis revealed five classes: self-oriented, high purpose, moderate purpose, dreaming purpose, and drifting purpose with low levels of purpose, action, and BTS indicators. Consistent with prior research, results support the multidimensional, multi-level view of purpose and the previously identified classifications of purpose.

Kuusisto et al. (2023) studied purpose dimensions and profiles among Finnish and Dutch college students. Using the MILQ, PIL, and the CPS, and an open-ended purpose question, students were assessed along the various dimensions and orientations of purpose. Analyses revealed four purpose profiles among the students: purposeful students, who were intentional and engaged in a purpose beyond themselves; intrinsically focused students who were intentional and engaged with an identified purpose that was self-oriented; dreamers, who scored high on measures of BTS purpose but low on intention and engagement; and disengaged students showing low levels on all dimensions and orientations. These results support previous research findings regarding orientations and dimensions of purpose while adding to the cross-cultural understanding of purpose profiles.

Importantly, the associated positive outcomes of purpose differ according to the dimension, with the BTS purpose dimension noted by many researchers as the most beneficial (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c). Some researchers theorize that this is due to the connection between purpose and subsequent meaning derived specifically from a purpose that is extrinsically focused and beneficial (Bronk, 2014). Thus, much of the current research focuses on BTS purpose and associated positive outcomes and uses definitions of purpose that intentionally include a BTS component as an aspect of purpose or a requirement of fully realized purpose among participants (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon & Malin, 2020; Kuusisto et al., 2023; Malin et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c).

An additional focus of recent research has also been exploring types or orientations of purpose. Though purpose can diffuse all areas of life and individuals may

hold multiple purposes, current researchers have begun to focus on distinct types of purpose apparent throughout the previous literature. For example, purpose can be focused on religion, family, occupation, and the arts (Bronk, 2014). Additional purpose orientations studied in current research include an activist purpose type (Wilson & Hill, 2023), political purpose (Han & Dawson, 2021), and civic purpose (Han & Dawson, 2021).

A final aspect of purpose in life explored in current research is the dynamically changing, non-linear nature of individual purposes (Colby et al., 2020; Damon & Malin, 2020; Malin, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Research depicts purpose as changing across the lifespan; beginning in adolescence and continuing to change throughout all stages of adulthood (Colby et al., 2020; Pfund & Lewis, 2020; Ryff, 2020).

According to Ryff (2020), purpose typically declines throughout life, though exceptions can occur. In contrast, Damon and Colby (2022) describe purpose as increasing during adolescence and emerging adulthood, dipping slightly during middle adulthood, peaking in middle adulthood, and declining during late adulthood. Pfund and Lewis (2020) describe a similar trajectory of purpose development across time.

The changing nature of purpose is associated with, though not dependent upon, a variety of environmental factors including family (Damon & Malin, 2020), SES and other economic influences (Damon & Malin, 2020), education (Malin, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2023), social connection (Damon & Malin, 2020; Kiang et al., 2020), work (Malin, 2020), and religion and spirituality (Upenieks & Schieman, 2022). As these factors change over time, it is theorized that the dimensions of purpose may as well.

Recent research provides specific depictions of the non-linear and dynamically changing purpose profile. For example, Ribeiro et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative investigation of purpose among Portuguese students, asking participants to describe their purpose in life and accompanying changes before, during, and after participation in a service-learning course. Results depicted purpose as dynamic and changing, as students' self-reported purpose in life changed after participation in the course.

Upenieks and Schieman (2022) explored religiosity as one potential driver of the fluid change in purpose during emerging adulthood. The longitudinal analysis (n=1,240) of closeness with God, religious service attendance, and purpose in life suggested that as religiosity changes, particularly with religious service attendance, associated changes in life purpose can also be seen. The correlated changes exemplify the fluid nature of purpose in life.

In conclusion, current research on purpose in life depicts purpose as multidimensional with variations in orientation and purpose type (Kuusisto et al., 2023; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022b). Additionally, because of recent research, purpose in life is viewed as dynamically changing across the lifespan and developing in a non-linear fashion (Damon & Colby, 2022; Pfund & Lewis, 2020; Ryff, 2020). Finally, though research has revealed associated positive outcomes with increased purpose in life, the BTS purpose orientation has emerged as particularly important in this regard (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon & Malin, 2020; Kuusisto et al., 2023; Malin et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c).

Correlates of Purpose

A variety of constructs and behaviors associated with purpose have been studied in recent years. The correlates studied represent a wide range of behaviors and experiences such as physical activity (Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021), COVID-19 vaccination status (Hill et al., 2024), religion (Upeneiks & Schieman, 2022), education (Boylan et al. 2022; Hill et al., 2023a; Ryff, 2023), social connection and relationships (Pfund et al., 2022a; Weston et al., 2021b) and mentor and family support (Damon & Colby, 2022; Gong et al., 2020). Other studies have correlated constructs of positive socio-emotional well-being with life purpose, including morality, self-esteem, humility, and compassion (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). Positive cognitive behaviors such as problem-solving have also been correlated with purpose, while negative behaviors such as avoidance and rumination have been negatively correlated with purpose (Lohani et al., 2023). However, the research examining these behaviors and experiences has been correlational. Therefore, based upon these studies it cannot be said that these are predicted of, leading to, or resultant of purpose in life.

Associated Positive Outcomes

Historical researchers theorized that having a sense of purpose in life is important to psychological well-being (Erikson, 1968; Frankl, 2000; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Ryff, 1989; Ryff, 2023; Seligman, 1998). Current research utilizing regression analyses, longitudinal methodologies, and occasionally experimental methods provide continued support for this theory (Kashdan et al., 2022). Research also connects purpose in life with a variety of associated positive outcomes from adolescence (Bronk et al., 2020; Hielscher et al., 2023; Ratner et al., 2023) through each stage of adulthood (Bundick et al., 2021; Damon & Colby, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2021). Of these, both psychological

(Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Ozdogan, 2021; Sutin et al., 2023a; Sutin et al., 2023b; Yager & Kay, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020) and physiological (Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Shiba et al., 2022) associated outcomes have been uncovered. As much of the research has involved adolescent and college student participants, a plethora of purpose outcomes related to academic success have been studied (Colby et al., 2023a, Lo & Ip, 2022; Ratner et al., 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022c; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023). However, the current state of research in the field remains largely correlational in methodology. Thus, questions remain regarding direction of change, causality, and effects of life purpose during these stages and in these contexts (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Kashdan et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023; Shiba et al., 2022).

In recent decades the primary focus of research on life purpose has been positive outcomes associated with an increased sense of purpose in life (Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Ryff, & Kim, 2020), and found in every developmental stage from adolescence through late-life (Boylan et al., 2022; Bronk et al., 2020; Bundick et al., 2021; Hill & Burrow, 2021; Shiba et al., 2022; Sutin et al., 2021; Sutin et al., 2023c). For example, according to Bronk et al. (2020), in adolescence increased sense of purpose is associated with hope, satisfaction with life, overall health, feelings of safety, and lower levels of depression. Importantly, this study compared these outcomes in youth from low and middle SES backgrounds, indicating that positive associations with increased life purpose exist regardless of SES. Similarly, Ratner et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between self-reported daily level of purposefulness and sense of well-being among adolescents completing a daily diary entry. Similarly, a meta-analysis of purpose-related interventions

for the treatment of anxiety and depression among adolescents conducted by Hielscher et al. (2023) found evidence for a moderate reduction in depression, and to a lesser degree anxiety, among youth participating in interventions aimed at increasing purpose.

Among emerging adults, recent research has correlated an increased sense of purpose with better sleep and positive affect across the following two days (McGowan et al., 2022). A positive association was also found between sense of purpose and parent-child relationship satisfaction and stability, and in these and other social relationships (Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund et al., 2022b). Similarly, an increased commitment to relationships is associated with increased life purpose, a trend that is stable across adulthood (Pfund et al., 2020). Further, increased life purpose has been associated with increased quality of romantic relationships and an increased rating of prospective partner quality (D'Ottone et al., 2023; Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund & Hill, 2022). Among community college students in China, Ozdogan (2021) found purpose in life moderated the relationship between loneliness and self-reported well-being. Finally, life purpose predicted fewer symptoms of gambling disorders and increased flourishing among university students (Zhang et al., 2020).

Among adults in middle adulthood through late adulthood, increased life purpose is associated with positive adaptation (Bundick et al., 2021) and greater integration of personal and work lives (Sutin et al., 2023b). Sense of purpose also appears to provide a buffer against mental illness, as indicated in a study of healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Echeverria et al., 2021). In later adulthood, increased sense of purpose has been correlated with healthier cognition during aging (Sutin et al., 2021), lower salivary inflammatory markers (Lee et al., 2023) reduced all-cause mortality

among older adults regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and SES (Shiba et al., 2021; Shiba et al., 2022), and reduced epigenetic age (Kim et al., 2023). Relatedly, Sutin et al. (2023c) found a negative correlation between purpose in life and inflammatory markers, and a positive correlation between markers of immunity, purpose in life, and cognition. Purpose in life was found to be positively correlated with cognition and overall health, via the moderators of immunity and inflammation.

Positive psychological outcomes across adulthood associated with increased sense of purpose in life include healthier eating habits and resulting lower waist circumference (Berkowitz et al., 2023) and other beneficial health behaviors and psychosocial outcomes (Kim et al., 2023) among older adults. Similarly, Sutin et al. (2022) found increases in physical activity with increased sense of purpose. Reduced allostatic load (Lewis & Hill, 2023), and lowered salivary markers of inflammation among older adults have been found in those with increased purpose in life (Lee et al., 2023). Finally, lowered inflammation and increased immunity, leading to increased episodic memory have also been correlated with increased life purpose (Sutin et al., 2023b).

Associated psychological outcomes across adulthood range from increased ability to cope with anxiety by broadening perspectives (Pfund et al., 2023), affect stability and increased emotional and stress-response homeostasis (Burrow et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2022), maintaining cognition over time (Sutin et al., 2021; Sutin et al., 2023b), and increases in levels of flourishing (Chen et al., 2022). Among college student participants, purpose was described as a motivational strength after experiencing adverse childhood experiences (Rose et al., 2023). Among Ukrainian university students during the

Ukrainian-Russian war, sense of purpose was positively correlated with grit and overall flourishing (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2023).

Further, current research has found negative correlations between life purpose and incidence of mental illness (Yager & Kay, 2023), specifically anxiety and depression (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Barcaccia et al., 2023; Hielscher et al., 2023), impulsive behavior and recent risky behaviors that cause harm to the self (Ratner et al., 2021b), risk of drug misuse (Kim et al., 2020), and loneliness (Hill et al., 2023a). Further negative correlations have been found between purpose and subjective stress levels, COVID-19 related anxiety, and hopelessness (Sutin et al., 2023a). Sutin et al. (2024) also found a relationship between stress and purpose in life. Researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 16 studies across different nations. When controlling for various demographic factors including age, race, education, and sex, a negative correlation was found between purpose in life and subjective stress levels.

Finally, as most of the purpose-related research has been conducted during adolescence and emerging adulthood, positive outcomes specific to academic settings have been explored. Positive correlations with purpose in an academic setting have been found for resilience (Colby et al., 2023a, Lo & Ip, 2022; Ratner et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (VanRoo et al., 2023), grit, resilience, and academic adjustment among college students across the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022b, VanRoo et al., 2023), self-regulation and problem solving (Lohani et al., 2023), and grades in high school and college (Lo & Ip, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022c). Additionally, life purpose is negatively correlated with amotivation (VanRoo et al., 2023) and academic

burnout (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). Life purpose has also been correlated with increased degree progress among Freshman (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020), and with reduced incidences of academic misconduct among students with a self-growth purpose orientation (Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022a).

Thus, the current research supports historical theorists' assertions that positive outcomes are associated with having a clear life purpose. Positive outcomes are associated with purpose throughout life, beginning with adolescence (Bronk et al., 2020; Bundick et al., 2021; Damon & Colby, 2022; Hielscher et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Ratner et al., 2023). Research suggests positive associations both psychological in nature (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Sutin et al., 2023b; Yager & Kay, 2023) and physiological (Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Shiba et al., 2022). Finally, positive correlates pertinent to success in academic settings have been a focus of recent research (Colby, et al., 2023a, Ratner et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023). Importantly, much of the current research associating purpose in life with positive outcomes is correlational, limiting empirical understanding of direction and causality. Though some research employed longitudinal and pre-test, post-test methodologies, supporting the view that purpose is promotive of these outcomes, further research is needed (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Shiba et al., 2022).

Purpose and Religion

Viktor Frankl (2000) elaborated upon the overlap of meaning in life and religion when explaining that life has potentially many meanings, with one ultimate meaning not understood while living unless at the very end of life. This ultimate meaning is a spiritual meaning, giving life a larger purpose and overall meaning. The study of religion and

spirituality as it relates to meaning and purpose continues in current research. Areas of current research include the associations of purpose in life with measures of religion and spirituality including religious service attendance (Chen et al., 2020), religious purpose types (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020), purpose in life as a mediator in the relationship between religion and spirituality, and mortality (Boylan et al., 2023), religiosity and flourishing (Upenieks & Schiemann, 2022), and religious context in Tweets about purpose (Bronk et al., 2023). Though nuances of these correlations are not yet understood, theories and models attempting to explain the relationship between religion and spirituality and life purpose have recently been proposed (Bronk, 2014; King et al., 2023).

Boylan et al. (2023) conducted longitudinal research using regression analysis to explore the relationship between aspects of religion and spirituality with all-cause mortality. Aspects analyzed included religious service attendance, identity, and coping. Further, the researchers explored social support and purpose in life as potential mediators of this relationship. Results showed a decreased risk of all-cause mortality with increased service attendance. The composite measure of religion and spirituality was also correlated with decreased mortality risk. Importantly, purpose in life and social support were found as mediators of these relationships. Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) assessed longitudinal data from three cohorts: young, middle, and older adult participants. Regression analyses revealed religious service attendance was positively correlated with purpose in life. This relationship remained when controlling for prior purpose in life, SES, and health at baseline.

Upeneiks & Schieman (2022) studied correlations between religious stability over life and subsequent flourishing, including purpose in life. Results revealed that higher religiosity across life was associated with better overall profiles of flourishing.

Additionally, Bronk et al. (2023) analyzed 2,000 Tweets referencing purpose in life. Of the 527 that mentioned a particular source of purpose, 36% were concerning religion and spirituality. Significantly, most of these Tweets pointed to religion and spirituality as a source of purpose and wrote about these in a positive tone.

Regarding the relationship between these constructs, Damon and Malin (2020) reviewed decades of international research on life purpose, religion and spirituality among adolescents. Interestingly, this research points to a more complex relationship between these constructs, as far fewer youth report religion and spirituality as related to their life purpose than adults; as little as 15%. These findings were consistent across countries where youth are more likely to associate with a religion such as Brazil and Finland. Thus, though a clear connection between religion and spirituality and purpose in life has been established by research across ages, more research is needed regarding when and how this relationship occurs.

While the nuanced relationship and direction of change between these constructs is not fully understood, several theories and models have begun to emerge. For example, Bronk (2014) discussed the varied aspects of religious purpose, elaborating on potential avenues of religion fostering or framing purpose via answering existential questions, encouraging transcendence via a focus on relationship with God, teaching values related to serving others thereby encouraging BTS purposes, and finally, by anchoring life in a framework of meaning and purpose via living according to God's will. Similarly, King et

al. (2023) propose that religion and spirituality, and the supportive mentoring and other relationships experienced in this realm, support youth in developing meaning and central identities of morality, which lead to greater purpose development and desire to contribute to the world beyond themselves.

The relationship between religion and spirituality and purpose is clear, and both historical and current researchers have connected the constructs with one another and with positive outcomes. Importantly, these correlations persist when controlling for various demographic factors and are seen internationally. However, further research, based upon proposed theory and models is needed to better understand the intricate relationship between them.

Purpose and Emerging Adulthood

The development of purpose is best studied beginning with adolescence and continuing through emerging adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). Beginning with Erikson (1968), theorists have described the emergence of purpose during childhood, with a commitment developing during adolescence, highlighting its corresponding development with identity. However, recently researchers have focused on emerging adulthood as an important stage of purpose development, especially as the stage of emerging adulthood becomes more differentiated from that of adolescence and established and middle adulthoods (Mehta & Arnett, 2023; Reifman & Niehuis, 2022). Concurrently, new neuroscientific understandings of cognitive development support this trend as important cognitive abilities such as prospection and self-awareness continue to develop into emerging adulthood (Bronk & Mithcell, 2022).

Purpose exploration begins in earnest during adolescence as individuals begin to think of themselves as members of a larger societal group and explore their identities (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). Therefore, it is developmentally appropriate to begin the study of purpose development currently. Erikson is known for describing adolescence as a time of identity exploration and a time for exploring potential purposes (Erikson, 1968). Indeed, current research finds that identity commitment and purpose commitment are positively correlated, yet distinct constructs (Bronk, 2014; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Further, there is evidence that identity crises might be reduced by finding and committing to a life purpose and that a commitment to purpose is strengthened by a well-formed identity (Bronk, 2014; Hill & Burrow, 2012). However, purpose is often not identified or committed to during adolescence, leaving this process to continue into and throughout emerging adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). While some purpose exemplars commit to a purpose during adolescence, most people continue this search into adulthood (Bronk, 2014). This is demonstrated by statistics showing around 20% of adolescents have a sense of purpose as compared to 30% of emerging adults (Bronk, 2014). This is further evidenced by the preponderance of newer purpose research among emerging adults rather than adolescents.

