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Theoretically, purpose serves as a basic dimension of healthy psychological functioning and an important protective factor from psychopathology. Theory alone, however, is insufficient to answer critical questions about human behavior and functioning; we require empirical evidence that explores the parameters of purpose with respect to measurement, prediction, and modification. Here, we provide empirically supported insights about how purpose can operate as a beneficial outcome (e.g., marker of well-being), a predictor or mechanism that accounts for benefits that a person derives (such as from an intervention), or a moderator that offers insight into when benefits arise. Advancing the study of purpose requires careful consideration of how purpose is conceptualized, manipulated, and measured across the lifespan. Our aim is to help scientists understand, specify, and conduct high-quality studies of purpose in life.

Public Significance Statement
This article reviews and synthesizes what is known about the nature and benefits of human beings possessing and working toward a purpose in life. We detail the various ways that a purpose can serve a person and the specific ways that psychologists and other mental health professionals can study and target this highly desirable psychological resource.

Keywords: purpose in life, meaning in life, goals, well-being, resilience

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There are unique psychological and physical benefits afforded by the possession and strength of a purpose in life. Purpose in life figures prominently in how people cope with negative life events, whether major stressors or daily hassles (e.g., Hill et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019). People with a stronger life purpose tend to live longer (R. Cohen et al., 2016) and show evidence of greater physiological health 10 years later (e.g., resting cardiovascular activity, metabolism, inflammation; Zilioli et al., 2015). Notably, these findings cannot be accounted for by demographics (race, sex, age, socioeconomic status) or indicators of subjective well-being (positive affect, negative affect, social relationship quality). Research on purpose in life grew exponentially since the late 1990s (Wong, 2012), with a variety of theories, constructs, and research methodologies. This variety, however, produced a fragmented body of evidence.

In the past decade, purpose researchers made significant methodological improvements that affect not only their area of inquiry but also the broader study of purpose—especially on methodology issues that improve the strength, stability, and generalizability of effects (e.g., priming purpose; Burrow & Hill, 2013; refined assessment approaches; Martela & Steger, 2023; multivariate examinations of predictors; Nakamura et al., 2022; preregistered hypothesis tests; Ratner et al., 2022). Below, we discuss advances in research and practice with respect to defining, modeling, and testing purpose in life. Our aim is to help others contribute to a burgeoning area of inquiry with vast, untapped potential.

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(Re)Defining Purpose in Life

Varying theories lead to varied definitions of purpose, and, as such, a diffusion of results makes the research difficult to synthesize. Methods of measurement (e.g., self-report) aside, purpose remains so varied with respect to its definition, researchers may not be capturing potential effects of purpose—or, at other times, may be observing an illusory effect. Creating a more universal definition of purpose will lead to more consistent findings.

Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that can be evaluated on the dimensions of strength (i.e., the influence it has on behavior), scope (i.e., the range of domains affected), and awareness (i.e., the degree to which there is conscious clarity and articulation; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). A purpose is *central* such that the nature of these concerns and pursuits becomes a predominant theme of a person's identity. A purpose is *self-organizing* in that it motivates a person to dedicate finite resources toward certain goals and away from others; it is easier to dedicate time, energy, attention, money, and social capital when there is hope that effort translates into purpose-related progress. A purpose is a *life aim* represented as a long-term commitment that is difficult to accomplish in a short period. For instance, a purpose might be to care for animals, which have no terminal end. A goal toward that purpose might be fulfilled by becoming a veterinarian, which has a clear stopping point after receipt of a degree and job. Effort expenditure toward a purpose can be viewed as striving toward reinforcing goals that are congruent with one's deepest values (Emmons, 2003; Sheldon, 2004). Central, self-organizing, life-aim features define purpose.

If purpose is present, we can evaluate how this resource operates in a person's life in terms of strength, scope, and awareness. A person's purpose, if present, lies on a spectrum from weak to strong in terms of the influence on behavior, effort expenditure, decision making, and sacrifices. A person's purpose lies on a spectrum from narrow to broad scope in terms of life domains affected. A person's purpose can reside in full conscious awareness as a clear, well-articulated part of their life to being outside conscious awareness.

In essence, there are three defining features of purpose (a central, self-organizing, life aim) and three dimensions to evaluate how much a person's life is driven by a purpose (strength, scope, awareness). With greater endorsement of these features and dimensions, a person can be said to possess a more potent purpose. A measure that captures these features and dimensions will more effectively capture the power and influence of purpose in a person's life.

Some researchers conceptualize purpose as a binary state (i.e., purpose or no purpose); to treat our model as such, researchers would need to create and justify cut scores for each dimension such that those who score below (or above) a particular threshold would be deemed to have a purpose; others would be treated as "non" purposeful or vice versa. The beauty of a dimensional approach is that, if desired, a researcher can decide to dichotomize data if they have a sufficient sample of people who score zero on items capturing purpose. To allow for this scientific flexibility, we recommend that assessment approaches using dimensional scales provide anchors that allow respondents to endorse an absence of purpose and/or their purpose has no influence on daily life in terms of behavior, decision making, and energy.[1]

One critical question is whether the orientation of purpose (i.e., on oneself or other people/things) should be a definitional criterion. Purpose is often referred to as "of consequence to the world beyond the self" (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Embedded in this reference are empirical questions: How often does a purpose transcend the self? What are the consequences, if any, when a person's purpose is more other-oriented than self-oriented?

In studies on purpose, researchers used qualitative analysis to identify existing themes. Eleven themes of purpose emerged: personal, physical, education, family, lifestyle, relationships, occupation, material, leisure, success, and social responsibility; a social responsibility category occurred infrequently and was dropped from the analysis (Cross & Markus, 1991). These results suggest that a sizeable number of purposes in life revolve around the self, spanning pleasure and achievement. Purpose is not restricted to other-oriented aims.

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[1] We hypothesize that the greater number of purposes a person has, the fewer, less intense psychological benefits. This hypothesis stems from the load-bearing capability model of stress, where attempting to devote time, energy, and money toward too many purposes leads to more strain than psychological gain (e.g., Karasek, 1979).

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There is value in treating the content of purpose separately from the definition. We hypothesize that a purpose transcending self-preservation and self-advancement might result in greater personal and societal benefits. Self-transcendence is a socially desirable motivation and, as such, likely garners greater support than self-oriented pursuits. For example, adolescents with other-oriented purposes (such as improving society, supporting family, serving God, helping others) put more effort into aligned goal pursuit and extract greater well-being than adolescents with self-oriented purposes (such as creating beauty; e.g., Bronk & Finch, 2010).

Other studies demonstrate the benefits afforded by self-oriented purposes. Across three studies, adults rated self-oriented purposes (such as accepting one's authentic self) as more important than self-transcendence (trying to make the world a better place; Hill, Burrow, Brandenberger, et al., 2010; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). A stronger belief that self-oriented purposes are achievable correlated with greater well-being (e.g., increased vitality, fewer psychopathological symptoms), whereas belief in the achievability of self-transcendent purposes was weakly or unrelated to well-being. These data suggest that neglecting self-oriented purposes artificially restricts the range of purposes that people create, pursue, and derive benefits from. A concrete definition with three elements of purpose (central, self-organizing, life aim) and a potentially valuable moderator (orientation toward self or others) offers building blocks to advance theory and research.

Disentangling Purpose From Related Constructs

Definitions and models exist that conflate purpose with adjacent constructs such as meaning in life, values, and various well-being dimensions (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Frankl, 1959; Reker & Peacock, 1981; Ryff, 1989). To ensure measurement practices enable progress in psychological science—especially in the study of psychological strengths and well-being—measurement models must distinguish the uniqueness of purpose. Failure to do so leads to construct ambiguity and, worse, scientific misunderstanding and stagnation.

Separating Purpose From Meaning in Life

Purpose in life and meaning in life are often treated as interchangeable constructs. There is a wide range of experiences that produce a meaningful existence. A person with a greater understanding of their psyche (e.g., what is the underlying motivation to be a class clown; what triggers social anxiety symptoms) and the external environment (e.g., what are the early warning signs of potential aggression by a stranger; what qualities are appealing in a romantic partner) not only experiences a meaningful existence but possesses an advantage in navigating challenges in daily life. A person develops a coherent meaning system by drawing connections and inferences about the self, other people, and the world around them. This meaning system is a desirable endpoint for making sense about one's life. Additionally, this meaning system can aid in the development of life aspirations and be the springboard to a purpose (King & Hicks, 2021).

A meaningful life can be a function of any combination of the following: a person making sense about their life, other people, and the world (comprehension), a person feeling their life is worth living (significance), or the presence of purpose (George & Park, 2016, 2017). A person can have reliable sources of meaning (e.g., feeling that their work is intrinsically valuable and worthwhile) without any semblance of purpose in life. Cumulative evidence finds that purpose is related but distinct from the other two dimensions of meaning (significance and comprehension), and there are psychological benefits unique to purpose (e.g., Costin & Vignoles, 2020; George & Park, 2017; Li et al., 2021; Martela & Steger, 2023).

Older instruments often mix the distinct constructs of meaning and purpose. The lead author of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) offers criticism that "The MLQ-P [presence subscale] includes items that tap both coherence (e.g., 'I understand my life's meaning') and purpose (e.g., 'My life has a clear sense of purpose'), but they are summed into a single scale score" (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 533). We must reconsider assessment tools that introduce nonrandom error into the literature, which is why we recommend newer, precise, multidimensional approaches (e.g., George & Park, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2023).

Separating Purpose From Goals

Purpose in life and goals can be distinguished. People can evaluate whether they accomplished goal endpoints (e.g.,

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"lose 10 pounds"). Purpose is a broader aim that often exists without an attainable outcome (Elliot, 2006). Instead, purpose motivates the creation and pursuit of specific goals. In this way, purpose stimulates goals that are consistent with the overarching life mission. Purpose can be thought of as a "goal manager" that organizes and drives higher order goals, which in turn drive subgoals (Elliot et al., 2006; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). For example, a person's purpose might be to "live a healthy lifestyle." This purpose stimulates the higher order goal of "adhering to a consistent exercise regimen," which in turn stimulates the subgoal of "completing a 30-minute cardiovascular workout four times per week."

Not all goals are driven by or indicative of a purpose. A person might construct and pursue goals that reflect temporary needs or situational circumstances independent of or in conflict with a purpose. Nonetheless, people who pursue goals congruent with their purpose might be more successful and derive greater benefits from achieving these goals (Lewis, 2020). Because purpose offers guidance for creating and pursuing goals, people who commit to goals consistent with their purpose might be better able to achieve these goals and create new ones.