While historically purpose was believed to develop during adolescence (Erikson, 1968), the view of developmental stages has changed during the modern era, with suggestions of new or modified definitions of developmental stages, such as extending the period between adolescence and traditional adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Anghel et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2023; Reifman & Niehuis, 2022). Modern developmentalists suggest

that emerging adulthood be studied as a unique stage (Anghel et al., 2021; Arnett, 2000), in addition to adding a stage of established adulthood prior to middle adulthood (Mehta et al., 2023; Reifman & Niehuis, 2022). Indeed, recent research on identity development suggests that identity commitment is also extending into the 30's (Eriksson et al., 2020). Similarly, purpose development research has continually provided evidence that purpose identification and commitment continue to develop across emerging adulthood, often becoming more solidified around the age of 30 (Damon & Malin, 2020; Malin, 2023). Thus, it is important that research on the development of purpose include the wide-range of emerging adulthood, extending participant ranges to at least the 30-year mark.

Finally, there is new understanding of the cognitive foundations of developing purpose and identity supporting the notion that purpose development should be studied across emerging adulthood (Bronk & Mitchell, 2022). Specifically, the ability to engage in prospection, an important part of exploring identity and purpose, is associated with activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Zhang et al., 2023). Importantly, connectivity between the hippocampus and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which results in increased scores on tests of future planning and problem-solving, continues to develop into adulthood (Calabro et al., 2020). Therefore, there is neurological evidence for the continued development of purpose through emerging adulthood and thus, the importance of studying this process through this stage.

Potential Antecedents of Purpose

Of the variables correlated with purpose in life, researchers suspect several to be predictive of, or potential antecedents to its development. Much of the research on these antecedents focuses on adolescence and early emerging adulthood, particularly on

experiences in educational setting (Colby et al., 2022; Han et al., 2021; Han & Dawson, 2021; Malin, 2023). However, insights can be gleaned from correlational and longitudinal studies examining experiences and demographic factors among older adults as well (Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolska, 2022).

General constructs and experiences studied as potential antecedents to purpose, without limitation to stage of development, include the previous parent-child interaction (Hill et al., 2019), religiosity (Chen et al., 2020; Coelho et al., 2023; Upeneiks & Schieman (2022), expressing gratitude (Czyżowska & Gurba, 2022; Maranges et al., 2024), meaningful personal relationships (Riveros et al., 2023), and social support and interactions (Cai & Lian, 2022; Coelho et al., 2023; Pfund et al., 2022b).

Further, experiences specific but not limited to educational settings which are potential antecedents to purpose development include: exposure to and collaboration with people of diverse backgrounds (Malin, 2023), moral reasoning (Colby et al., 2022; Han et al., 2021; Han & Dawson, 2021; Kuusisto et al., 2023; Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolska, 2022), deeply reflecting on purpose (Malin, 2023; Riches et al., 2020), service to others (Malin, 2023; Nakamura et al., 2022; Ribiero, 2023), life planning (Yuliawati & Ardyan, 2022), and mentorship (Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022; Gong et al., 2020; King et al., 2023; Malin, 2023; Wilson & Hill, 2023). These experiences and constructs have recently been studied within college settings, especially within liberal arts colleges and universities as the development of moral and civically engaged citizens has historically been a focus of these institutions (Anghel et al., 2021; Colby, et al., 2022; Malin, 2023).

For example, morality, moral reasoning, and moral identity among college students are each predictive of purpose (Colby, et al., 2022; Han, 2024; Han et al., 2021; Han & Dawson, 2021; Kuusisto et al., 2023). In older adults, adherence to moral and ethical standards were predictors of later purpose at four-year follow-up (Weziak-Bialowolska & Bialowolska, 2022).

In experimental research university students assigned to an intervention encouraging gratitude expression showed significant increases in purpose in life compared to controls (Czyżowska & Gurba, 2022; Maranges et al., 2024). Mentorship, another aspect of liberal arts education, has also been found to enhance a sense of purpose (Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022; Gong et al., 2020; King et al., 2023; Malin, 2023; Wilson & Hill, 2022). According to prior research, potential pathways to purpose development are social learning, such as from mentorship relationships, or witnessing others find their purpose (Wilson & Hill, 2022). Similarly, Riveros et al. (2023) identified meaningful personal relationships as a potential antecedent to purpose. In retired individuals, physical activity, volunteering, and social connection with friends were all predictive of purpose four years later (Nakamura et al., 2022). Among academic settings, Cai & Lian (2022) found that social support via meaningful social relationships led to greater purpose via an enhanced feeling of initiative towards personal growth.

Finally, in a longitudinal study of college student aspirations Colby et al. (2023b) found civic education, social justice, ethics, and virtue as potential antecedents or aspects of education important to beyond-the-self aspirations among college students. Though a wide variety of potential antecedents to have been identified and studied via longitudinal and correlational methodologies, few have been experimentally studied to suggest

causation and direction of change. However, the few experimental studies published are supportive of the hypotheses that these constructs and experiences are antecedents to the development of purpose (Bronk et al., 2019a; Marangas et al., 2023; Mendonca et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2023; Ruini et al., 2023).

Testing Purpose Interventions

As antecedents continue to be identified, researchers have begun to develop interventions aimed at increasing purpose. Development of interventions has led to experimental and quasi-experimental testing of their effectiveness (Bronk et al., 2019a; Marangas et al., 2023; Mendonca et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2023; Ruini et al., 2023). Interventions examined include those focusing on values and deep reflection of purpose (Riches et al., 2020), service learning (Ribeiro, 2023), character development (Marangas et al., 2024; Mendonca et al., 2023), and creative storytelling (Ruini et al., 2023).

Riches et al. (2020) tested the effectiveness of a purpose intervention including values exploration using Q-sort, prospection by imagining best possible selves, and reflecting deeply on purpose. The intervention was developed and initially tested using MTurk, with later experimental testing among high school and college student participants. Results revealed the intervention as an effective way to increase purpose among these ages.

Bronk et al. (2019a) developed an online intervention for increasing purpose among 224 18–30-year-old U.S. participants. The intervention included purpose reflection which included a reflection of personal goals, values, and desired impact on the world. There was also a gratitude group that practiced expressing gratitude feelings and behaviors. Additionally, there was a control group. All groups were measured on

gratitude, seeking purpose, and identified purpose, at pre-and-post intervention.

Participants in the purpose group showed significant increases in both purpose types on pre-test and post-test. Participants in the gratitude group also increased in searching for purpose and identified purpose compared with controls. Interestingly, this group increased on both measures to a larger degree than the purpose-intervention group, highlighting gratitude as a potential antecedent to purpose. This further supports the generalizability of the findings by Czyżowska and Gurba (2022).

Ribeiro et al. (2023) studied the impact of various service-learning courses on the purpose development of graduate students. Students showed an increase in purpose in life across the courses however, no pre-test was administered, limiting the results of the study. Several studies of the impact of character development on purpose have been conducted as well. Mendonca et al. (2023) utilized character interventions in a character development university course. Pre-test and post-test measurements showed an increase in purpose compared with control groups. Similarly, Maranges et al. (2024) studied the impact of college courses focusing on character development with an emphasis on using moral exemplars throughout the courses. Using a mixed-methods pre-test, post-test design, participants in the character courses grew in purpose significantly when compared with control groups.

Finally, Ruini et al. (2023) assessed the effectiveness of a creative storytelling narrative intervention to increase purpose among Italian children and adolescents. Using pre-test, post-test design with controls and random assignment, post-intervention purpose levels were predicted by group assignment.

Though the experimental investigation of antecedents to purpose remains limited, the published research to date is supportive of the those previously identified in non-experimental research. Importantly, the research results appear to support the hypothesis that purpose interventions can be effective at increasing purpose. However, further studies including longitudinal follow-up are needed to confirm the effect of these and other interventions and experiences, especially regarding long-term effects (Malin, 2023).

Barriers to Purpose Development

Important to the study of purpose development and potential interventions to increase purpose is the study of barriers that might hinder the development of purpose. Researchers have suggested that, if liberal arts education is found to be promotive of purpose development, then disparities in access to higher education and higher education elitism may pose as significant barriers to purpose development (Ryff & Kim, 2020). Indeed, Mei et al. (2020) found that years of education corresponded to higher levels of purpose among retired adults. Coelho et al. (2023) found similar correlations between education and purpose, while Sumner (2016) found no difference in purpose levels between participants with higher education experiences and those without.

An additional barrier investigated by researchers is SES (Bronk et al., 2020; Wichmann et al., 2019). Ryff (2020), cites disparities related to SES and poverty, especially post-pandemic, as exceptional concerns regarding the barrier to purpose in life. However, other research has supported the notion that even those living in poverty and disparate circumstances such as impoverished Brazilians (Wichmann et al., 2019) and Guatemalans (Liang et al., 2017), emerging adults living amidst recessions (Bronk et al., 2019b), and through the COVID-19 pandemic (Colby et al., 2023a; Echeverria et al.,

2021; Ratner et al., 2022; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022b) are able to achieve higher awareness of purpose. Additionally, findings from research on low-income youth in California show that these youth are as likely as their wealthier peers to achieve a sense of purpose (Bronk et al., 2020). This research supports the initial theory and subsequent research on purpose written by Frankl (Frank, 2006) and other historical figures.

Other potential barriers examined in current research include depression and anxiety in childhood and adolescence (Ruini et al., 2023), career-related anxiety during college (Müceldili et al., 2023), and trauma during adolescence (Pfund et al., 2020). A final consideration in the potential barriers to purpose development is the type of work accessible to a person. Though employment is not the sole avenue to a life of purpose (Damon & Colby, 2022; Frankl, 2006), many individuals do find purpose in their work (Weston et al., 2021a). However, it is possible that a life busy with work unrelated to purpose may serve as a barrier to pursuing purpose in life (Malin, 2014; Yemiscigil et al., 2021).

In a study of the impact of retirement on purpose, Yemiscigil et al. (2021) found that white-collar workers experienced stable or decreasing purpose at retirement, indicating an association of work with purpose. However, blue-collar workers experienced an increase in purpose at retirement, indicating that work posed a barrier to the pursuit of purpose and purposeful goals. Alternatively, Coelho et al. (2023) found lower levels of purpose among retirees as compared to working individuals. However, SES was not included as a demographic variable, and this study was exclusive to residents of Portugal. Additionally, as indicated by Pfund et al. (2022b), working adults

may show greater purpose because of increased social interaction at work as their study found the impact of social interaction stronger for those in the study who were retired or not working.

In conclusion, there are potential barriers to developing purpose in life. However, the impact of these barriers is unclear. While results of some research show the impacts of suggested barriers, other research on similar constructs provides conflicting results. As with other areas of research on life purpose, more research is needed to better understand potential barriers.

Purpose and the Liberal Arts

The focus of research in the field of purpose has recently begun to explore predictors of purpose specific to the liberal arts experience to identify potential interventions for later experimental study (Damon & Colby, 2022; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2022). However, researchers and educators have recently begun to question the impact of a liberal arts education on purpose development considering neo-liberalism in higher education (Burrow, 2023; Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023). Though calls have been made to further explore how the arts and liberal arts education might promote meaning and purpose in life (Ryff, 2023; Ryff & Kim, 2020) no studies to date have studied purpose solely among non-college educated emerging adults, and only one has compared the two groups (Sumner, 2016). Instead, most research with this focus has compared purpose among-and-within college students or education-related activities and their relationship with purpose development (Damon & Colby, 2022; Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2023). Understanding potential relationships between a liberal arts education and purpose development has important implications for

understanding potential interventions to increase a sense of purpose and examining issues of equity for emerging adults not privy to a liberal arts education (Ryff, 2023; Ryff & Kim, 2020).

Research on purpose among and between college students has identified a correlation between education, liberal arts experiences and sense of purpose (Damon & Colby, 2022; Malin, 2023). However, correlational research is limited in implication, specifically regarding causation. Though several experimental studies have been conducted testing the effectiveness of purpose interventions, participants have been solely high-school and university students, limiting generalizability outside of this population to less or differently educated individuals (Marangas et al., 2024; Mendonca et al., 2023; Ribiero, 2023; Riches et al., 2020; Ruini et al., 2023). Thus, research is needed to explore similarities and differences in purpose between those with liberal arts education experiences and those without to better determine the strength of previously established correlations. The sole research study attempting to study the correlation between education and purpose among young adults found strikingly different results than previous correlational studies. Further, there were important limitations in the study which may have skewed results (Sumner, 2016).

Finally, researchers in the field have begun to narrow the focus of education and purpose to experiences particular to a liberal arts education rather than education in general (Anghel 2021; Colby, et al., 2022; Colby et al., 2023b; Malin, 2023; Ryff, 2023). However, these experiences are not isolated to a liberal arts setting. Thus, it remains to be seen if there is enough of a distinction in the prevalence of these experiences between college and non-college educated individuals to lead to a discrepancy in purpose

development. Further, exploration into the effects of these same experiences outside of a college setting remains to be explored.

Kuusisto et al. (2023) sought to investigate the impact of neo-liberalism in higher education and the diminishing levels of purpose as a result. To do so, participants from four universities in Finland and Denmark were assessed on levels and orientations of purpose. Qualitative analysis revealed that BTS's purpose was not prevalent among the sample, apart from students enrolled in a university specifically promoting moral development and enriched values. Further, important differences in purpose levels emerged between students majoring in arts and humanities and those with lower levels of purpose majoring in technology and economics. In contrast, Colby et al. (2022) found that among 1,500 students across 11 colleges in the U.S., reports of purpose, and particularly BTS purpose were high. In a later study, Colby et al. (2023b) found that college students held BTS purposes which were stable across three years. Follow-up interviews with a subset of participants revealed experiences with peers and educators regarding ethics, social justice, and civics were particularly promotive of purpose development. These differences may reflect cultural differences, operational definitions, methodological differences, and the different measures used. However, in both cases, research supports the notion that colleges can formulate curriculum specifically focusing on purpose development.

Research among older adults often finds correlations between level of education and purpose. For example, Mei et al. (2020) found positive correlations between higher purpose and higher levels of education among participants in late adulthood.

Similarly, Coelho et al. (2023) found positive associations of education with purpose in life among older adults. These studies were retrospective and considered highest level of education attained and current level of purpose during older adulthood.

However, Sumner (2016) found no difference in purpose level between college graduates and non-graduates. Importantly, a limitation of these findings is the classification of college experience. Participants who reported having some college, but no degree were included and classified with those who reported no college experience. This was the comparison group to those who graduated from college, meaning that current college students were included in the no-college group. Additionally, all college graduates were grouped, despite potential differences in college type, major, age at college, or college experience. Further, the participant sample was primarily white (79.6%), limiting generalizability. When controlling for this potential confound, participants were coded as white or not-white, potentially missing effects of ethnicity and race. Importantly, there was a higher percentage of African American participants in the non-educated group, potentially skewing the results in that, according to previous research, African American participants on average have higher levels of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Coelho et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2022). Finally, experiences thought to promote purpose were not assessed. Thus, there was no analysis of the relationship between potential antecedents, purpose, and college experiences or lack thereof.

As researchers have begun to theorize on liberal arts experiences and purpose, they have hypothesized that specific aspects of college, particularly those relevant to a liberal arts education, are promotive of purpose development (Kuusisto et al., 2023; Damon & Colby, 2022; Ryff, 2023; Sullivan, 2016). For example, Ryff (2023) suggested

that exposure to the arts may be an important antecedent to purpose development and should be studied further. These intentional experiences of a liberal arts education curriculum have recently been studied within college settings (Colby, et al., 2022; Malin, 2023; Ryff & Kim, 2020)

Using latent-class analysis in a cross-sectional design, Malin (2023) analyzed correlates of college experiences and various purpose categorizations (moderate, high, self-oriented, drifting, and dreaming). Advising and mentoring related to life goals and purpose were significantly associated with higher purpose class. Service-learning and field experiences were also associated with an increased likelihood of being in the high-purpose class. Finally, relating learning to ways in which one can benefit the world beyond the self, and understanding issues from a different person's perspective were each predictive of membership in the higher purpose class.

Thus, the field of research on purpose development among emerging adulthood has shifted focus in recent years towards the study of morality, ethics, arts, humanities, character, and other aspects of salience in the traditional model of liberal arts education (Bronk, 2019). However, whether current liberal arts institutions are in line with these curricular goals is a topic of present debate (Damon & Colby, 2022; Deresiewicz, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Sullivan, 2016). Finally, research investigating the potential effects of these liberal arts experiences, and higher education on purpose development is limited. Further research is needed to determine the presence of these antecedents and potential effects on life purpose (Bronk, 2014; Malin, 2023). Such research will remain limited in generalizability without comparison with non-liberal educated groups and controlling for similar purpose-promotive experiences between groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary research on life purpose, expanding upon the theoretical and historical foundations, has identified operational definitions, and has discriminated between overlapping constructs (Damon et al., 2003; Malin, 2023; Ratner et al., 2021a). Research in the past decades has focused on positive outcomes associated with purpose in life (Bronk et al., 2020; Hielscher et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Ratner et al., 2023; Shiba et al., 2022). Additionally, potential correlates of, barriers to, and antecedents of purpose have been studied in recent years (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2019a; Gong et al., 2020; Lo & Ip, 2022; Pfund et al., 2022a; Pfund & Hill, 2018). A primary focus of this research is on experiences salient to a liberal arts education (Malin, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022a). More recently, educators and researchers have questioned whether these experiences are unique to a liberal arts education and if the current liberal arts curriculum is focusing enough on these potential antecedents. Recent research also focuses on whether the association of purpose with liberal arts experiences is creating an equity issue, with limited access to higher education and therefore, purpose development (Damon & Colby, 2022; Deresiewicz, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Sullivan, 2016).