Research on the "vertical coherence" of actions taken by the self is relevant to distinguishing purpose and goals. People differ in the degree that everyday behaviors and decisions and short- and moderate-time goals facilitate greater effort and progress toward a higher order purpose—and the possible self that emerges from being purpose-driven. For instance, someone's purpose might be to fully develop their athletic potential, and their goals might be to work out regularly and learn about human physiology. An examination of the past month of behaviors might show an average of three weekly gym trips, five sessions with a personal trainer, and pursuit of a degree in exercise science. By itself, this

person shows a high degree of vertical coherence with their actions. If they missed workouts because they worked late or consumed large amounts of junk food, then these actions reduced the amount of vertical coherence for the same individual. When existing goals enable other goals (instead of hindering), greater horizontal coherence is present. The opposite of vertical and horizontal self-coherence is conflict among goals and behaviors, which interfere with a purpose. A growing body of work shows that a person with greater self-coherence in their activity experiences greater well-being (e.g., Sheldon & Kasser, 1995) and greater enjoyment and effort during the pursuit of a purpose (e.g., Durik & Harackiewicz, 2003). Moreover, when people develop a coherent narrative about how various parts of a life fit together, this is linked with greater well-being (McAdams & Olson, 2010). Harmonious integration enhances the psychological benefits of a purpose.

Separating Purpose From Values

Values play an integral role in the development of purpose, but they are not the same mechanism. Values reflect life domains that people care deeply about and consider to be important principles when thinking about their identity (Reilly et al., 2019). Examples of valued domains include family, career, spirituality, autonomy, and reputation. Examples of values in domains include being compassionate when interacting with kids, helping animals live with minimal suffering, or striving to make decisions in accordance with God's teachings. Purpose is the highest order aim that often reflects a subset of a person's values. A person's purpose might be criminal justice reform, which aligns with values of protecting vulnerable populations and treating people with dignity. Values may drive purpose, as clarity about values and being able to connect them to goals increase the likelihood of living with intention (Dahl et al., 2020). For example, a person values family, and consequently, their purpose is to maintain high-quality relationships with their children. Purpose might drive values, such as a person seeking to empower disadvantaged individuals and, in pursuit of that purpose, realize a goal of becoming an attorney and strengthen their values of caring for others and contributing to their community. As evidenced by these examples, distinguishing between values and purpose can be challenging.

Empirical evidence offers support for the distinction between purpose and values. The Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) showed small positive correlations with values such as self-acceptance/personal growth (.22), intimacy/friendship (.28), and community contribution (.22; Siwek et al., 2017). In studies with the same measure, small positive correlations emerged with how much specific values served as "the guiding principle" in people's lives (rs between .12 with valuing pleasure to

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.23 with wisdom and .37 with salvation, to a high of .44 with responsible; Paloutzian, 1981). Other studies find that purpose is positively correlated with behaving in ways that align with self-defined values (.54; Trompetter et al., 2013). Purpose in life is strongly correlated with the degree that people feel they are making behavioral progress toward their most important values (.59) and avoiding unwanted experiences and distraction from values (−.68; Smout et al., 2014). A study of 9,803 adults from over 70 countries found that only 37% viewed work (including homemakers and blue- and white-collar professionals) as a calling or purpose where what they do "for a living is a vital part of who she is … one of the first things she tells people about herself" (Peterson et al., 2009).

Together, findings indicate that a sense of purpose might be derived from a person's values, but the presence of values does not dictate the strength of purpose. Someone might value being honest, physically fit, safe from danger, and teaching others and yet have no central, self-organizing, life aim related to these values. Humans have values and psychological strengths that often fail to translate into this psychological asset called purpose in life.

Research on value affirmation interventions finds support for a direct linkage to purpose (Burd & Burrow, 2017). Respondents contemplate positive features of the self, and this attention is thought to buffer against self-threatening events and information (e.g., G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014). People are reminded of the resources available to the self, altering one's capacity to deal with stressful demands. Proposed ways that value affirmation helps a person include increased self-efficacy and optimism when handling stressors, bolstering an orientation to threat that involves openness and approach instead of defensiveness and avoidance, and helping to clarify their purpose(s) in life (Howell, 2017).

Effective self-affirmation strategies include writing and thinking about one's purpose (Burrow & Hill, 2013) or important relationships, social group memberships, and projects outside of the self (e.g., G. L. Cohen et al., 2009; Crocker et al., 2008).

When a purpose is present, the values, psychological strengths, and relationships that are integral to the self are often embedded in the effortful pursuit of purpose. That said, important distinctions are worthy of investigation because

> Inducing purpose may make individuals less likely to abandon unattainable goals as it may provide strong motivation to attain a particular future, whereas with self-affirmation, drawing on other available self-resources already presently available may make individuals more likely to do so by providing an immediate reminder that the present self already has much available. (Burd & Burrow, 2017, p. 9)

Separating Purpose From Well-Being

Whether purpose represents an element or cause of well-being is a point of continued debate. Some argue that purpose in life is a core element of well-being. For example, purpose is one of six components in Ryff's (1989) seminal model of psychological well-being. Others argue that purpose is not an element of well-being but instead an attribute when present that influences well-being (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). We adopt this latter perspective and define well-being as perceived enjoyment and fulfillment with one's life as a whole (Goodman et al., 2021). In this framework, purpose is a potential cause of well-being, whereas the psychological benefits from pursuing a purpose are elements of well-being.

Correlations and factor analytic models show the separability of purpose from other well-being dimensions. This includes moderate, positive correlations between purpose and constructs such as life satisfaction, self-mastery, self-esteem (.36, .52, and .44, respectively; Scheier et al., 2006), and autonomy (.55; Hadden & Smith, 2019). Purpose correlates as low as .39 with a sense of control (Costin & Vignoles, 2020) and .56 with a sense of agency (Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016). Purpose can be considered a predictor of well-being that is associated with but distinct from desirable outcomes. For example, in a study of American and Canadian adults, people with a stronger purpose endorsed more frequent positive emotions, positive self-image, and a sense of hope that they have the agency to energetically pursue goals and find alternative paths when obstacles arise (Hill, Burrow, & Bronk, 2016); results remained even after accounting for Big Five personality traits.

Once clearly defined and differentiated from related constructs, researchers can carefully integrate purpose measures into their research program. In the following section, we offer contemporary examples of three approaches

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that influence all aspects of research—from the types of research questions and methodologies to analytic approaches.

Refining the Measurement of Purpose

A psychometrically sound measure of purpose in life should separate purpose from similar constructs (namely meaning in life and values). In this section, we review popular and promising measures of purpose.

The Most Common Approach

Self-report measures commonly gather attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors about a person's perceived purpose. The most widely used self-report measure is Ryff's (1989) purpose in life subscale (e.g., over 20 empirical publications during 2018–2022 from the Midlife in the U.S. Study, http://www .midus.wisc.edu/). Unfortunately, data from epidemiological studies show evidence of α coefficients as low as .26 (in a sample of 4,960; Clarke et al., 2001), .29–.35 (across three waves of data from 4,963 participants; Weston et al., 2021), .33 (in a nationally representative sample of 1,108; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), and .02–.34 (in a sample of 7,617 from 109 countries; Disabato et al., 2016). As for construct validity, in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (Herd et al., 2014; with a sample of 8,500 adults), latent correlations of purpose with self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and personal growth were .98, .96, and .94, respectively (see secondary analyses in Springer & Hauser, 2006). In a nationally representative sample of 2,731, correlations between purpose with self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and personal growth were .87, .76, and .83, respectively (Springer & Hauser, 2006). In factor analyses, dimensions of purpose,

self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and personal growth are loaded together on a single factor (e.g., Abbott et al., 2006). These studies suggest that Ryff's (1989) purpose measure has questionable reliability and lacks differentiation from well-being constructs. Despite the importance of this generative work by Dr. Ryff, we raise these findings to illustrate the need for more scientifically precise measures.

Promising Alternative Approaches

Several newer self-report measures of purpose are congruent with conceptual models and demonstrate stronger psychometric properties (see Supplemental Table S1, for a review). The Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (George & Park, 2016, 2017) separates meaning into three aspects: *purpose in life*, *comprehension* (i.e., degree to which someone believes their life makes sense and things fit together), and *mattering* (i.e., degree to which someone believes their existence matters in the world). Theoretically, guided items in the purpose subscale capture centrality and self-organization (e.g., "I have overarching goals that guide me in my life") and a life aim ("I have certain life goals that compel me to keep going"). In three independent samples, the purpose subscale loads independently from the two meaning dimensions in factor analyses. When using the three subscales to predict the presence of a high behavioral approach system and low behavioral inhibition system, only purpose uniquely predicted each.

The Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale (Martela & Steger, 2023) also separates purpose from comprehension (termed "coherence") and mattering (termed "significance") components of meaning. Theoretically, guided purpose items capture the three core components of purpose: centrality ("I pursue one or more big purposes in my life"), self-organization ("My daily activities are consistent with a broader life purpose"), and a life aim ("I am highly committed to certain core goals in my life"). In five independent samples, the purpose subscale loads independently from the two meaning dimensions (Martela & Steger, 2023).

The four-item Brief Purpose in Life Measure (Hill, Edmonds, et al., 2016) is well-suited to studies requiring brevity. Items capture components of centrality (e.g., "My plans for the future match with my true interests and values"), self-organizing ("My life is guided by a set of clear commitments"), and a life aim ("I know which direction I am going to follow in my life"). As for construct specificity, accounting for the Big Five personality traits, purpose uniquely predicted greater agency toward goals and the ability to find multiple paths to achieve goals despite obstacles, appreciation of the long-term costs and benefits of actions taken in the present, a more positive self-image, fewer delinquent behaviors, and greater maturity. After accounting for education, income, and political affiliation, the Brief

Purpose in Life Measure predicted engagement in meaningful activities at work and home and a greater willingness to engage in healthy behaviors, such as a willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine (Hill et al., 2021). This evidence suggests that purpose helps people navigate difficult life decisions and think broadly.

The Claremont Purpose Scale is designed for adolescent populations. The first two subscales capture Meaningfulness (a person's understanding of their purpose) and Goal Orientation (a person's commitment of time, energy, and resources toward their purpose). Items capture centrality (e.g., "How confident are you that you have discovered a satisfying purpose for your life?) and self-organization (e.g., "What portion of your daily activities move you closer to your long-term aims?"); life aim is not clearly captured. The Beyond-the-Self Orientation subscale suggests purpose has an "external component" inspired "by a desire to make a difference in the 'broader world'" (Bronk et al., 2018, p. 2). Items assess how a purpose serves others (e.g., "How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?" "How often do you hope to leave the world better than you found it?"). Factor analyses support three related, distinct subscales. A total score (combining subscales) predicted greater empathy, openness to experience, and wisdom; total purpose predicted resilience during the 2007–2008 economic recession better than optimism (Bronk, Leontopoulou, et al., 2019). Evidence also suggests sensitivity to change in an online intervention fostering youth purpose (Bronk, Baumsteiger, & McConchie, 2019).

Recent work suggests that beyond-the-self items correlate distinctly with measures of meaning and distress compared with the other two purpose dimensions but do not load onto a higher order purpose factor (Veazey et al., 2023), suggesting these items are useful but not essential.

Together, research with the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale, Three Dimensional Meaning in Life Scale, Brief Purpose in Life Measure, and Claremont Purpose Scale suggests purpose is an indicator of positive mental health as well as a resource that offers benefits beyond the Big Five personality traits and demographics.