Biblical Foundations of the Study

The study is robustly founded in theological (Messer, 2021) and Biblical teachings (*New International Version*, 2011). These teachings, scriptures, and theories support the importance of studying life purpose, especially among early adults, with a focus on BTS purpose, and within the liberal arts setting. While Frankl's work was not overtly based on a theological foundation, he often referred to his faith in his writings

(Frankl, 2000) and elaborated upon the transcendental and spiritual components of his theory in his later text (Frank, 2006).

Frankl (2000) initially referred to the religious connection with meaning and purpose in his seminal writings. Later expansions of his theory included more overt references to spirituality, God, and transcendence. In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl (2006) discussed the importance of realizing an ultimate, overarching meaning in life, separate from a sense of purpose or individual life purposes. He described ultimate meaning differently than meaning in life in that ultimate meaning is the meaning of life. As evidence of the spiritual and theological referents of his theory of ultimate meaning, he referred to ultimate meaning as "up to heaven" (Frankl, 2006, p. 147). Frankl refers to God and religion in other parts of his text as well, specifically sharing Einstein's definition of religion as finding meaning in life and quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein's similar faith-based definition of meaning that a belief in God requires understanding meaning in life. Frankl mirrored Aquinas in his description of ultimate meaning and purpose, defining an ultimate meaning as a transcendent experience (Long & VanderWeele, 2023). Indeed, Frankl stated that God is the ultimate being which runs parallel to ultimate meaning. Finally, he wrote that while meaning or purpose in life can be understood, ultimate meaning is not comprehensible, only becoming understood at the end of life (Frankl, 2006). This is in symmetry with theological teachings from 1 Corinthians 13: 11-12, which explain that knowledge is limited while living Earthly lives, but true understanding will come from God at human death and spiritual resurrection (*New International Version*, 2011). Frankl also referred to religion as a fulfillment of the human-specific will to this ultimate meaning (Frankl, 2006, p. 167). Thus, Frankl's

original conception of life purpose and meaning in life was theologically related and inspired (Frankl, 2000; Frankl, 2006).

Ultimate and Penultimate Purposes

In continued similarity to Frankl, Messer (2021) also drew a delineation between a momentary purpose during life on Earth and an ultimate purpose in life, referring to these as ultimate and penultimate purposes accordingly. Biblically, the ultimate and penultimate purposes are evident as well. For example, God's ultimate purpose for each life is described in 1 Corinthians 15:58 which teaches that in the end we, will meet our Father and, if incorrupt and living according to His will for our lives, we will rest eternally with Him. Thus, we should work in a steadfast way, knowing that our work on Earth is the work of the Lord and is not in vain (*New International Version*, 2011).

Colossians Chapter 3 teaches Christians to do all things for the glory of the Lord, loving others and being charitable, reflective of both ultimate and penultimate purpose (*New International Version*, 2011). Further, Peter urged the persecuted Christians to live according to God's calling in their lives to live with faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love (*New International Version*, 2011, 1 Peter 3:10). Similarly, in his second letter to Timothy Paul states that God saved Christians and calls us live according to His will, to serve His ultimate purpose (*New International Version*, 2011; 1 Timothy 1:13). Finally, in his letter to Titus Paul reminds him that Christians must be committed to living according to God's word. This is God's instruction to us all to live according to His ultimate purpose, staying busy and productive in doing so (*New International Version*, 2011, Titus 3:14).

Biblical reference to personal, penultimate purposes is also evident. At the conclusion of Genesis 47, in the story of Israel and his sons, Joseph reassures his brothers that he is not seeking revenge for their wrongdoing. Here Joseph explains that God had good intentions to utilize their wrongdoings, and these aided Him in the accomplishment of the moment. Thus, God has a purpose for every person and every event, even persecutions and wrongdoings. He is guiding our lives and each of our lives has a unique purpose for Him (*New International Version*, 2011, Genesis 19:21; 47:50). Similarly, the concept of penultimate purpose is evident in the story of Moses, who is brought back to his mother after she must let him go in the water. Later, Moses leads his people through the water to safety as well (*New International Version*, 2011, Exodus 2). As evidenced by Moses, and by Israel, Joseph, and his brothers, God is shown to have an ultimate plan which His followers work towards by following His individual plans.

Other Biblical references to individual purposes include Ephesians 4:1, referencing individual callings and service, working together to serve Him and His ultimate works through love and mutual service (*New International Version*, 2011, Ephesians 4:1). Finally, 1 Peter refers to individual purpose in the discussion of unique gifts given to each person from God to benefit others (*New International Version*, 2011, 1 Peter 4:10-11). This scripture provides additional support for studying potential barriers to purpose as well. Throughout His word, Christians are called to love one another (John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-8), be positive influences on one another (Proverbs 27:17; Ephesians 4:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:11), and to share God's good word throughout the world (Matthew 28:19-20), the ultimate purpose of each Christian (*New International Version*, 2011). This further supports the study of purpose, including the pursuit to identify and

address potential barriers to enable others to live their true, purposeful lives, and to see God's calling both individually and as part of His creation. Interestingly, the proposed antecedents to purpose, gratitude (Colossians 4:6), exposure to and acceptance of others (James 2:1-4; Acts 10:34-35), and mentorship (Titus 2:3-5; Proverbs 27:17), are all founded in Biblical teachings and exhibited by Jesus and his disciples (*New International Version*, 2011).

Christian Virtues and Purpose in Life

Theological support for this study is also evident in theological teachings and reviews (Long & VanderWeele, 2023; Messer, 2021). For example, Messer (2021) studied purpose in life from a Christian theological perspective as an aspect of flourishing. This perspective views purpose as living according to a vocational calling specific to an individual and specific to time and place. In Messer's description, eschatological hope is hope for the renewal of creation and the fulfillment of the Lord's ultimate purpose for all.

Similarly, Long and VanderWeele (2023) discussed the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love reflected in positive psychology and purpose literature. According to these authors, empirical investigations of hope, faith, and love have identified positive correlations of each virtue with purpose in life. The current definition of purpose is often described by researchers as a guiding goal that one may never actually achieve (Damon & Colby, 2020), reflecting Frankl's original theory which states that the ultimate meaning in life may never be understood, or is revealed only at death (Frankl, 2000). With this definition, hope emerges as an integral aspect of purpose in life and a strength experienced during human weakness which acts to orient a person to God (Long &

VanderWeele, 2023). The view of hope connects Frankl's theory and these theologically based studies as each sees hope as inherent in a purposeful life, orienting one to the Lord, and providing motivation and strength in times of weakness (Frankl, 2000; Frankl, 2006; Long & VanderWeele, 2023; Messer, 2021). Finally, these reviews and theories are further supported Biblically. For example, when Jacob questions God and His plans for Jacob's life, Isaiah reminds him of the promise God gives of strength and endurance for Christians who have hope in Him (*New International Version*, 2011, Isaiah 40:31).

Long and VanderWeele (2023) argue that faith is depicted in well-being research within measures of religion and spirituality. They refer to research correlating these constructs with increased purpose in life. This perspective of faith in the Lord and His guidance which motivates believers to pursue a goal and the associated positive outcomes further support the theological foundation of the study.

Finally, the Christian virtue of love is evident in the research on BTS purpose and is supported in the findings that purpose orientation is beneficial above and beyond other purpose orientations (Bronk & Finch, 2010; Damon & Malin, 2020; Kuusisto et al., 2023; Malin et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022a). Though not all research on purpose in life reflects eudemonic, virtuous purposes, this study investigates this orientation specifically. This aligns with God's commandment to love one another, as seen in Ephesians 4:1, and to promote goodness in the world as seen in Colossians 3 (*New International Version*, 2011). Further Biblical support for studying BTS purpose comes from Proverbs, where Christians are taught that those who walk in the ways of the Lord and remain in His wisdom will be protected by the Lord, kept safe and calm, and experience long life and health (*New International Version*, 2011, Proverbs

3). This Biblical teaching supports and is supported by research connecting the BTS orientation of purpose to associated positive outcomes, both psychologically (Boreham & Schutte, 2023; Ozdogan, 2021; Sutin et al., 2023a; Sutin et al., 2023b; Yager & Kay, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020) and physiologically (Kim et al., 2022; Lewis & Hill, 2023; Shiba et al., 2022). This is also reflected in Paul's letter to Timothy as he urges him to live in holiness, to live a pure life, and to urge others to do the same (*New International Version*, 2011, 1 Timothy 1:6). This, Paul says, is the key to true life and true happiness. The letter includes instructions to take care of the elderly, for the rich to be generous, and to not get caught up in worldly actions or talks. Thus, through displaying the virtue of love by living for the benefit of others and the ultimate calling in our lives, we will live truly happy, meaningful lives (*New International Version*, 2011, 1 Timothy 1:6).

Biblical support for the study is evident. From a study of purpose overall, to the constructs of BTS purpose orientation, and identifying potential antecedents and barriers to purpose, each construct is supported Biblically as described. The prevalence of the associated positive outcomes is further evidence that the topic of purpose and the promotion of its development is in line with His word and teachings. The correlations between religion and purpose are further examples of this (Boylan et al., 2023; Bronk, 2014; Bronk et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2000; Damon & Malin, 2020; Upenieks & Shieemann, 2022).

Summary

Research on purpose in life, with foundations in Frankl's theory and subsequent historical figures, has been defined and studied in historical and recent research (Bronk et al., 2018; Frankl, 2000; Frankl, 2006; Klinger, 1977; Maddi, 1970; Malin, 2023; Ratner

et al., 2021a; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 1998; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020). The literature on life purpose provides operational definitions, an understanding of various dimensions, orientations, and types, and has found evidence of correlates, associated positive outcomes, and potential antecedents and barriers to developing purpose in life (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Bronk, 2014; Bronk et al., 2023; Damon et al.; 2003; Damon & Colby, 2022; Malin, 2023). The focus of purpose development has been among adolescents and emerging adulthood, in alignment with Eriksonian theory and supported by current research (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Erickson, 1968; Hill & Burrow, 2012; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). However, most of this research has been conducted with undergraduate students, limiting the generalizability of findings to those outside of college settings. Thus, little is known about how purpose might develop outside of an undergraduate setting. Though experiences proposed as antecedents to purpose are common within an undergraduate, liberal arts curriculum, they are not exclusive to such setting and may be experienced by emerging adults who do not attend such institutions (Malin, 2023). Further, potential barriers to purpose development are an important area of the research, and, if a liberal arts education is found to be significantly supportive of purpose development, this will also emerge as a barrier to purpose development for those who lack access to higher education (Ryff & Kim, 2020). As Christians are called to take care of one another in pursuit of penultimate and ultimate purposes, it is important to identify potential barriers and antecedents for all emerging adults in pursuit of the Lord's ultimate purpose for His creation. Developing purpose in life, with a focus on BTS purpose is one part of this penultimate purpose. The study is necessary to investigate the relationship between liberal arts-related educational

experiences and the development of life purpose. Further, this study compares the development, search for, and attainment of purpose among emerging adults who graduated from a liberal arts institution with those who did not. This promotes the understanding of potential antecedents and barriers to purpose. The study also investigates purpose levels and orientations among non-college educated emerging adults, filling a gap in the current literature.

In Chapter Two I reviewed the literature on the historical foundations of purpose, definitions of purpose, and differentiations between purpose and similar constructs. I also reviewed dimensions, orientations, and profiles of purpose, and current research on correlates, potential antecedents, and barriers to purpose development. I then reviewed positive outcomes associated with life purpose and summarized research on interventions intending to increase sense of purpose. Finally, I discussed research regarding the constructs of religion, emerging adulthood, and liberal arts education in relation to life purpose and purpose development. In the next chapter I will address the research methodology of the study including research questions and hypotheses, the research design, participants, and procedures. I will also discuss instrumentation and measurements, operationalization of variables, data analysis, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Overview

In the following chapter I will provide complete details of the research methodology and procedures for the completed study. First, I will list the research questions and hypotheses, describe the research design, and provide a description of participants. Then, I will describe the planned study procedures, instrumentation, and measurements I used in the study. Next, I will explain the operationalization of variables and data analysis plans. Finally, I will describe the limitations and assumptions of the conducted research.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Do emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose?

Hypothesis 1(H₁): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose.

Null hypothesis One (H₀): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do vs do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university do not differ in levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose

RQ 2: What is the relationship between age and levels of awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): There is a positive correlation between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis two (H₀₂): There is no relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 3: Does holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderate the relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderates the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis three (H₀₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university does not moderate the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 4: What is the relationship between the potential antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 4 (H₄): There are positive relationships between potential antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and

religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Four (H₀₄): There are no relationship between antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 5: What is the relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 5 (H₅): There is a positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Five (H₀₅): There is no relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 6: Is the positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university?

Hypothesis 6 (H₆): The relationship between low SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

Null hypothesis Six (H₀₆): The relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is not be mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

Research Design

In the conducted study I utilized a quantitative, comparative cross-sectional design to examine relationships between the dimensions of life purpose during emerging adulthood, having completed a degree from a liberal arts college or university, and antecedents and barriers to life purpose proposed by recent research. I assessed the relationships between these variables and compared the two groups on quantitative outcomes. Therefore, a quantitative study was most appropriate.

Correlational studies are appropriate to use when investigating relationships between variables (Mohajan, 2020). Further, when analyzing relationships between variables across development, longitudinal or cross-sectional methodologies are appropriate. Though a longitudinal design would be ideal to capture differences in dimensions of purpose over time, this would require extensive time and more participant recruitment (Mohajan, 2020). Due to the time and budget constraints of the study, a cross-sectional methodology was most feasible. This cross-sectional, correlational design fulfilled the purpose of the study in examining dimensions, moderators and mediators, orientations, and correlates of life purpose among these groups and across stages of development during emerging adulthood. Thus, a quantitative, correlational study utilizing comparative cross-sectional design was well-suited for the research questions and purpose of the study.

Participants

Participants were emerging adults between the ages of 20 and 30 years old who are U. S. residents, speak the English language, and either had completed a degree program from a liberal arts college or university or never attended college. A liberal arts

university was defined as a college or university which has “academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, mathematics, and social and physical sciences as distinct from professional, vocational or technical subjects” (Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 472). I chose to conduct this study with emerging adults based on theories which suggest that emerging adulthood is a prime developmental period for purpose development (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk et al., 2014).

I recruited participants utilizing Prolific; a data gathering tool that connects researchers with participants (Prolific, n.d.). I selected Prolific at the recommendation of Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and because of the support of the platform’s appropriateness for use in social science research (Liberty University IRB, n.d.; Newman et al., 2021; Péér et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Researchers have examined the data validity and reliability for studies utilizing Prolific with results suggesting external validity and reliability of data and overall data quality (Péér et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Further, I chose to utilize Prolific for survey collection to increase the generalizability of results. Finally, accessing emerging adults, especially those with no college experiences, is a barrier to conducting this research. Prolific provides access to this population which is otherwise difficult to access.

Surveys were anonymous and no personally identifiable information about the participants were provided by Prolific. Prolific asks each volunteer to complete a profile of various demographics and experiences in life. While the researchers do not view these profiles, Prolific allows researchers to set basic inclusion and exclusion criteria and only offers study participation to participants who meet these criteria (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Prolific also encourages validation of demographic variables within connected research

surveys. Thus, demographic questions were repeated in the survey (See Appendix C) in the exact wording provided by Prolific during screening. In addition to these demographics, additional demographic questions pertinent to the study were asked (see Appendix C).

To better capture the relationship between dimensions of purpose and experience in a liberal arts institution, I excluded participants who had some college experience but had not graduated or were currently enrolled in an educational program as indicated in their pre-screening. Prolific does not offer screening questions related to the type of college or university attended, such as a liberal arts institution. Thus, a question was added to the demographics survey to assess this, and data for participants who attended schools not fitting the definition of liberal arts college or university were excluded from analysis (See Appendix C). Participants who indicated that they were a current undergraduate student, completed some college education without graduation, or graduated from a non-liberal arts institution were excluded from the sample.