Beyond Global Self-Reports

A limitation of self-report is that respondents are rarely given instructions on how purpose is defined and thus rely on lay beliefs, many of which capture something other than purpose (e.g., doing something you are good at). If a person is unable to articulate their purpose or lacks awareness of values, motives, and/or goals, nonrandom error plagues measurement.

At times, people may have a hard time noticing or acknowledging that their actions are not a reflection of purpose. Reasons range from social desirability to cognitive dissonance. Consider parents. Due to the daily expenditure of time, energy, and money, people may simply justify those caregiving responsibilities as purposeful. Yet, we know there is variability. When social desirability is high, unobtrusive measures increase in value (Webb et al., 1999). Researchers might ask: How do parents cognitively and emotionally respond when their kids are gone for several days (e.g., at sleepaway camp)? When there are options to do something with friends or kids, what are parents' preference and reward responsiveness to competing options (e.g., neurological and physiological indicators)? We can expect parents with a strong sense of purpose in parenting to show observable behavioral evidence of investment, intimacy, and effort expenditure in creating and sharing positive experiences with their children, especially when other rewarding options are available. These observational efforts have the potential to offer insights unparalleled by self-reports.

One promising direction for capturing behavior is wearable devices. For example, the electronically activated recorder (Mehl & Robbins, 2012) is a device worn to capture snapshots of ambient sounds in the natural environment every few minutes. Trained coders can then code what people are doing, with whom, and where. By capturing dialogue, researchers can search for linguistic markers of a sense of purpose. Other wearable devices are paired with passive sensors to collect behavioral indicators such as geospatial movement, sleep quality, and physiological indicators of stress. Participants can be actively involved in providing contextual information about data gathered on the ambient sounds, geospatial movement, and people they are with to determine what exactly they are doing. These dynamic methods allow for information on moments of purpose-congruent behavioral effort, progress, and catalysts.

Observational studies exist of how people scoring high on purpose scales or primed to think about their purpose behave (e.g., Burrow et al., 2014; Burrow & Hill, 2013; Ratner et al., 2022). However, little knowledge has accrued on the behavioral indicators of purpose.

Personalized Approaches to Purpose

Existing measures handle a person with a single purpose. However, a person can have multiple purposes in different independent domains (such as work and parenting). Multiple purposes may be beneficial to a point, but then serve to reduce time, energy, and attention available. A person pursuing a single purpose may become disheartened if obstacles become too great to overcome. If that same person had several purposes in different domains, then she may shift from a momentarily impeded purpose to other feasible purposes. In this case, the plurality of purposes enhances effort, progress, and downstream benefits. Too many purposes, however, may lead to inefficient and excessive switching costs and impede benefits. Efficient resource allocation is enabled by harmonious integration of multiple purposes. While theory

exists to support these hypotheses, evidence is sparse on exactly how multiple purposes operate (see Footnote 1). A more personalized measurement approach can capture whether a person is both effective and efficient in activity across multiple purposes.

Using an idiographic approach, Kashdan and McKnight (2013) asked people to generate an open-ended list of objectives "that you are typically trying to accomplish or attain" (Emmons, 1986). After generating several, respondents selected the objective best reflecting their central, fundamental life aim (i.e., purpose). Respondents generated their purpose without influence from a predetermined list. Researchers then paired a person's self-generated purpose with a standardized set of questions about each, such as effort exerted, progress made, and difficulty in pursuit of their purpose. The standardized question format measures purposes that are highly specific to each person while also capturing changes in common processes related to purpose. These standardized questions are keyed to a person's specific purpose, which can then be used as a short momentary assessment for tracking changes daily, weekly, or monthly. This approach can be improved by offering a definition of purpose followed by questions targeting the self-organizing influence on behaviors and decision making, along with strength and scope.

There have been few studies using idiographic measures, where people write in their fundamental life aims and related lower order goals/strivings, along with repeated assessments of effort, progress, difficulties, and benefits that occur daily. Idiographic measures allow for a short set of items to capture how much a person engages in purpose-congruent behavior during representative real-life episodes—along with factors that enable and inhibit this quest.

Modeling Purpose

Purpose can serve as a beneficial outcome, a predictor or mechanism that accounts for benefits that a person derives (such as from an intervention), or a moderator that offers insight into when benefits arise. As an outcome, different dimensions of purpose can be targeted (e.g., strength—or the effort devoted or progress made to a purpose); as a predictor or mediator, purpose can be distinguished from predictors as a mechanism that explains healthy outcomes; and as a moderator, purpose offers insights into how relevant individual differences and situational features can be activated (e.g., strengths become amplified; vulnerabilities become attenuated). We review contemporary data for each of these possibilities. Parsing out the ways purpose can be explored offers an illustrative example for how to think broadly about individual differences. What is unique about purpose (compared to other individual differences such as coping strategies, personality traits, goals, and life narratives)

is that when present, purpose resides as a person's ultimate concern (Emmons, 1999).

Purpose as a Desired Outcome

A promising area of research lies in individual differences that influence how a person develops purpose. In a comprehensive study, researchers explored 61 candidates for predicting enhanced purpose over 4 years in 13,771 adults (Nakamura et al., 2022). Antecedents to purpose included indicators of physical health (frequent physical activity, good sleep hygiene, and fewer physical health problems), well-being (frequent positive emotions, optimism, health and financial self-efficacy, and life satisfaction), minimal emotional difficulties (e.g., depression, daily discrimination), and social relationships (contact with friends at least one time per week, low loneliness, positive social support, frequently helping other people, frequently volunteering). Results remained after accounting for baseline purpose along with a wide range of covariates such as income, education, health insurance, and Big Five personality traits. A person with sufficient biopsychosocial resources finds it easier to focus on long-term concerns.