Power Analysis

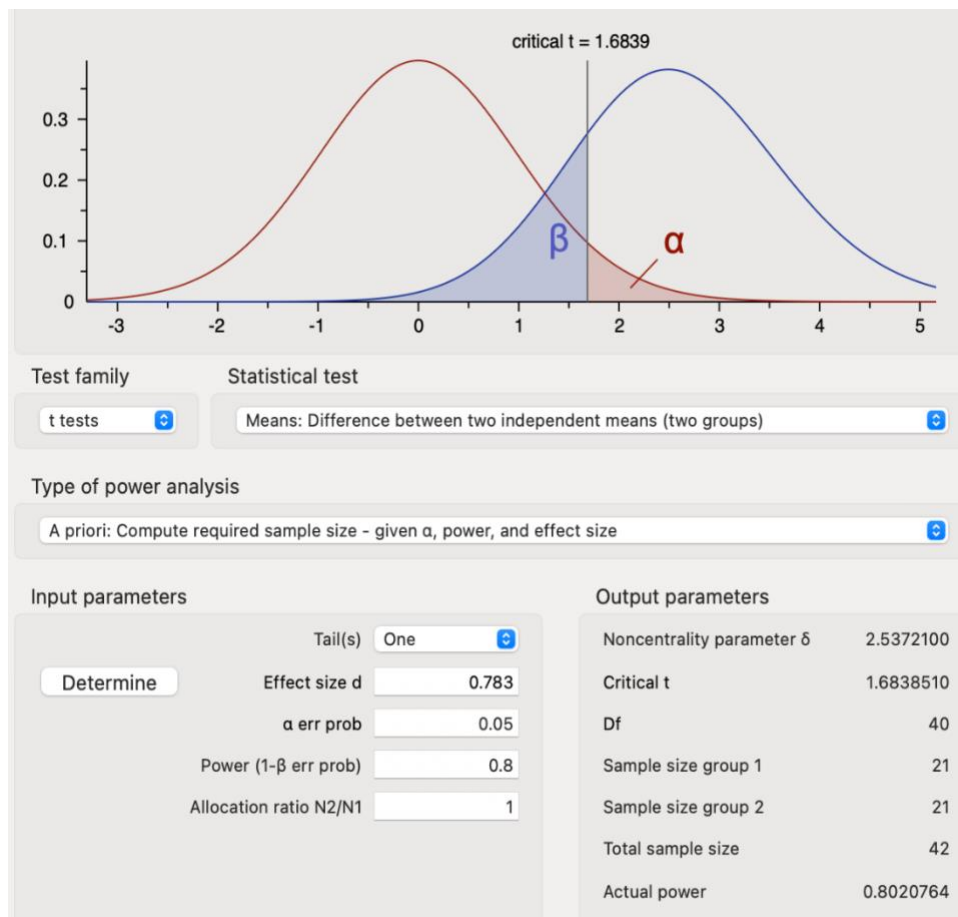
RQ1

I conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 for sample size estimation using data from a study conducted by Gong et al. (2020) ($n=700$), which compared life purpose between participants who had completed at least two years of college or technical school and those who had not. The effect size in Gong et al.'s data was calculated from the published means and standard deviations of each group ($d=.783$), considered to be a medium effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria. With a significance criterion of $\alpha=.05$ and $\text{power}=.80$ the minimum sample size needed with this

effect size is $n=42$, with a minimum of 21 participants in each group for between-groups ANOVA with analysis of interactions (See Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

*Power Analysis in G*Power for RQ1*



Note. Power analysis showing requirements of sample size based on prior research by Gong et al. (2020) with a medium effect size ($d=.783$).

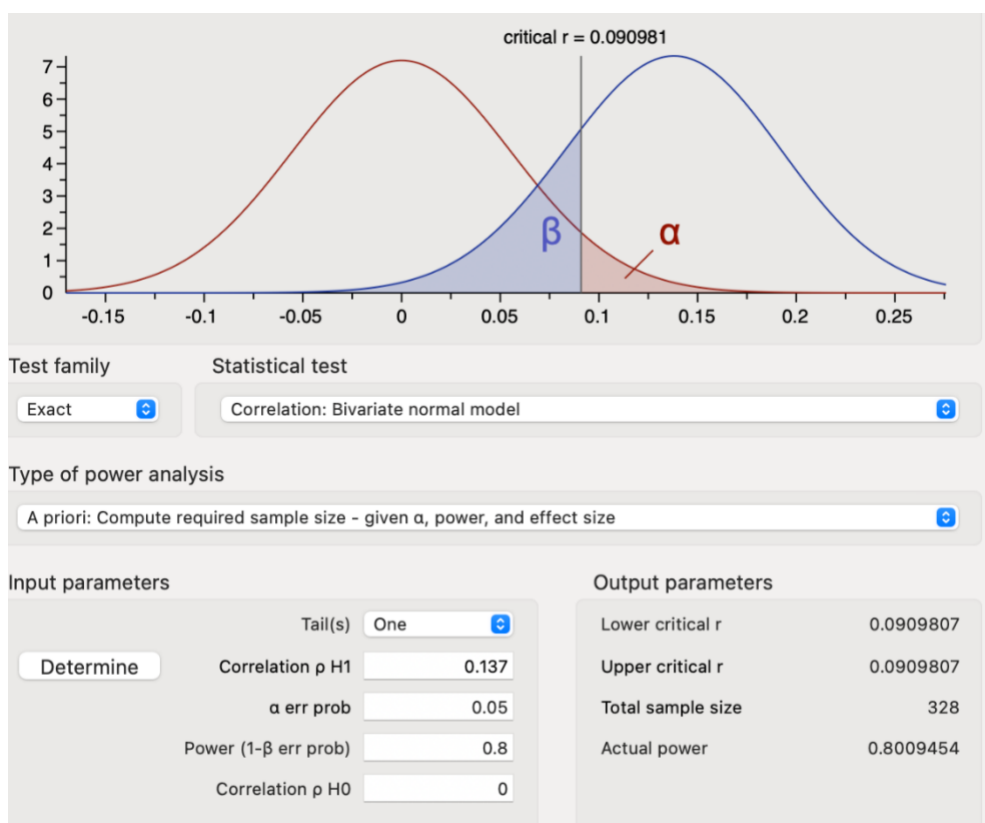
RQs 2, 4, & 5

I conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power version 3.1.9.6 for sample size estimation using data from a study conducted by Sumner (2017) ($n=511$), which compared life purpose between participants who had varying levels of education and

assessed the relationship between age and life purpose. The effect size in Sumner's (2017) data for age and life purpose was $r=.137$, considered to be a small effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria. With a significance criterion of $\alpha=.05$ and power $=.80$ the minimum sample size needed with for effect size is $N=328$ for bivariate correlation (See Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2

*Power Analysis in G*Power for RQs 2, 4, & 5*



Note. Power analysis showing requirements of sample size based on prior research by Sumner (2017) with a small effect size ($r=.137$).

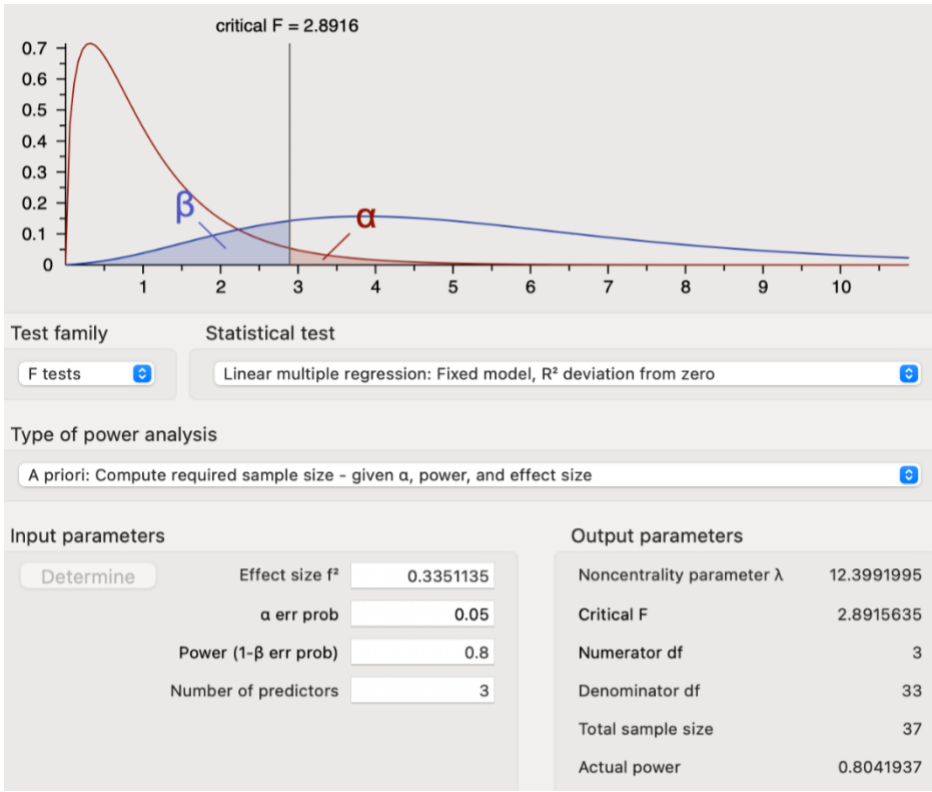
RQ3

I conducted an a priori power analysis G*Power version 3.1.9.6 for sample size estimation using data from a study conducted by Wu et al. (2022) ($n=550$), which

examined the relationship between family-SES and burnout in college and analyzed resilience as a moderator of this relationship. The effect size in Wu et al.'s (2022) data for resilience as a mediator between family-SES and college burnout was $f^2=.33$, considered to be a medium effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria. With a significance criterion of $\alpha=.05$ and power=.80 the minimum sample size needed with for this effect size is $N=37$ for a mediation analysis (See Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3

*Power Analysis in G*Power for RQ3*



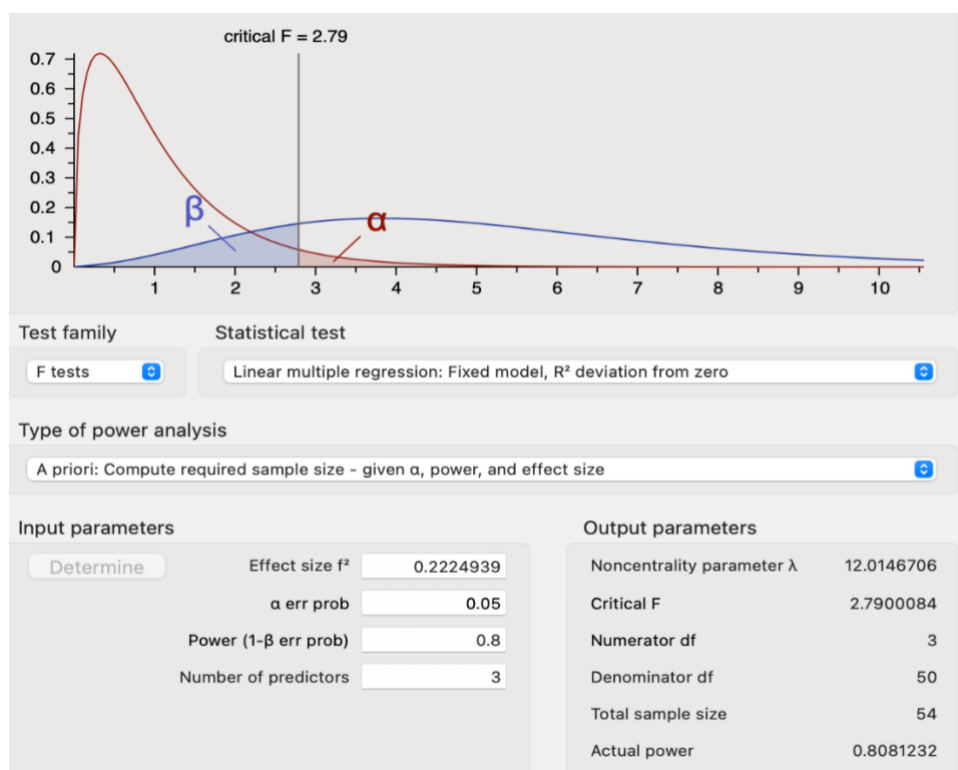
Note. Power analysis showing requirements of sample size based on prior research by Wu et al. (2022) with a small effect size ($f^2=.33$).

RQ6

I conducted an a priori power analysis G*Power version 3.1.9.6 for sample size estimation using data from a study conducted by Wu et al. (2022) ($n=550$), which examined the relationship between family-SES and burnout in college and analyzed subjective well-being as a mediator. The effect size in Wu et al.'s (2022) data for well-being as a mediator between family-SES and college burnout was $f^2=.22$, considered to be a medium effect size according to Cohen's (1988) criteria. With a significance criterion of $\alpha=.05$ and power= $.80$ the minimum sample size needed for this effect size is $N=54$ for a mediation analysis (See Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4

*Power Analysis in G*Power for RQ6*



Note. Power analysis showing requirements of sample size based on prior research by Wu et al. (2022) with a small effect size ($f^2=.22$).

In total, the power analyses resulted in suggested sample sizes ranging from 37 to 328. Additionally, I recruited an additional 20% (N=66) to account for unusable data. This resulted in a sample size of 393 (N=393), with 197 participants in each group. After cleaning the data by removing unqualified participants and incomplete surveys 311 (N=311) participants remained, with 142 liberal arts degree holders in group 1 and 169 non-liberal arts degree holders in group 2.

Study Procedures

After IRB approval, data was collected using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants were recruited on Prolific using the social media recruitment information (See Appendix A). Once participants chose to enroll in the study, they were connected to the anonymous survey on Qualtrics via the Prolific platform. Survey responses were kept anonymous and no personally identifiable information was collected. Participants were compensated \$3.00 USD for completion of the survey. This practice is typical for online survey recruiting and the amount is suggested by Prolific based upon the time it took for participants to complete the survey (Prolific, n.d.).

Participants were presented with the informed consent information sheet (See Appendix B) including study information where they could opt to participate in the study. After participants opted to participate in the study, they were presented with pre-screening questions via Prolific. Informed consent included the purpose of the study and informed participants that the survey would be anonymous, and all data would be kept confidential and securely stored, only available to researchers involved in the study. Further, participants were informed that participation would be voluntary, could be stopped at any time without penalty, and there were no foreseeable risks to participating

beyond minimal risk of emotional discomfort. Participants were informed that they would receive a \$3.00 USD payment upon verified submission of the survey. Participants were also informed of the estimated time required to complete the survey which was fifteen minutes. The first question on the Qualtrics survey was consent to participate in the study. If participants did not consent to participate the survey ended and no other questions were presented.

After consent was given, the survey questions loaded. Measures of the survey included demographic questions, the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) (See Appendix D) (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a), the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) (See Appendix E) (Underwood, 2011; Underwood & Teresi, 2002), the Perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-fr) and the Perceived Social Support from Family (PSS-fa) scales (See Appendix F) (Procidano & Hellar, 1983), and the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) (See Appendix G) (McCullough et al., 2002). At completion of the study, participants received a completion code and were redirected back to Prolific for payment. After all data was collected the data file from Qualtrics and accompanying demographic data provided by Prolific was downloaded to IBM's SPSS Statistics Version 29 for data analysis.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Demographics Questionnaire

Participants were asked questions to collect basic demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity, SES (Prolific, n.d.), highest level of education

completed, student status, type of college or university attended, and employment status (See Appendix C).

Revised Sense of Purpose Scale

The three dimensions of life purpose were measured using the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2019) (See Appendix D). The SOPS-2 is a 14-item, 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The measure includes three subscales measuring: awareness of purpose with 5 items (e.g., “My purpose in life is clear”), awakening to purpose with 4 items (e.g., “I am gaining clarity about my life’s purpose”), and altruistic purpose with 5 items (e.g., “I aspire to make a positive difference in my community”). Higher ratings result in higher scores on each subscale. Each subscale is measured by totaling the scores for each item. Thus, the awakening to purpose subscale scores range from 4-28 with higher scores indicating a higher level of awakening to purpose. The awareness of purpose subscale scores range from 5-35, with higher scores indicating higher levels of awareness of purpose. The altruistic purpose subscale scores also range from 5-35, with higher scores indicating higher levels of altruistic purpose.

Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2019) validated the SOPS-2 using confirmatory factor analysis which provided support for all fourteen items of the scale with good model fit and significant item loadings. The three factors explained 52.33% of the variance. Construct reliability was established with values above .70 for each subscale. Factorial validity was established by assessing factorial validity resulting in significant factor loadings and by assessing measurement invariance across groups differing in gender, race, ethnicity, and age during emerging adulthood. Criterion validity

was established by correlating each subscale with latent factors using confirmatory factor analysis. Finally, Cronbach's alpha ranged between .75 and .87 for each factor, demonstrating internal consistency and reliability. Another validation for use of the SOPS-2 with emerging adults revealed the following reliability estimates for each subscale: awakening = .87, awareness = .94, and altruistic = .88 (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2019). Thus, factorial validity of the scale, criterion validity of the subscales, and the validity for use with emerging adults have been established (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2019; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma & 2020a).

Antecedents to Purpose

Potential antecedents to purpose included social and family supports, practicing gratitude, and religiosity/spirituality.

Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality was assessed using the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) (Underwood, 2011; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The DSES is a 16-item inventory developed to measure regular, daily experiences of spirituality including feelings of joy, awe, and inner peace. This scale is used to assess ordinary inner experiences of spirituality, rather than extraordinary experiences, beliefs, or behaviors (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The first 15 items of the DSES (e.g., "I find strength in my religion or spirituality") have 6 response options "Many times a day," "Every day," "Most days," "Some days," "Once in a while," and "never". Item 16, "In general, how close do you feel to God?" has answer choices of "Not at all," "Somewhat close," "Very close," and "As close as possible". This item is reverse scored. Underwood (2001) details several methods of scoring including mean scores, total scores, and dichotomous scoring.

I calculated total scores for the scale. Thus, scores range from 16-94 with higher scores indicating fewer daily spiritual experiences.

Underwood and Teresi (2002) established reliability and validity of the measure through a series of studies. Internal consistency reliability was high, with Cronbach's alpha of .94 and .95. Further, test-retest reliability of the scale was demonstrated with a Cronbach's alpha of .88 and .92 for test and re-test respectively (Underwood & Teresi, 2002).

Perceived Social Support from Family and Friends.

The Perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-Fr) and the Perceived Social Support from Family (PSS-Fa) scales were used to measure social and family support (Procidano & Hellar, 1983). Each of these scales include 20 questions (e.g., "My friends give me the moral support I need"). Participants answer each question by selecting "yes," "no," or "I don't know". Answers of "yes" are scored with one point each while answers of "I don't know" are not scored. Total scores range from 0-20 on each scale, with higher scores indicating higher perceived support from family and friends respectively. In a preliminary study Procidano and Hellar (1983) found the entire measure including both scales to have high test-retest reliability ($r = .83$) and internal validity with a Cronbach's alpha of .90. In a subsequent study the researchers assessed homogeneity of the two scales in a study with undergraduate students. Internal consistency was established with Cronbach's alpha for the PSS-fr as .88 and .90 for the PSS-fa.

Practicing Gratitude.

To measure practicing gratitude the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) was used (McCullough et al., 2002). The GC-6 questionnaire contains six questions designed to

measure the intensity, frequency, density, and span of dispositions toward gratitude. Participants rate each statement (i.e. “I have so much in my life to be thankful for”) on a scale of 1-7 with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 7 being “strongly agree”. Total scores range from 6-42 with 6 being the lowest and 42 being the highest and higher scores indicating higher gratitude. Analysis of the questionnaire established internal validity with a Cronbach’s alpha of .82. Confirmatory factor analysis (.95) indicated good model fit (McCullough et al., 2002).

Operationalization of Variables

Age – This variable is a ratio variable and was measured by asking participants to indicate their numerical age from 20-30 years of age.

Altruistic Purpose – this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the altruistic purpose subscale of the SOPS-2 (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020b).

Antecedents to Life Purpose –

Family Supports – this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the PSS-fa (Procidano & Hellar, 1983).

Friend Social Supports – this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the PSS-fr (Procidano & Hellar, 1983).

Practicing Gratitude – This variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the GQ-6 (McCullough et al., 2002).

Religiosity and Spirituality– this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the mean score on the DSES (Underwood & Teresi, 2002).

Awakening to Purpose – this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the awakening to purpose subscale of the SOPS-2 (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a).

Awareness of Purpose – this variable is a scale variable and was measured by the total score on the awareness of purpose subscale of the SOPS-2 (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a).

Exposure to a Liberal Arts Education – this variable is a nominal dichotomous (yes/no) variable and was measured by the response to demographic item: “If you graduated from college, did you attend a liberal arts college or university? A liberal arts college or university is defined as an institution that has “academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, mathematics, and social and physical sciences as distinct from professional, vocational or technical subjects” (Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 472).

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using IBM’s SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.0. Data was screened for inclusion and exclusion criteria, outliers, and incomplete answers. Invalid responses were removed. RQ1 was analyzed using separate between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) to analyze the difference in each purpose dimension between emerging adults with and without liberal arts degrees. RQ2 was analyzed using Pearson’s correlation analysis to examine the relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose (dimensions of purpose). RQ3 was analyzed using a moderated regression analysis to assess age, holding a degree from a liberal arts institution, and the interaction between these as predictors of dimensions of purpose and to assess any interactions among these variables. RQ4 was analyzed using multiple linear

regression analysis to examine the relationship between the antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and dimensions of purpose. RQ5 was analyzed using a Pearson's correlation between SES and each dimension of life purpose. RQ6 was analyzed using regression analyses to analyze holding versus not holding a degree from a liberal arts institution as a mediator between SES and each dimension of life purpose.

Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations

The study conducted has several delimitations, assumptions and limitations. The delimitations of the study are that participants had either graduated from a liberal arts institution or have never attended college. Participants with some liberal arts college experience but no completion and those who graduated from non-liberal arts institutions were excluded. Additionally, participants were be 20-30 years old and were U.S. residents. Finally, participants had access to the internet. Assumptions of the study are that participants were representative of the target population, understand English, and understand how to correctly use Prolific. An additional assumption of the study is that participants are able and willing to answer questions truthfully and honestly (Wright, 2023). Standardization and comprehension of terms are additional assumptions. However, to ensure these assumptions are correct, comprehension checks and definitions of terms were be included in the survey (Peytchev, et al., 2010).

Limitations and potential threats to internal validity were inattention, non-comprehension, and the potential for non-human participants, otherwise known as bots (Albert & Smilek, 2023; Douglas et al., 2023; Tang et al, 2022). However, compared with traditional pen-and-paper surveys, respondents tend to have better attention during

the completion of online surveys (Wright, 2023). Additionally, attention and comprehension checks were built into the survey platform, as were screening tools to reduce non-human participants. In comparison with other survey platforms, Prolific is superior in managing these potential threats when compared with other similar platforms (Albert & Smilek, 2023; Douglas et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2022).

Other limitations of the study include those related to methodology and generalizability (Yarkoni, 2022). First, the study is correlational, not experimental. Thus, any relationships found between the variables do not suggest causation (Mohajan, 2020). Though the results may be informative, future studies will need to employ experimental methods to identify and determine variables that influence purpose.

Generalizability is limited depending on the participants who complete the study. However, research suggests results using the Prolific platform have good external validity overall (Péer et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Additionally, these results may not be generalizable to emerging adults in the US who do not often use technology, as Prolific users represent individuals who are comfortable with and often using technology such as the Prolific platform (Wright, 2023). This is similar to traditional sampling bias with pen-and-paper, mail-in, or telephone surveys and research suggests that this bias is no greater among online surveys than traditional survey methods (Kees et al., 2017). However, research has found Prolific to provide higher quality, nationally representative samples than other online research platforms (Newman et al., 2021). Further, results are not generalizable to emerging adults in other distinct sub-cultures or countries.

Methodologically, the cross-sectional design is another limitation of the study. Though this method allows for a better understanding of how a sense of purpose might

develop across emerging adulthood, longitudinal research will be needed to understand how this construct develops across time (Malin, 2023). Finally, survey biases, including social desirability, response, and volunteer biases, are weaknesses of any survey-based study (Mohajan, 2020). Research shows that these threats can be reduced by reminding participants of such biases and asking them to answer truthfully (Hong & Chiu, 1991; Setiawati et al., 2024).

Summary

In this chapter I provided comprehensive details regarding the methodology and procedures for the study conducted. I listed the research questions and hypotheses, described the research design, and provided a description of participants. I described the study procedures, instrumentation and measurements used in the study, the operationalization of variables, and statistical analyses conducted. Finally, I described the delimitations, limitations and assumptions of the research.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

In the following chapter I will provide an overview of the purpose of the study, the data collection process, and research questions guiding the study. Then, I will provide the descriptive results including sample demographics, means to questionnaires, and any other relevant descriptive results. Next, I will detail the findings of the study including statistics, tables, and comparisons.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between purpose in life and liberal arts educational experiences by comparing purpose dimensions and orientations among and between emerging adults who have completed a degree program at a liberal arts college or university and emerging adults who did not attend a liberal arts college or university. Dimensions of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and the altruistic purpose orientation were assessed between and within these two groups across emerging adulthood from 20-30 years of age. Further, life experiences shown in prior research to be potential correlates, barriers, and predictors of life purpose were analyzed.

After IRB approval, data were collected using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants were recruited on Prolific using the social media recruitment information (See Appendix A). Once participants chose to enroll in the study, they were connected to the anonymous survey on Qualtrics via the Prolific platform.

Measures of the survey included demographic questions, the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) (See Appendix D) (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020a), the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) (See Appendix E) (Underwood, 2011; Underwood &

Teresi, 2002), the Perceived Social Support from Friends (PSS-fr) and the Perceived Social Support from Family (PSS-fa) scales (See Appendix F) (Procidano & Hellar, 1983), and the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) (See Appendix G) (McCullough et al., 2002).

Summary of Research Question(s) and Hypotheses

RQ1: Do emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do versus do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose?

Hypothesis 1(H₁): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do versus do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose.

Null hypothesis One (H₀): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do versus do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university do not differ in levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose

RQ 2: What is the relationship between age and levels of awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): There is a positive correlation between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis two (H₀2): There is no relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 3: Does holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderate the relationship between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderates the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis three (H₀₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university does not moderate the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 4: What is the relationship between the potential antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 4 (H₄): There are positive relationships between potential antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Four (H₀₄): There are no relationship between antecedents to life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 5: What is the relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age?

Hypothesis 5 (H₅): There is a positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Null hypothesis Five (H₀₅): There is no relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ 6: Is the positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university?

Hypothesis 6 (H₆): The relationship between low SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

Null hypothesis Six (H₀₆): The relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is not be mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university

Descriptive Results

After data collection was completed, data were screened for incomplete answers, unreliable responses, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. Measures were scored and data were loaded into IBM's SPSS Statistics Version 29 (2022). Of the 397 survey responses, 64 were removed due to not meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria of either graduating from a liberal arts college or university or having never attended a liberal arts

college or university. Participants who were currently enrolled in higher education who were either not at a liberal arts college or university or who had graduated from a liberal arts college or university and were attending graduate school were included.

Additionally, participants who were unsure of whether the undergraduate institution they attended was a liberal arts institution were removed. Of the remaining responses, 22 were removed due to incomplete responses. Thus, after data cleaning, 311 survey responses remained. Next, Mahalanobis distance was employed to identify and remove multivariate outliers using nine degrees of freedom and a cutoff of $<.001$. This resulted in the removal of three additional participants. In total, screening resulted in a total of 308 participants ($N=308$) with complete surveys and qualification based on criteria set for inclusion, leaving 140 participants who graduated from a liberal arts college or university and 168 participants who never attended a liberal arts college or university.

Participants' ages ranged from 20-30, with a mean of 25.5 years and a standard deviation of 3. Participant demographics are reported in Table 4.1. See Appendix C for a full listing of demographics questions.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Man	126	40.9
Woman	166	53.9
Non-Binary	14	4.5
Rather Not Say	2	0.6
Socioeconomic Status		
Level 1	3	1
Level 2	20	6.5
Level 3	53	17.2
Level 4	58	18.8

Level 5	66	21.4
Level 6	53	17.2
Level 7	45	14.6
Level 8	10	3.2
Level 9	0	0
Level 10	0	0
Highest Level of Education Completed		
No Formal Qualifications	7	12.3
Secondary Education (e.g. GED)	5	1.6
High-School Diploma	119	38.6
Technical/Community College	34	11
Undergraduate Degree	95	30.8
Master's Degree	40	13
Doctoral Degree	5	1.6
Unreported	3	1
Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	.3
Asian	44	14.3
Black or African American	38	12.3
Hispanic or Latino	39	12.7
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	.3
White	175	56.8
Other	10	3.2
Employment Status		
Full-time	151	49
Part-Time	54	17.5
Due to start a new job within the next month	8	2.6
Unemployed and job seeking	65	21.1
Not in paid work	18	5.8
Other	12	3.9

Descriptive statistics for each measure are reported in Table 4.2 below. Note that the DSES scores range from 16-94 with higher scores indicating fewer daily spiritual experiences. For all other measures higher scores indicate higher levels of the construct measured.

Table 4.2

Descriptive Statistics of All Measures Used

Measure	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	α
---------	---------	---------	------	----	----------

SOPS-2 Awakening	4.00	28.00	17.66	5.98	.87
SOPS-2 Awareness	5.00	35.00	19.43	8.57	.94
SOPS-2 Altruistic	5.00	35.00	26.63	5.69	.88
DSES	16.00	94.00	66.64	20.25	.94
Pss-Fr	1.00	20.00	11.77	3.32	.88
Pss-Fa	0.00	20.00	10.57	4.17	.90
GQ-6	14.00	41.00	28.43	4.10	.82

Note. SOPS-2 Awakening = Awakening to Purpose subscale of the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale; SOPS-2 Awareness = Awareness of Purpose subscale of the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale; SOPS-2 Altruistic = Altruistic subscale of the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale; DSES = Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale; PSS-Fr = Perceived Social Support from Friends scale; PSS-Fa=Perceived Social Support from Family scale; GQ-6=Gratitude Questionnaire-6.

Study Findings

Research Question One: Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U

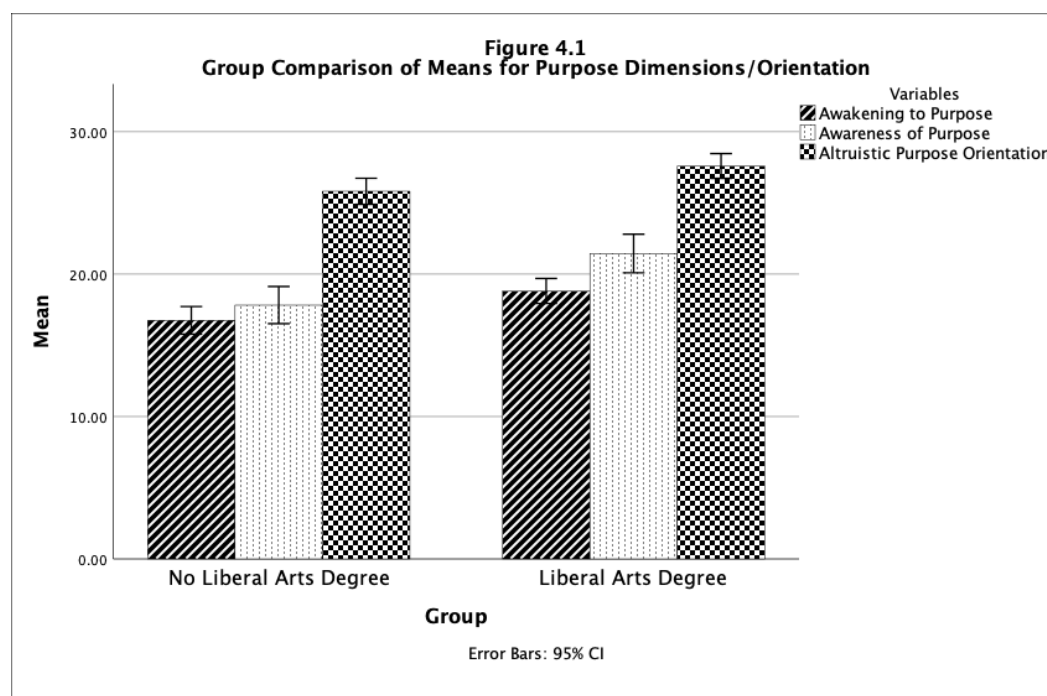
Hypothesis 1(H₁): Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who do versus do not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university have higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose.

For research question one there was one independent variable with two levels (liberal arts degree versus no liberal arts degree) and there are three dependent variables (awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and altruistic purpose). Each dependent variable was checked for normal distribution. The data violated the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance as evidenced by significant Shapiro-Wilk ($p < .05$) and Levene Statistics ($p < .05$). Thus, an Independent Samples Mann-Whitney *U* test was calculated to examine if the levels of awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and altruistic purpose between emerging adults who held a degree from a liberal arts institution and those who did not were different. The confidence level was set at .95. Distribution of the engagement scores for each group were similar, as assessed by visual

inspection of the population pyramid histograms. Comparison of means showed statistically significantly different results between groups. Emerging adults with a liberal arts degree had significantly higher levels of awakening to purpose ($M = 18.81$) than emerging adults without a liberal arts degree ($M = 16.71$, $U = 9530$, $z = -2.87$, $p = .004$). Emerging adults with a liberal arts degree had significantly higher levels of awareness of purpose ($M = 21.44$) than emerging adults without a liberal arts degree ($M = 17.75$, $U = 8776.50$, $z = -3.89$, $p < .001$). Emerging adults with a liberal arts degree had significantly higher levels of altruistic purpose ($M = 27.56$) than emerging adults without a liberal arts degree ($M = 25.84$, $U = 9814.50$, $z = -2.50$, $p = .012$). Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who did versus did not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university had higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose (See Figure 4.1).

Figure 4. 1

Group Comparison of Means for Purpose Dimension/Orientation



Research Question Two: Correlation

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): There is a positive correlation between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Research question two involved an examination of the correlations of age with three variables: awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose. Data was first screened for assumptions necessary to run a Pearson's correlation analysis. The data violated assumptions of normality as indicated by a statistically significant Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p < .01$). Thus, a Spearman's rank correlation analysis was used to assess the relationships between age and awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between age and each dimension and orientation of purpose such that as age increased levels of awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose would also increase. There was no statistically significant correlation between awakening to purpose and age, $r(308) = .04, p = .459$. There was no statistically significant correlation between awareness of purpose and age, $r(308) = -.02, p = .79$. There was no statistically significant correlation between altruistic purpose and age, $r(308) = -.002, p = .97$. The relationships between age and awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and altruistic among 20-30 year old emerging adults were not statistically significant. Therefore, I failed to reject the null hypothesis.

Research Question Three: Moderated Regression Analysis

Hypothesis 3 (H₃): Holding a degree from a liberal arts college or university moderates the relationship between age and awareness of, awakening to, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Research question three examined the potential of holding a degree from a liberal arts institution as a moderator in the relationship between age and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose (See Figure 4.2)

I planned to analyze RQ3 using a moderated regression analysis to assess age, holding a degree from a liberal arts institution, and the interaction between these as predictors of dimensions and orientation of purpose and to assess any interactions among these variables. Indicator variables and interaction terms were created to account for the dichotomous moderator variable and to create a comparison group for the analysis. Model One examined the relationship between age, no liberal arts degree, and awakening to purpose in a regression analysis. Model two examined the relationship between the interaction term of age and no liberal arts degree with awakening to purpose. A scatterplot of awakening to purpose against age was plotted. Visual inspection of this plot indicated that the assumption of linearity was violated. Additionally, there was evidence of multicollinearity as evidenced by tolerance values less than .01 and VIF greater than 10. Thus, taking into account the non-linear relationship found between age and dimensions/orientation of purpose, along with the violation of assumptions to perform a moderated regression analysis, the decision was made not to move forward with the analysis. I failed to reject the null hypothesis. Results from the analysis for research question two, along with the finding of non-linearity failed to support the hypothesis that

holding a degree from a liberal arts institution moderates the relationship between age and dimensions of and orientation of purpose.