Purpose can be examined as a desired end state, with the expectation that as purpose increases, more benefits occur. Complementing basic research is a generation of psychological interventions referencing purpose-related constructs. Popular treatments refer to the therapeutic goal of increasing "committed action to chosen values" (acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT]; Hayes et al., 2006) or "developing goals that fit one's values" (dialectical behavior therapy; Linehan & Wilks, 2015). ACT researchers have theorized that for people with mental illness, purpose in life is often obstructed (Strosahl & Robinson, 2009), but they can find purpose amid suffering (e.g., Harris, 2009).[2] Collectively, an explicit goal of these therapies is to help people build a larger pattern of action linked to their most important values (and purpose is a guiding framework for pursuing value-aligned goals).

Despite rich conceptual models and mention as an intervention target, purpose is absent from program evaluation. Consider a meta-analysis of 20 ACT meta-analyses, 100 effect sizes, and 12,477 participants. Not a single study measured purpose in life as an outcome (Gloster et al., 2020). This review concluded that ACT was efficacious for "all conditions examined," including depression, anxiety, physical pain, and substance use, with evidence that ACT led to

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[2] We are not equating purpose with these targets of ACT and process-based therapies, but there is overlap. A purpose can be described as "committed action to chosen values" (or at least one important value and likely more than one). As mentioned earlier, purpose is the strongest reflection of a person's values. Purpose can be thought of as a "goal manager" that organizes and drives higher order goals that are aligned with a person's deepest values of how they want to think and behave as a human being; how a person wants to treat themselves, other people, and the world.

symptom reduction. Yet, this conclusion conflicts with a pronouncement from the originators that "All ACT techniques are eventually subordinated to helping the client live in accord with his or her chosen values" (Hayes et al., 1999, p. 205). If purposeful living is indeed "the heart" of behavior change (Hayes et al., 2022), then it is critical to measure purpose when testing efficacy and effectiveness (e.g., Arch et al., 2021).

In addition to structured approaches, purpose can be studied as an outcome of alternative interventions. For instance, researchers found that people can become better at organizing and pursuing personally meaningful goals with a single 30-min counseling session (strategizing on how to cope with difficulties that might be encountered) and 60-min group session (reflecting on the ultimate motivations behind goals; Sheldon et al., 2002). While, on average, participants did not change their goal progress 3 months later, participants with short-term goals strongly integrated with longer term values at baseline showed large gains. Notably, this research team asked participants to provide open-ended responses on what their goals are (idiographic) along with ratings of how goals are tied to longer term objectives (nomothetic), which together offer a novel approach to operationalize purpose-related variables.

Purpose as a Predictor and Mediator

A sense of purpose often serves as a predictor or mechanism that explains healthy outcomes (e.g., Dahl et al., 2020). Research on purpose as a predictor demonstrates how purpose serves as a source of resilience that partially accounts for healthy self-regulation following stressors and traumatic events (e.g., Bonanno & Burton, 2013). Research on purpose as a mediator demonstrates how strengthening purpose predicts better outcomes. That is, we expect purpose to be an agent of change, whereby individuals who cultivate a purpose and work toward it benefit by being healthier.

Treating purpose as a predictor or mediator fits with research on the wide range of psychological and physical benefits that arise from the ability to regulate the self toward personally meaningful goals. People with a stronger sense of purpose engage in greater preventive health care services such as better sleep hygiene, healthier food intake, dental care, and exercise (e.g., Hill et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2014). People with a strong purpose show evidence of less activation in brain regions associated with conflict (dorsal anterior cingulate cortex; Kang et al., 2019), suggesting less strain during difficult decision making.

While purpose operates as an antecedent for investing in a healthier version of the self, purpose also serves as a mediator between conditions that require serious health care (e.g., degenerative brain disease, transition from civilian life to military service or vice versa, the onset of mental illness or self-harm-related thoughts) and healthier habits. For instance,

in an 8-month longitudinal study of 245 women with a breast cancer diagnosis, an intervention to increase illness-related coping abilities (predictor) led to a greater purpose in life (mediator), which in turn predicted more positive and fewer negative emotions (outcomes; Mens & Scheier, 2016). These findings deserve to be underscored—cancer survivors cope effectively with a disruptive disease as a result of having a purpose and goals related to that purpose.

As another example, consider the developmental task of adolescents forging an identity. Researchers used experience sampling in middle school students to examine whether one reason identity formation predicts well-being is discovery of and commitment to a purpose (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Commitment to a purpose helped adolescents manage difficulties that occur as their identity develops (leading to less daily negative emotions); in addition, adolescents with a stronger purpose experienced greater daily positive emotion. Collectively, at least one reason adolescent identity development is valuable stems from the introduction of an internal compass of how to make decisions among competing options—through a purpose. Adolescents with less awareness of and commitment to a purpose are more apt to being guided by external factors (e.g., peer pressure, adult interests) and experience less happiness.

Purpose as a Moderator

Biopsychosocial factors that lead to clinically significant change for one person may have little to no effect on another. Moderators influence the direction and strength of a predictor, informing *under what conditions* and *for whom* interventions work best (e.g., How long should an intervention be? What is most likely to work with a person of a particular age, sex, race, or economic condition? How does a person's cognitive intelligence influence treatment engagement?). There is a reason to believe the effect of certain biopsychosocial factors often depends on the strength of a person's purpose.