Research Question Four: Multiple Linear Regression

Hypothesis 4 (H₄): There are positive relationships between potential antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

RQ4 was analyzed using multiple linear regression analyses to examine the relationship between the antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality) and dimensions and orientation of life purpose. Procedures and results for each regression are reported below.

Predicting Awakening to Purpose A multiple regression analysis was run to predict awakening to purpose from antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality). There was one case of a studentized deleted residuals greater than +/- 3 standard deviations (-3.075). This case was removed as an outlier and the regression was re-calculated. Linearity was verified as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against predicted values. There were independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.10. There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no

leverage values greater than .2, and no values above 1 for Cook's distance. The assumption of normality was met as assessed by a Q-Q Plot. The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted awakening to purpose, $F(4, 302) = 43.175, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .355$. Three of the four variables (practicing gratitude, religion/spirituality, and perceived support from friends) added statistically significantly to the prediction ($p < .05$). Social support from family did not ($p = .089$). Thus, this variable was removed from the model and the analysis was re-run prior to prediction. Results of the revised analysis revealed that the regression model after removing the perceived support from family variable continued to statistically significantly predict awakening to purpose, $F(3, 303) = 55.99, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .35$. Regression coefficients and standard errors are presented in Table 4.3 (below).

Table 4.3

Multiple Regression for Awakening to Purpose

Awakening to Purpose	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model						.36	.35***
Constant	12.77***	7.70	17.83	2.60			
Spirituality/Religiosity	-0.12***	-0.15	-0.10	0.01	-.42***		
Perceived Support from Friends	0.33***	0.16	0.50	0.09	.18**		
Gratitude	0.33***	0.19	0.48	0.07	.23***		

Note. Model = "Enter" method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R^2 .

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Predicting Awareness of Purpose

A multiple regression analysis was run to predict awareness of purpose from antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality). There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against predicted values. There was one case of studentized deleted residuals greater than ± 3 standard deviations. Therefore, that case was removed as an outlier and the analysis was re-run. There was independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.03. There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no leverage values greater than .2, and no values above 1 for Cook's distance. The assumption of normality was met as assessed by a Q-Q Plot.

The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted awareness of purpose, $F(4, 303) = 38.10, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .33$. Three of the four variables (religion/spirituality, perceived support from friends, and perceived support from family) added statistically significantly to the prediction ($p < .05$). Gratitude did not ($p = .136$). Thus, gratitude was removed from the model and the analysis was re-run prior to prediction. Results of the revised analysis revealed that the regression model after removing gratitude continue to statistically significantly predict awareness of purpose,

$F(3, 303) = 49.85, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .32$. Regression coefficients and standard errors are presented in Table 4.4 (below).

Table 4.4

Multiple Regression for Awareness of Purpose

Awareness of Purpose	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model						0.33	0.32***
Constant	22.44***	17.95	26.93	2.28			
Spirituality/Religiosity	-0.19***	-0.23	-0.15	0.02	-0.44***		
Perceived Support from Friends	0.49***	0.24	0.74	0.13	0.19***		
Perceived Support from Family	0.34**	0.13	0.54	0.11	0.16**		

Note. Model = “Enter” method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R^2 .

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Predicting Altruistic Purpose

A multiple regression analysis was run to predict altruistic purpose from antecedents of life purpose (social supports, family supports, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality). There were four cases of studentized deleted residuals greater than ± 3 standard deviations as identified by case wise diagnostics and review of residuals. These cases were removed and the regression was re-run. There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against predicted values. There was independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.713.

There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no leverage values greater than .2, and no values above 1 for Cook's distance. The assumption of normality was met as assessed by a Q-Q Plot.

The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted altruistic purpose, $F(4, 299) = 27.72, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .26$. Three of the four variables (religion/spirituality, perceived support from friends, and gratitude) added statistically significantly to the prediction ($p < .05$). Perceived support from family did not ($p = .26$). Thus, this variable was removed from the model and the analysis was re-run prior to prediction. Results of the revised analysis revealed that the regression model after removing the perceived support from family variable continued to statistically significantly predict altruistic purpose, $F(3, 300) = 36.5, p < .001, \text{adj. } R^2 = .26$. Regression coefficients and standard errors are presented in Table 4.5 (below).

Table 4.5

Multiple Regression for Altruistic Purpose

Altruistic Purpose	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model						0.27	0.26***
Constant	23.56***	18.71	28.40	2.60***			
Spirituality/ Religiosity	-0.09***	-0.12	-0.07	0.02***	-0.36		
Perceived Support from Friends	0.38***	0.22	0.54	0.08*	0.24		
Gratitude	0.18*	0.04	0.32	0.07***	0.14		

Note. Model = "Enter" method in SPSS Statistics; *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; *SE B* = standard

error of the coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; R^2 = coefficient of determination; ΔR^2 = adjusted R^2 .

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Research Question Five: Correlation

Hypothesis 5 (H₅): There is a positive relationship between SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age.

Data for SES and each level/orientation of purpose was analyzed for assumptions of linearity and normal distribution. Each of the variables showed linear relationships however, all variables violated normality as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's statistics ($p < .001$). Thus, the decision was made to analyze the relationships between variables using a non-parametric Spearman's Rho correlation.

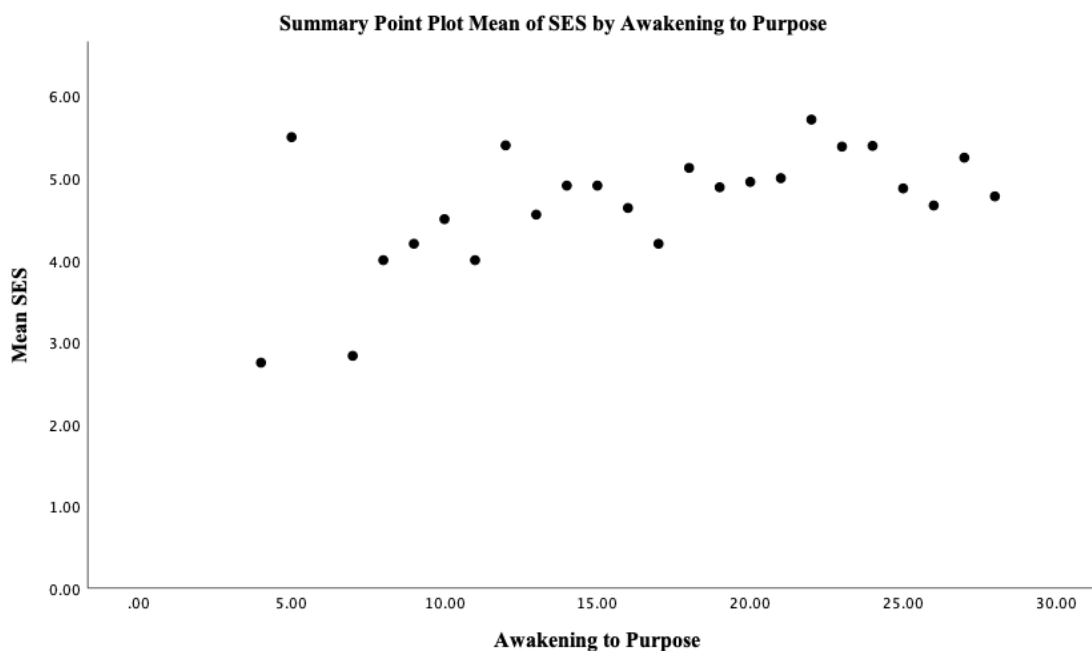
Awakening to Purpose and SES

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to analyze the relationship between SES and awakening to purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age (N=308). Preliminary analysis showed a monotonic relationship between SES and awakening to purpose, as assessed by visual inspection of a scatterplot. There was a statistically significant, weak positive correlation between awakening to purpose and SES, $r_s(306) = .261, p < .001$ (see Figure 4.2). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected

and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. SES and awakening to purpose are weakly but significantly positively correlated among emerging adults 20-30 years old.

Figure 4.2

Scatterplot of SES by Awakening to Purpose



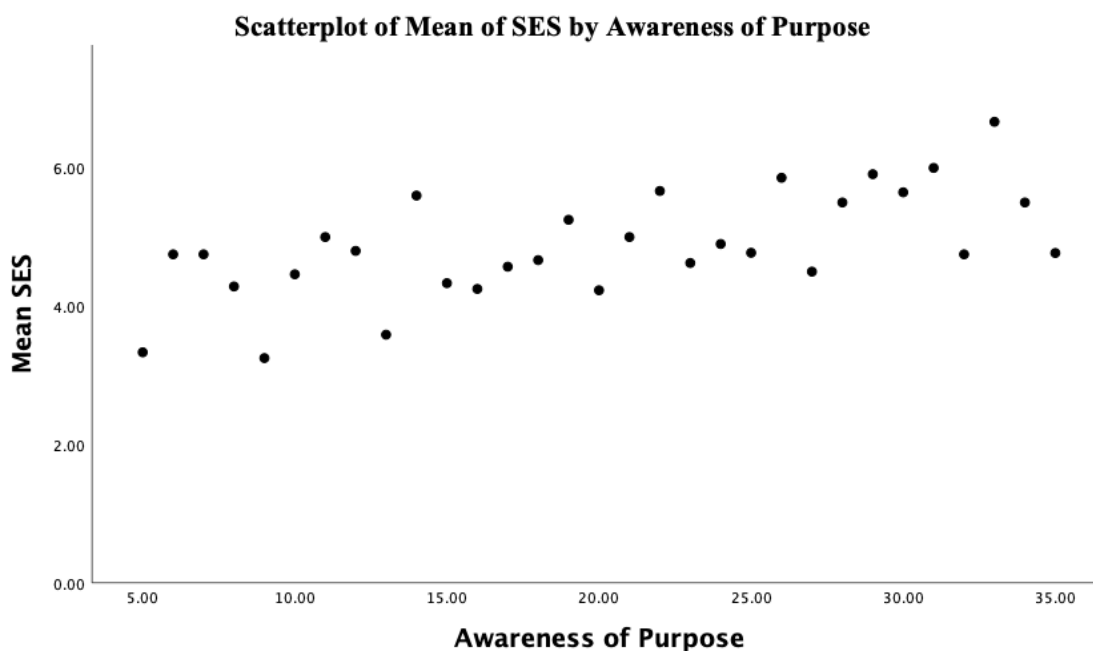
Awareness of Purpose and SES

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to analyze the relationship between SES and awareness of purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age (N=308). Preliminary analysis showed a monotonic relationship between SES and awareness of purpose, as assessed by visual inspection of a scatterplot. There was a statistically significant, weak positive correlation between awakening to purpose and SES, $r_s(306) = .293, p < .001$ (see Figure 4.3). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

SES and awareness of purpose were weakly but significantly positively correlated in emerging adults 20-30 years old.

Figure 4.3

Scatterplot of SES by Awareness of Purpose



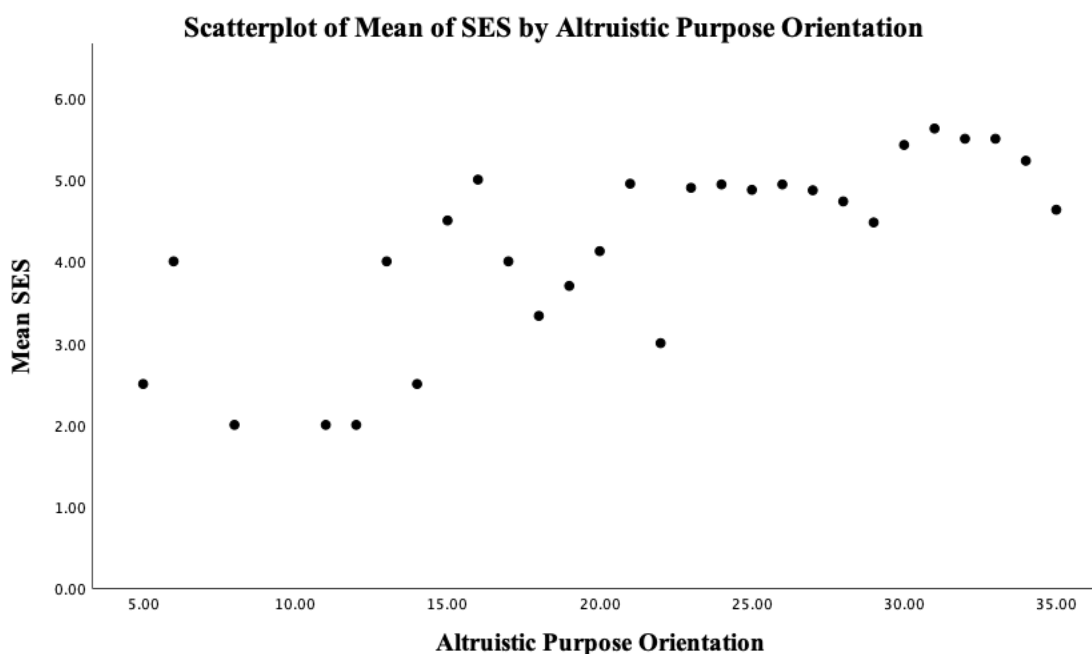
Altruistic Purpose and SES

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to analyze the relationship between SES and altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years of age (N=308). Preliminary analysis showed a monotonic relationship between SES and altruistic purpose, as assessed by visual inspection of a scatterplot. There was a statistically significant, weak positive correlation between altruistic purpose and SES, $r_s(306) = .260$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 4.4). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. SES and altruistic

purpose were weakly but significantly positively correlated in emerging adults 20-30 years old. Results are summarized in Table 4.7.

Figure 4.4

Scatterplot of SES by Altruistic Purpose



Research Question Six: Mediation Regression Analysis

Hypothesis 6 (H₆): The relationship between low SES and awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose is mediated by having versus not having a degree from a liberal arts college or university.

RQ6 was analyzed using regression analyses to analyze holding a degree from a liberal arts institution as a mediator between SES and each dimension and orientation of life purpose (awakening to, awareness of, and altruistic purpose). In each mediation model the mediating variable, holding a liberal arts degree versus not, was dichotomous. Thus, methods such as PROCESS were unavailable and inappropriate for mediation

analyses in these models. The Sobel test and using the product-of-coefficients model would not be appropriate for estimating significance as these require calculating the product of coefficients for variables measured on different scales (Schuster et al., 2023). Thus, the difference-in-coefficients (Baron & Kenny, 1986) method was used for analyses and the significance of the indirect effect was calculated using the method proposed by Iacobucci (2012), which provides an equation for calculating a $Z_{mediation}$ score using z-scores calculated using the B coefficients and standard error values for pathways A and B (See Figure 4.5 below).

Figure 4.5

Equation for Testing Significance of the Indirect Effect of A Binary Mediator

$$z_a = \hat{a} / \hat{s}_a,$$

$$z_b = \hat{b} / \hat{s}_b,$$

$$Z_{Mediation} = \frac{z_a z_b}{\hat{\sigma}_{z_{ab}}} = \frac{\frac{a}{s_a} \times \frac{b}{s_b}}{\sqrt{z_a^2 + z_b^2 + 1}}.$$

Note. Equation by Iacobucci, 2012.

For each mediation analysis, a linear regression was conducted to calculate coefficients for C , the direct effect of X on Y ($SES \rightarrow$ purpose). Then, binary logistic regression was conducted to calculate coefficients for the A pathway, the prediction of M by X ($SES \rightarrow$ Liberal Arts Degree). Finally, a linear regression was conducted to calculate coefficients, standard errors, and significance of

predicting Y (purpose) by both X and M (SES and liberal arts degree), resulting in coefficients for C' and the B pathway. The difference in C and C' was then analyzed according to the method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). If C' was closer to zero than C , there was evidence of a potential partial mediation. To test the significance of this, Z scores were calculated for A, B, and mediation according to the equation proposed by Iacobucci (2012). Finally, if the $Z_{mediation}$ score exceeded 1.96 ($\alpha=.05$, two-tailed test), significance of a partial mediation was suggested.

Mediation Analysis: Awakening to Purpose

Zero-order correlations were first examined using Pearson's product-moment correlations. The correlations, means, and standard deviations of each are reported below in Table 4.8. Significant positive correlations at the $p = <.001$ level were found between SES and holding a liberal arts degree, SES and awakening to purpose, and holding a liberal arts degree and awakening to purpose.

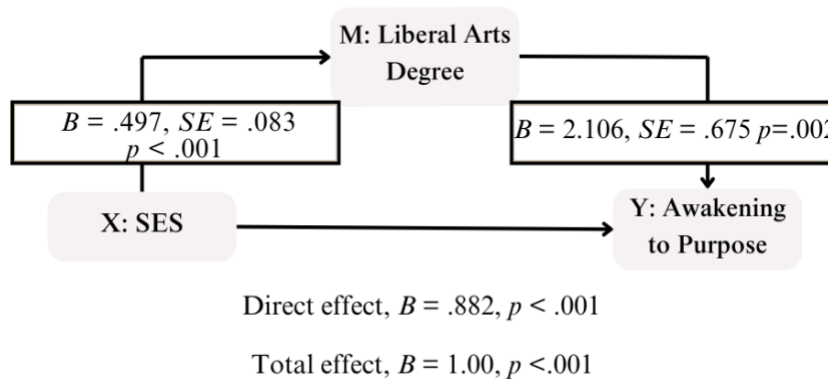
Data were assessed for outliers using case wise diagnostics. No outliers were detected ($N=308$). Next, the potential mediation of holding a liberal arts degree on the direct relationship between SES and awakening to purpose was assessed. In this analysis, SES was the predictor variable, awakening to purpose was the outcome variable, and holding a liberal arts degree was the mediator (See Figure 4.6)

Figure 4.6

Mediation Model Summary

MEDIATION ANALYSIS SUMMARY

N=308



The first step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the total effect (pathway C), if SES (X) predicted awakening to purpose (Y). The results showed that the total effect of SES on awakening to purpose was significant, $B = .882, p < .001$. The second step in the analysis used binary logistic regression to examine the effect of Pathway A, if SES (X) predicted holding a liberal arts degree (M). The results showed that the effect of SES on holding a liberal arts degree was significant, $B = .497, SE .083, p < .001$. The third step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the effect of Pathway B and Pathway C'. Pathway B examined if holding a liberal arts degree (M) predicted awakening to purpose (Y). The results showed that the effect of holding a liberal arts degree on awakening to purpose was significant, $B = 2.106, SE .675, p = .002$. Pathway C' examined if SES (X) no longer predicted, or had a lowered prediction of awakening to purpose (Y) when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree (M) was included. Results showed that the effect of SES on awakening to purpose when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree was significant, $B = .882, p < .001$ but had a lowered prediction than Pathway C. Thus, the significance of a possible partial mediation

was tested using Iacobucci's equation. This resulted in a $Z_{mediation}$ score of 2.737, which exceeded 1.96 and thus, was significant ($\alpha=.05$, two-tailed test). I rejected the null hypothesis. The results of this analysis supported holding a liberal arts degree as a partial mediator of the effect of SES on awakening to purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years old.

Mediation Analysis: Awareness of Purpose

Zero-order correlations were first examined using Pearson's product-moment correlations. Significant positive correlations at the $p = <.001$ level were found between SES and holding a liberal arts degree ($r=.361$), SES and awareness of purpose ($r=.281$), and holding a liberal arts degree and awareness of purpose ($r=.215$).

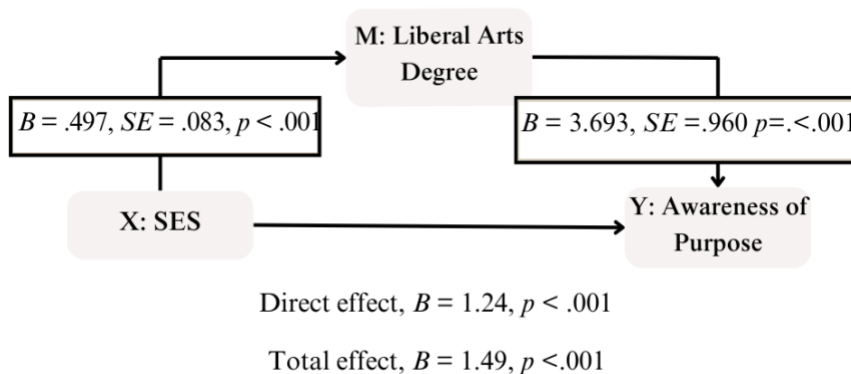
Data were assessed for outliers using case wise diagnostics. No outliers were detected ($N=308$). Next, the potential mediation of holding a liberal arts degree on the direct relationship between SES and awareness of purpose was assessed. In this analysis, SES was the predictor variable, awareness of purpose was the outcome variable, and holding a liberal arts degree was the mediator (See Figure 4.7)

Figure 4.7

Mediation Model Summary

MEDIATION ANALYSIS SUMMARY

N=308



The first step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the total effect (pathway C), if SES (X) predicted awareness of purpose (Y). The results showed that the total effect of SES on awareness of purpose was significant, $B = 1.49, p < .001$. The second step was repeated from the previous analysis. The third step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the effect of Pathway B and Pathway C'. Pathway B examined if holding a liberal arts degree (M) predicted awareness of purpose (Y). The results showed that the effect of holding a liberal arts degree on awareness of purpose was significant, $B = 3.693, SE .960, p = <.001$. Pathway C' examined if SES (X) no longer predicted, or had a lowered prediction of awareness of purpose (Y) when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree (M) was included. Results showed that the effect of SES on awareness of purpose when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree was significant, $B = 1.24, p < .001$ and had a lowered prediction than Pathway C. Thus, the significance of a possible partial mediation was tested using Iacobucci's equation. This resulted in a $Z_{mediation}$ score of 3.20, which exceeded 1.96 and thus, was significant. The

null hypothesis was rejected. Holding a liberal arts degree partially mediated the effect of SES on awareness of purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years old.

Mediation Analysis: Altruistic Purpose

Zero-order correlations were first examined using Pearson's product-moment correlations. The correlations, means, and standard deviations of each are reported below in Table 4.12. Significant positive correlations at the $p = <.001$ level were found between SES and holding a liberal arts degree ($r = .361$) and SES and altruistic purpose ($r=.288$). A statistically significant positive correlation at the $p = <.01$ level was found for holding a liberal arts degree and altruistic purpose ($r=.153$).

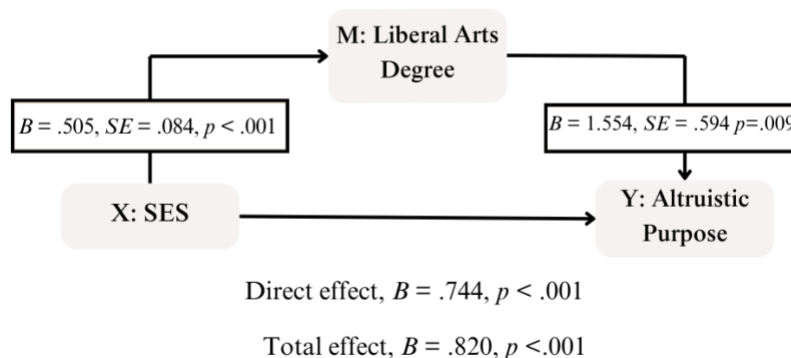
Data were assessed for outliers using case wise diagnostics. Four outliers were detected and removed before analysis ($N=304$). Next, the potential mediation of holding a liberal arts degree on the direct relationship between SES and altruistic purpose was assessed. In this analysis, SES was the predictor variable, altruistic purpose was the outcome variable, and holding a liberal arts degree was the mediator (See Figure 4.8)

Figure 4.8

Mediation Model Summary

MEDIATION ANALYSIS SUMMARY

N=304



The first step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the total effect (pathway C), if SES (X) predicted altruistic purpose (Y). The results showed that the total effect of SES on altruistic purpose was significant, $B = .820, p < .001$. The second step in the analysis used binary logistic regression to examine the effect of Pathway A, if SES (X) predicted holding a liberal arts degree (M). The results showed that the effect of SES on holding a liberal arts degree was significant, $B = .505, SE .084, p < .001$. The third step in the analysis used linear regression to examine the effect of Pathway B and Pathway C'. Pathway B examined if holding a liberal arts degree (M) predicted altruistic purpose (Y). The results showed that the effect of holding a liberal arts degree on altruistic purpose was significant, $B = 1.554, SE .594, p = .009$. Pathway C' examined if SES (X) no longer predicted, or had a lowered prediction of altruistic purpose (Y) when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree (M) was included. Results showed that the effect of SES on altruistic purpose when the mediator of holding a liberal arts degree was significant, $B = .744, p < .001$ and had a lowered prediction than Pathway C. Thus the significance of a possible partial mediation was tested using Iacobucci's equation. This

resulted in a $Z_{mediation}$ score of 2.731, which exceeded 1.96 and thus, was significant. The null hypothesis was rejected. Holding a liberal arts degree partially mediated the effect of SES on altruistic purpose among emerging adults 20-30 years old.

Summary

In summary, for research question one, after an independent samples Mann-Whitney U test, the null hypothesis was rejected. Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who did versus did not hold a degree from a liberal arts college or university had higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose. For research question two, no statistically significant correlations were found between age and dimensions or orientation of purpose among the sample. I failed to reject the null hypothesis. These findings, along with non-linear relationships found between age and dimensions/orientation of purpose and violation of assumptions to perform a moderated regression analysis, the decision was made not to move forward with the analysis for research question three which would have examined a liberal arts degree as a moderator in the relationship between age and purpose. I failed to reject the null hypothesis.

Research question four used multiple linear regression analyses to examine the relationships between perceived social support, perceived support from family, practicing gratitude, and religion/spirituality and dimensions and orientation of life purpose. Results of the first regression analysis statistically significantly predicted awakening to purpose by perceived social support, gratitude, and religion/spirituality but not perceived support from family. Results of the second regression analysis statistically significantly predicted awareness of purpose by perceived social support, perceived support from family, and religion/spirituality, but not gratitude. Results of the third regression analysis statistically

significantly predicted altruistic purpose by perceived social support, gratitude, and religion/spirituality but not perceived support from family.

For research question five, using Spearman's rho correlation analyses, SES and each dimension and orientation of purpose were weakly but significantly positively correlated in emerging adults 20-30 years old. Finally, for research question six, using mediation analyses, holding a liberal arts degree partially mediated the relationships between SES and each dimension and orientation of purpose.

In this chapter I provided an overview of the purpose of the study, the data collection process, and research questions guiding the study. Then, I provided the descriptive results including sample demographics, means to questionnaires, and any other relevant descriptive results. Next, I detailed the findings of the study including statistics, tables and comparisons. In the next chapter I will summarize the findings of the study and discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and biblical foundations. Finally, I will discuss the implications and limitations of the study findings as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between purpose in life and liberal arts educational experiences by comparing purpose dimensions and orientations among and between emerging adults who have completed a degree program at a liberal arts college or university and those who did not attend a liberal arts college or university. Dimensions of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and the altruistic purpose orientation were assessed between and within these two groups across emerging adulthood from 20-30 years of age. Further, life experiences shown in prior research to be potential correlates, barriers, and predictors of life purpose were analyzed. In the following chapter I summarize the key findings of the study, the implications of the findings for theory and practice, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Emerging adults 20-30 years of age who held a degree from a liberal arts college or university had higher levels of awareness of purpose, awakening to purpose, and altruistic purpose than those who did not have a degree from a liberal arts setting. There were no statistically significant correlations between age and dimensions or orientation of purpose among the sample of 20-30 year old emerging adults. These findings, along with non-linear relationships found between age and dimensions/orientation of purpose and a violation of assumptions to perform a moderated regression analysis resulted in the decision not to move forward with the analysis examining a liberal arts degree as a moderator in the relationship between age and purpose. Perceived social support,

gratitude, and religion/spirituality, but not support from family, statistically significantly predicted awakening to purpose. Perceived social support, perceived support from family, and religion/spirituality, but not gratitude, statistically significantly predicted awareness of purpose. Perceived social support, gratitude, and religion/spirituality, but not family support statistically significantly predicted altruistic purpose. There were weak but statistically significant positive correlations for socioeconomic status (SES) and each dimension and orientation of purpose for the entire sample. Finally, holding a liberal arts degree partially mediated the relationships between SES and each dimension and orientation of purpose for the sample.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the present study are important in contributing to existing knowledge of purpose development. Further, these results can inform future research and practice within counseling, psychology, education, and civic engagement. Additionally, the findings of the current research support biblical and theological teachings.

No Association Between Age and Purpose

Prior research and theory on purpose development has focused on adolescence and emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Bronk et al., 2009; Damon et al., 2003). Historically, it has been theorized that purpose develops during these stages (Erikson, 1968) and modern research supports this notion (Bronk et al., 2009; Bronk, 2014; Damon et al., 2003; Hill & Burrow, 2012; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). Thus, the lack of association between age and purpose from 20-30 years of age in this sample was unexpected. As developmental psychologists have introduced the concept of emerging adulthood and the extension of adolescent development into the 20s (Anghel et al., 2021; Arnett, 2000;

Damon & Malin, 2020; Eriksson et al., 2020; Malin, 2023), I hypothesized that this would be reflected in purpose differences across age from 20-30. The research findings, however, did not support this hypothesis. The results of this analysis suggest that purpose does not change significantly from age 20-30 for this population. This finding contributes to a better understanding of how purpose develops and helps to fill the gap in existing research examining purpose during this stage of life.

Antecedents to Purpose

Previous research has identified potential antecedents to purpose development including religion and spirituality (Campanario et al., 2022; Dobrow et al., 2023), social support (Damon & Colby, 2022; Gong et al., 2020), and practicing gratitude (Bronk et al., 2019a). Biblically, these antecedents are supported as well (*New International Version*, 2011, Acts 10:34-35, Colossians 4:6, James 2:1-4, Proverbs 27:17, Titus 2:3-5). Thus, the significant prediction of purpose dimensions and orientation by gratitude, perceived social supports, and religion/spirituality further supports existing theory, research, and biblical teachings. However, with the exception of perceived support from family for awakening to and altruistic purposes, and practicing gratitude for awareness of purpose, these antecedents predicted purpose in both groups of the sample. These results provide further support for experiences that might precede purpose and should be examined in the future as potential interventions for purpose development. The differences in family support and practicing gratitude not predicting different certain dimensions of purpose provides a more nuanced understanding of how these antecedents are related to purpose development. Indeed, the finding that practicing gratitude is predictive of awakening to purpose but not awareness of purpose provides support for the

potential of a gratitude intervention to promote purpose development. Finally, these findings support biblical wisdom and teachings exemplifying gratitude, supporting one another, and religion/spirituality as beneficial in life and part of living out God's calling.

SES and Purpose

Low SES has been suggested as a potential barrier to living a life of purpose (Ryff & Kim, 2020). However, recent research examining purpose and SES has produced mixed results regarding this theory. For example, Burrow et al. (2021) found a negative correlation between increased sense of purpose and low SES, with participants reporting that purpose in life motivated them despite living in poverty. Other studies of impoverished individuals found similar results of individual purpose despite low SES and experiencing marginalization (Bronk et al., 2019; Echeverria et al., 2021; Liang et al.; 2017; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2023). Thus, the finding in this research study of SES being significantly correlated with purpose dimensions and altruistic orientation is an important contribution to the existing literature. According to these results, higher SES is indeed correlated with higher levels of awakening to purpose, awareness of purpose, and altruistic purpose among 20-30 years olds. This further supports the need for interventions to assist individuals living in low SES to develop and live a life of purpose and thus, have access to the associated positive outcomes of living a life of purpose.

Liberal Arts Education and Purpose

Existing research has provided clear evidence that searching for, or being aware of life purpose is associated with a variety of positive outcomes in emerging adulthood and beyond (Bronk, 2014; Ryff, 2023; Ryff, & Kim, 2020). However, the research among adolescents and emerging adults has been almost exclusively conducted within

academic settings (Colby et al., 2023a, Lo & Ip, 2022; Ratner et al., 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2020; Yukhymenko-Lescroart et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Burrow, 2023). Additionally, there is clear evidence of a gap in research examining purpose among emerging adults not attending college (Malin, 2023). Additionally, it has been traditionally assumed that a liberal arts education is promotive of purpose development (Deresiewicz, 2014; Ryff & Kim, 2020). However, research comparing life purpose between emerging adults who have completed a liberal arts education with those who have not completed a liberal arts education is limited and outdated (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023). If the liberal arts experience is indeed promotive of an increase in life purpose, there should be differences between purpose dimensions and orientations between these two groups (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023). The results of this research study indeed found a difference in each dimension and orientation of purpose between the group of emerging adults holding a liberal arts degree and the group without. This finding supports existing theory regarding exposure to the liberal arts and purpose development (Damon, 2022; Ryff & Kim, 2020; Sullivan, 2016). Though not causal evidence, these results provide empirical support to continue the examination of a liberal arts education as promotive of purpose development.