A sense of purpose motivates a person to be effective and efficient in uncovering opportunities for purpose-congruent behavior and prevents people from engaging in behaviors counter to who and what they care most about. Using neuroimaging, researchers find that greater activation in the ventral striatum, the part of the brain tied to reward sensitivity, predicts greater substance use. Despite the presence of heightened neural activity in the ventral striatum when exposed to alcohol consumption cues (e.g., images), adults endorsing a stronger purpose on a given day consumed less alcohol (Kang et al., 2022). That is, the presence of a strong purpose served as resilience to excess consumption even in the presence of neurological risk factors.

Purpose might compensate for reductions in elements of well-being during periods of adversity. In a daily diary study, researchers examined the relationship between purpose in life

and daily well-being when confronted with daily stressors (Hill et al., 2018). Results suggested that a stronger purpose dampens reactivity to stressors due to an ability to maintain a broader perspective (and focused on longer term aspirations). Participants endorsing a stronger purpose experienced less pronounced changes in negative emotion on days when stressors occurred relative to those with a weaker purpose. Purpose was not associated with the number of stressors, suggesting that purpose alters how people perceive distress rather than how much is felt. These results suggest that people with a stronger purpose engage in better self-regulation.

As evidence of resilience, in two studies, researchers tested whether people with a stronger purpose would be less affected by positive feedback received on social media (Burrow & Rainone, 2017). They found that a greater number of likes was positively associated with self-esteem for those with a weaker purpose, whereas no association was found between social attention and self-esteem for people with a stronger purpose. This body of work suggests that people with a stronger purpose "are guided by a sense of connection with and service to others," minimizing their need for social validation.

Other work suggests that a greater sense of purpose amplifies the benefits of interventions (i.e., moderation). In a longitudinal study of 154 people in treatment for cocaine and alcohol abuse, people with greater purpose in life at the start of a 30-day treatment were less likely to relapse 6 months after treatment; importantly, purpose predicted relapse beyond documented risk factors such as substance use severity, depressive symptoms, and age (Martin et al., 2011). In a study of 2,328 adults from Switzerland, adults with the greatest likelihood of a willingness to get vaccinated for COVID-19 and receipt of a vaccination comprised the presence of a strong purpose along with trust in university research centers (first moderation effect), the presence of a strong purpose along with trust in political institutions (second moderation effect), and the presence of a strong purpose with trust in medical doctors (third moderation effect) (Hill et al., 2023). These findings illustrate the value of exploring synergies among psychological strengths and environmental resources to uncover the healthiest members of society. Exploring purpose and/or trust in isolation is simply too crude to capture how behavior is a function of people and situations.

Consider simple, brief, theoretically grounded, "wise" interventions allowing for tests of whether a stronger purpose alters ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration (Burrow et al., 2014). White participants were shown demographic projections of either a White majority or ethnic minority–majority population by the year 2050 and then reported on how threatened they felt. Analyses controlled for demographic, personality, and mood variables to isolate the effects of purpose. For participants presented with the "future White majority" condition, purpose was unrelated to perceived threat. For participants presented with the "future ethnic minority–majority" condition, however, a stronger purpose predicted less threat reactivity. These findings provide additional evidence for purpose in life as a resiliency factor—mitigating perceived threats and negative emotions.

Taken together, research suggests that purpose in life is integral to achieving adaptive outcomes following life stressors, discrimination, suicidality, and a range of emotional disturbances. Purpose acts as a compass to navigate trade-offs for spending finite mental resources during stressful events (e.g., deciding to invest in healthy behaviors such as COVID-19 vaccination). That said, more information is needed on how the benefits from a sense of purpose such as lower mortality risk fail to be distributed equally. The bulk of evidence suggests that individuals with greater economic and social disadvantages experience a fraction of the benefits from having and pursuing a purpose (Shiba et al., 2021; Sumner et al., 2018).

Applications of Purpose

Despite decades of research on purpose in life, it is only in the last few years that purpose received ample attention across life domains and age groups. To propel the study of purpose, we offer several research directions.

Methodological Improvements

Purpose is an element of a person's identity that develops and changes over time (e.g., Hill & Weston, 2019; Pfund & Lewis, 2020). Researchers are beginning to clarify how increases or decreases in a sense of purpose offer insight into the pathways to mental and physical health. If there is reason to believe that purpose operates differently for subgroups of people (such as the shape of life trajectories), then the focus moves from a mediation to moderation model.

A person's effort and progress toward a purpose fluctuate across days and weeks (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013). One method that is advantageous for capturing potentially meaningful changes is experience sampling, which assesses near-immediate antecedents and consequences of purpose-related effort and progress. Assessing mediators and outcomes weekly, daily, or as they unfold in real-time reduces assessment error, minimizes the effects of recall biases, and examines constructs within the natural environment in which they occur (e.g., Shiffman et al., 2008).

Earlier, we emphasized the surprising lack of empirical research on purpose in life in treatment outcome studies. A similar lack of research exists on how purpose changes during naturalistic life events (e.g., retirement, pregnancy, switching careers, educational pursuits) despite empirical support for such change (e.g., posttraumatic growth; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; well-being after psychopathology; Rottenberg & Kashdan, 2022).

Tackling Biases and Constraints

Research is needed on people who score low in purpose in life measures. Competing explanations for low scorers include the relative absence of purpose and low levels of behavioral commitment, difficulty comprehending or articulating a purpose, or disadvantages that interfere with having a purpose or inaccurate reporting of a purpose. Uncontrollable stressors often compromise purpose-congruent behaviors, including the stressful experiences of being a marginalized member of society and economic disadvantages that require a recalibration toward more life-sustaining activities (e.g., obtaining a reliable food source). It will be essential to model these potential explanations as possible moderators of whether, in certain populations, development, benefits, and costs differ.