The finding that a liberal arts education mediated the relationship between SES and each purpose dimension and orientation further supports the hypothesis that a liberal arts education promotes purpose development. For those in the research sample, the association between low SES and lower purpose was partially mediated by holding a liberal arts degree. Thus, for those who held a liberal arts degree but remained in a low SES, purpose levels were higher than participants in low SES without a liberal arts

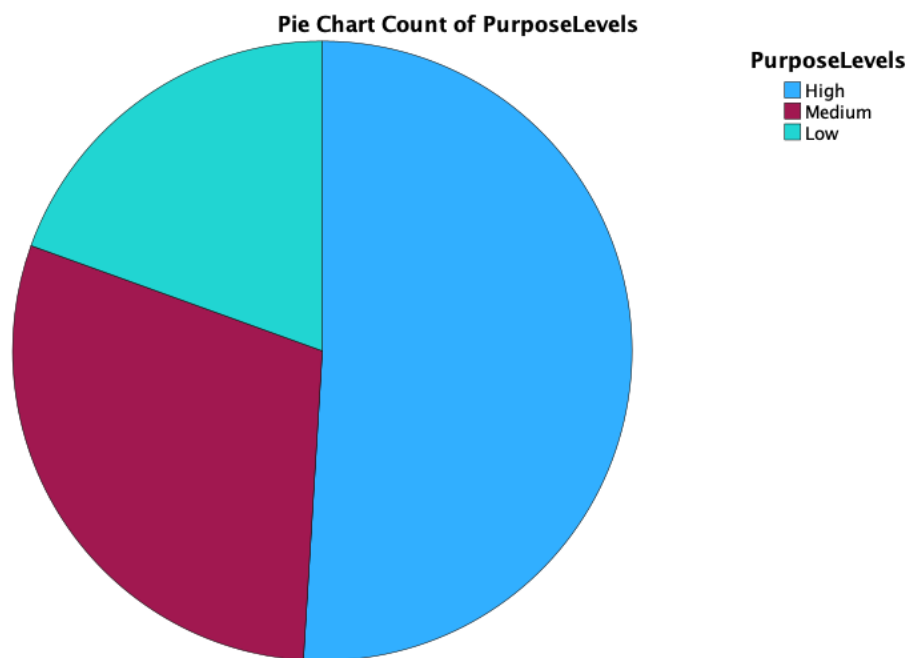
degree. This is compelling evidence of the importance of furthering the examination of liberal arts experiences as a potential cause of increased purpose. Further, this finding highlights the importance of developing, testing, and providing access to interventions for increasing purpose among individuals who do not or cannot attend liberal arts institutions. Again, this supports biblical teaching charging Christians to care for one another and support one another in living out the Lord's calling in our lives.

Additional Findings

Post-hoc analyses of the data collected in this study provided additional findings of note. First, there were no significant differences in minority status or ethnicity between the liberal arts degree holder group and the group without a liberal arts degree. In the liberal arts degree group, 44.3% of participants were minorities, with 15.7% Asian, 12.9% Black or African American, 10.7% Hispanic or Latino, 55.7% White, and 5% Other. In the no liberal arts degree group, 42.3% of participants were minorities, with 13.1% Asian, 11.9% Black or African American, 14.3% Hispanic or Latino, 57.7% White, and 2.4% Other. Each group was relatively equal with regard to these demographics. This finding supports the strength of the between-group differences found because differences found between groups cannot be attributed to pre-existing differences in groups in terms of minority status or ethnicity. This is important in understanding the results of the research with regard to differences in ethnicity and purpose. In a previous research study examining differences in purpose between college educated participants and non-college-graduates, Sumner (2016) found no differences in purpose levels between groups. However, in Sumner's study, there were significantly more African American participants in the non-educated group, potentially skewing the results. Indeed,

previous researchers have found that African Americans tend to have higher levels of purpose (Bronk, 2014; Coelho et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2022). In the current study, across all participants, African American participants had significantly higher levels of awakening to purpose ($Mdn = 21.5$) compared with other ethnicities ($Mdn = 18$) and African American participants had significantly higher levels of awareness of purpose ($Mdn = 25$) compared with other ethnicities ($Mdn = 19$), $U = 6185.50$, $z = 3.286$, $p = .001$. This finding is in alignment with prior research and, with both groups being equal in terms of ethnicity, provides added support to the overall findings of difference in purpose between emerging adults with versus without a liberal arts degree. Altruistic purpose levels were the same between groups ($Mdn = 28$), $U = 5707$, $z = 1.125$, $p = .261$.

Additionally, the overall levels of awareness of purpose and altruistic purpose among all participants were higher than is typically reported in existing literature. Existing and historical literature reports that a minority of individuals have a sense of purpose in life; often estimated to be around 31% of the population of adults (Colby, 2020) and growing from a minority of around 20-25% of adolescents and emerging adults to around 40-50% of 30 year olds (Damon & Malin, 2020). However, the results of this study revealed higher levels for all participants (See Figure 5.1 below). This finding is in contrast with much of the existing literature (Damon & Colby, 2022; Pfund & Lewis, 2020; Ryff, 2020). If this result is replicated, this finding may provide additional insight into purpose among both collegiate and non-collegiate emerging adults aged 20-30.

Figure 5.1*Overall Percentage of Purpose Levels***Implications**

The gap in existing research exploring purpose among non-college emerging adults is evident and has been suggested as a future research need by current researchers (Malin, 2023). This study begins to fill this gap. Prior to this study, there was no robust or recent research comparing life purpose between emerging adults with traditional, liberal arts degrees and those without (Burrow, 2023). This research encourages further study among and between these groups, which may lead to a better understanding of how a liberal arts education might impact purpose development, if these impacts persist over time, and if interventions could be developed to positively impact emerging adults who do not pursue traditional higher education.

The implications of these research findings inform future research on the development of purpose and highlight the importance of approaching the construct of

purpose as multidimensional and dynamic in nature, rather than just investigating purpose as unidimensional and unchanging. Further, the findings provide support for future research investigating potential interventions aimed at increasing purpose in life and subsequent experimental evaluation of these new interventions. Though causal conclusions cannot be made about the findings of this study, the findings provide additional support for the theory that a liberal arts education, and the studied antecedents may be promotive of purpose and can encourage continued research on the topic. The findings also provide support for further research into SES as a potential barrier to purpose. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest the need for further analyses of the liberal arts experience as a partial mediator in the relationship between SES and purpose.

Ideally, future research on the topic will use methodological approaches which allow for causal conclusions to be drawn from research results. Though this study did not employ such methodology, the results provide support for the theory that the liberal arts experience benefits students beyond education alone, and can be used to provide additional support for the value of a liberal arts education. These findings also provide additional information regarding purpose and its potential antecedents and barriers, which can serve as guidance for educators, counselors, religious leaders, and other community helpers.

Limitations

Important limitations related to the methodological design of this study exist. First, this study was correlational in nature rather than experimental. Thus, the relationships found between variables and differences between groups do not suggest

causation (Mohajan, 2020). Though informative, future experimental research is needed to determine if these variables influence purpose directly. Further, generalizability is limited due to the participants who completed the study. Participants were U.S. citizens, speak the English language, are 20-30 years of age, and are internet users. Thus, results are not generalizable to populations which do not match these descriptors. Additionally, these results may not be generalizable to emerging adults in the US who do not often use technology, as Prolific users represent individuals who are comfortable with and often using technology such as the Prolific platform (Wright, 2023). This is similar to traditional sampling bias with pen-and-paper, mail-in, and telephone surveys. Research suggests that this bias is no greater among online surveys than traditional survey methods (Kees et al., 2017). However, research suggests results using the Prolific platform have good external validity overall (Péer et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). Further, results are not generalizable to emerging adults in other distinct sub-cultures or countries.

Methodologically, the cross-sectional design is another limitation of the study. Though this method allows for a better understanding of how a sense of purpose might develop across emerging adulthood under limited availability of time, longitudinal research will be needed to fully understand how this construct develops across time. Ideally, longitudinal research utilizing a pre-test-post-test design with similar groups as this study will be conducted. Finally, survey biases, including social desirability, response, and volunteer biases, are weaknesses of any survey-based study (Mohajan, 2020).

Finally, among the sample there were important differences in employment status. Among the participants, 51% reported that they were not in full-time employment.

Though only 21% reported that they were unemployed and seeking work, differences in employment are key to the examination of SES and purpose. Thus, results should be further examined for replication in a group of working individuals, ideally with further assessment of job types (blue collar, etc.).

Recommendations for Future Research

As with all research, this study should be replicated to assess consistency of findings and ideally, expanded with new research questions in mind. Additionally, further research will be needed to examine how, why, and for whom the differences in purpose between liberal arts educated individuals and those without liberal arts experiences exist. This research encourages further study among and between these groups, which can lead to a better understanding of how a liberal arts education might impact purpose development, if these impacts persist over time, and if interventions could be developed to positively impact emerging adults who do not pursue traditional higher education. To assess these outstanding questions, future research will need to employ longitudinal and experimental designs. Additionally, there is robust research identifying potential antecedents to purpose (Czyżowska & Gurba, 2022; Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2022; Gong et al., 2020; King et al., 2023; Malin, 2023; Maranges et al., 2024; Wilson & Hill, 2022). However, few studies have examined the effect of interventions meant to increase purpose overall. Thus, future research should be conducted to experimentally assess these antecedents as potential interventions.

An additional aspect of life relevant to this age group which might impact purpose is parenting (Mahalick et al., 2020). As such, future research among this age group should include questions regarding parenting and family to assess potential associations

with purpose. Similarly, assessing the impact of employment status on purpose and including an examination of working classes such as blue-collar work compared with white-collar work would provide deeper understanding of how work relates to purpose among this age group. Though some research has examined these differences in older populations (Yemiscigil et al., 2021), no research has examined these potential impacts among emerging adults. Further, future research should examine antecedents to purpose which are more likely to be experienced in a liberal arts setting exclusively to understand these differences between groups and their relationship with purpose development. Finally, as this study found unexpected and contrasting levels of purpose, especially altruistic purpose, future research should assess the prevalence of purpose among this age group and provide comparisons with purpose levels before and after the ages of 20-30.

Summary

In summary, previous research on life purpose has provided robust evidence of positive outcomes associated with having a sense of purpose in life (Bronk & Damon, 2022; Bronk et al., 2023; Damon & Colby, 2022; Malin, 2023). Fully understanding how purpose develops, what promotes this development, and any barriers preventing purpose are important not only ethically but also theologically. As Christians are called to take care of one another, it is important to identify potential barriers and antecedents for all emerging adults in pursuit of the Lord's ultimate purpose for His creation. Developing purpose in life, with a focus on beyond the self (BTS) purpose is one part of God's call to take care of one another as Christians. Biblically, God's children are called to answer the Lord's call in their individual lives (1 Corinthians 7:17) and to love one another and help each other (Galatians 6:2). Recognizing life's purpose and living a life that is pleasing to

the Lord (Ephesians 4:1) honors Him and we must understand these aspects of how purpose do and do not develop in order to encourage this recognition.

While it has been assumed that completing a liberal arts education encourages the identification of a life purpose (Deresiewicz, 2014; Malin, 2023; Sullivan, 2016) there has been little-to-no research directly investigating if and how a liberal arts degree is promotive of purpose development. Additionally, no comparison between groups of emerging adults with and without a liberal arts degree has previously been conducted. In fact, most of the focus of research on life purpose among adolescents and emerging adults has been conducted in academic settings. Thus, little is known about how purpose might develop outside of an academic setting. Importantly, researchers and society have begun to question the potential influence of college and liberal arts education, specifically focusing on purpose development as well as the overall value of a liberal arts education (Deresiewicz, 2014; Sullivan, 2016). Thus, the results of this research suggesting that a liberal arts education is predictive of higher purpose provides overall support for the value of a liberal arts education. Further, the results suggest that barriers to accessing higher education may also pose as additional barriers to purpose development (Damon & Colby, 2022; Ryff, 2023). This study adds richly to the understanding of potential antecedents and barriers to purpose. The findings provide important direction for future investigations of the topic of purpose in life, which despite worldly barriers which exist for many, can ultimately aid in an individual's attainment of God's purpose.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT INFORMATION

ATTENTION ADULTS 20-30 YEARS OF AGE: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a PhD in Psychology degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to assess the relationship between education, age, religion, gratitude, social supports, and purpose in life. To participate, you must be an emerging adult between the ages of 20 and 30 years old who is a U. S. resident, speak the English language, and **either** have completed a degree program from a liberal arts college or university **or** have never attended college. A liberal arts university is defined as a college or university which has “academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, mathematics, and social and physical sciences as distinct from professional, vocational or technical subjects” (Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 472). Participants will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey, which should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you are interested and eligible, please click the “Take Part in this Study” button below. Consent information is provided as the first page of the survey. Participants will complete the survey, be redirected to Prolific with a completion code, and then receive a \$3 USD compensation to their Prolific account for a completed survey.

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION SHEET

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: A Comparison of Purpose in Life Among and Between Emerging Adults with and Without College Experience

Principal Investigator: Caroline Sowards, Doctoral Candidate., Psychology Department, Liberty University

Key Information about the Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 20-30 years of age, a U.S. resident, able to speak English, and either have completed a degree program from a liberal arts college or university or never have attended college.

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between purpose in life and liberal arts educational experiences. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey instrument asking questions related to purpose in life, educational experiences, and life experiences. This will take approximately 15 minutes.
- Participants who complete the survey will be compensated \$3.00 via the Prolific platform.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between purpose in life and liberal arts educational experiences. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey instrument asking questions related to purpose in life, educational experiences, and life experiences.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to complete an online survey which will take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of potential experiences related to understanding purpose in life including identifying potential barriers and future interventions.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Emotional discomfort could occur when thinking about answers to the questions related to purpose and religion/spirituality.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and her research mentor will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. The researcher and her research advisor. Data will be retained indefinitely.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. After completing the survey participants will be given a completion code and redirected to the Prolific website. They will then enter the completion code which will trigger a three U.S. Dollars (\$3.00) compensation on the Prolific platform.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time before submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Caroline Sowards. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at

████████████████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, ██████████
████████████████████

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and want to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

What is your age?

What gender are you currently?

Man

Woman

Non-Binary

Rather Not Say

Which of these is the highest level of education you have completed?

No formal qualifications

Secondary education (e.g. GED)

High-school diploma

Technical/Community college

Undergraduate degree

Master's degree

Doctorate degree

Are you a student?

Yes, an undergraduate student

Yes, a graduate student

No

Please indicate your ethnicity (i.e. peoples' ethnicity describes their feeling of belonging and attachment to a distinct group of a larger population that shares their ancestry, color, language or religion)?

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

White

Other

What is your employment status?

Full-time

Part-time

Due to start a new job within the next month

Unemployed (and job seeking)

Not in paid work (e.g. homemaker, retired, disabled)

Other

This scale represents where people stand in society. Higher numbers represent people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs.

Lower numbers represent people who are the worst off, those who have the least money, least education, worst jobs, or no job. What number best represents where you think you

stand on this scale?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

If you graduated from college, did you attend a liberal arts college or university - defined as: A college or university which has “academic subjects such as literature, philosophy, mathematics, and social and physical sciences as distinct from professional, vocational or technical subjects” (Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 472).

Yes

No

Unsure

APPENDIX D: REVISED SENSE OF PURPOSE SCALE (SOPS-2)

Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. A., & Sharma, G. (2020). Examining the factor structure of the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) with adults. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 15(4), 1203-1222. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-019-09729-w>

Sharma, G., & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. A. (2019). Validation of the Revised Sense of Purpose Scale (SOPS-2) with emerging adults. *Journal of Character Education*, 15(2), 39-52.

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APPENDIX E: DAILY SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE SCALE (DSES)

The list that follows includes items you may or may not experience. Please consider how often you directly have this experience, and try to disregard whether you feel you should or should not have these experiences. A number of items use the word 'God.' If this word is not a comfortable one for you, please substitute another word that calls to mind the divine or holy for you.

	Many times a day	Every day	Most days	Some days	Once in a while	Never
I feel God's presence.						
I experience a connection to all of life.						
During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.						
I find strength in my religion or spirituality.						
I find comfort in my religion or spirituality.						
I feel deep inner peace or harmony.						
I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities.						
I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.						
I feel God's love for me, directly.						
I feel God's love for me, through others.						
I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.						
I feel thankful for my blessings.						
I feel a selfless caring for others.						
I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.						
I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine.						

	Not at all	Somewhat close	Very close	As close as possible
In general, how close do you feel to God?				

The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale © Lynn G. Underwood www.dsesc.org

Do not copy without permission of the author.

Underwood, LG. 2006. Ordinary Spiritual Experience: Qualitative Research, Interpretive Guidelines, and Population Distribution for the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion/ Archiv für Religionspsychologie*, 28:1 181-218.

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Daily Spiritual Experience Scale Registration Form

By affixing your name to this form you agree to:

1. Include “© Lynn G Underwood www.dsescscale.org permission required to copy or publish” on any copies of the scale you distribute, print or publish.
2. Appropriately cite one of the papers below in your publication of results:
Underwood, LG (2006) Ordinary Spiritual Experience: Qualitative Research, Interpretive Guidelines, and Population Distribution for the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 28:1, 181-218
Underwood LG (2011) The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Overview and Results. *Religions*; 2(1): 29-50.
3. Keep Lynn Underwood informed of uses of the scale, results from your work, and publications and presentations that come from use of the scale.

If you are using the open-ended form or checklist form of the scale, contact [REDACTED] for a copy with the appropriate acknowledgments.

www.dsescscale.org contains an accurate form of the scale and additional information. It is the best source for updated information about the scale. Scoring information can be found in Underwood (2006), Underwood (2011), and Underwood (2020)

By submitting this registration you are giving permission for Lynn Underwood to send you occasional updates related to her work.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX F: THE PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILY (PSS-Fr) AND
PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS (PSS-Fa) SCALES

Procidano, M. E., & Heller, K. (1983). Measures of perceived social support from friends and from family: Three validation studies. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 11, 1-24.

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APPENDIX G: THE GRATITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE – 6

Using the scale below, as a guide, write a number beside each statement to indicate how much you agree with it.

1 = strongly disagree

2= disagree

3 = slightly disagree

4 = neutral

5= slightly agree

6= agree

7= strongly agree

___ 1. I have so much in my life to be thankful for.

___ 2. If I had to list everything that grateful for, it would be a very long list.

___ 3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.

___ 4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.

___ 5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.

___ 6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.

Items 3 and 6 are reverse scored.