Critical questions remain about "opportunity hoarding" at higher socioeconomic levels that require studies that move beyond Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples. Wealth affords resource abundance that allows people to sift through various possible long-term interests and purposes (Renninger & Hidi, 2020). Despite encouraging work showing that purpose in life can buffer the adverse effects of poverty among youth (Machell et al., 2016), these individuals suffer from time and resource disadvantages that likely constrain or alter the course of their purpose.

There are a few tests of whether indicators of socioeconomic status and opportunity-rich environments moderate the influence of sense of purpose on health outcomes. Some studies point out that the benefits arising from purpose are partially contingent on a person's socioeconomic resources. In a study of 13,159 adults over an 8-year period, having a higher socioeconomic status was linked to greater baseline purpose levels (Shiba et al., 2021). Having a greater baseline purpose predicted lower mortality risk over the 8-year time span for people (similar to previous studies; e.g., R. Cohen et al., 2016). However, the associations between purpose and mortality were smaller among people with less than a high school education, less income, or less wealth (e.g., property, savings). The differential effects of purpose by socioeconomic status are small, but when the outcome is striking, such as death, weak effects matter. Notably, prior studies finding purpose as a buffer against mortality ruled out age and country of origin as moderators but neglected the role of socioeconomic status. Other moderation tests suggest, however, that individuals experiencing resource deprivation in terms of finances, social support, and education tend to experience similar psychological, physical, and social benefits from a sense of purpose to resource-rich peers (Bronk et al., 2020; Nayman et al., 2019). More information is needed on how lower socioeconomic or marginalized status compromises the purpose and benefits conferred.

Community interventions that integrate purpose development into existing structures (e.g., school) might be a promising way to help disadvantaged youth develop their purposes without sacrificing critical time and energy elsewhere. Resources shown to be relevant to purpose span from human essentials (sleep hygiene, healthy food, exercise) to valuable social networks. Of particular interest is how people differ in resources that are most predictive of proactively developing and committing to goals and behaviors aligned with a purpose, and how best to expand these resources.

Developing and Maintaining Purpose

In prior work, we proposed three paths for how a person develops purpose: proactive, reactive, and social learning (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). A first path to purpose is proactive purpose, which involves deliberate behaviors such as intentional self-reflection. A person uncovers what is important to them, evokes enthusiasm, and they are motivated to engage in it over the course of days, weeks, months, or years. A person clarifies core values that inform purpose-related goals (Bronk, 2012; Burrow et al., 2010). Knowing who you are offers a foundation for making well-informed decisions about what is worthwhile, regardless of conformity pressures. Opportunities for sampling various activities allow someone to draw meaningful comparisons between potential rewards and the strengths required (e.g., community volunteering, attending religious services, writing a movie script). This exposure might uncover interests and long-term preferences (Bronk, 2013; Damon et al., 2003; Renninger, 2010).

A second path is reactive purpose, which occurs when one's purpose is clarified, reinforced, or modified after experiencing adversity (e.g., Rottenberg et al., 2018; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Adversity can disrupt a person's sense of safety, increase the salience of death, or alter a worldview. In turn, a person may recalibrate their life aims and redirect their energy toward a purpose (Bonanno, 2004; Rottenberg & Kashdan, 2022). Reactive purpose can happen at any time; a person may be laying the foundation of a purpose proactively prior to a transformative life event, or the event might spur new lines of thinking. In a reactive path, the event is less relevant than how a person reacts. Following the event, a person might reconstruct beliefs and values, which in turn influence goals set and behaviors pursued. People make sense of both positive and negative life events through narratives tying together historical events and an anticipated future (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Reflection and reconstruction following adversity might accelerate a person's motivation and commitment to purpose-relevant behaviors (Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2006). It is possible that reactive purposes involve existing interests galvanized by a traumatic event, such as pursuing a lifelong

dream of being an entrepreneur after a near-death accident; in contrast, posttraumatic growth might involve attempts to make sense of trauma and restore a sense of coherence (for the world to make sense). Research can extract situational features that make it more likely a person will respond with reactive purpose development. What makes an event transformative? What is the role of mortality salience? What types of events, during developmental periods, facilitate reactive purpose? With a more comprehensive understanding of events that facilitate reactive purpose, researchers can identify intervention targets for people struggling with aimlessness.

A third path to purpose is social learning, where role models influence what is valued and pursued (e.g., Lockwood et al., 2002). Researchers find that trusting, autonomy-supportive caregivers provide an impetus to uncover passionate interests and, in some cases, a purpose (e.g., Liang et al., 2018; Moran et al., 2013). Deconstructing impressive feats, including the attributes of responsible parties, offers insights for a child, teenager, or adult. An initial spark of interest often emerges from knowing someone of a similar background (e.g., race, age, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, country of origin) who accomplished something personally valuable. Access to stories alone (e.g., books, movies, songs) showcases possible aspirations and opportunities. One area ripe for exploration is how young adults develop purpose through social media content. For the first time in history, millions of children are progressing through critical developmental milestones with social media platforms in parallel. The exposure shapes values and interests, which in turn may shape the development and pursuit of purpose. Given the ubiquity of social media, research should not rely on biased assumptions that influences are uniformly harmful. Social media might broaden a young person's awareness of what is possible and offer access and opportunity to pursue purpose.

In studies of adolescents and adults, a higher frequency of people with an "adaptive personality profile" of greater agreeableness, conscientiousness, open-mindedness, and hope developed purpose through a proactive path compared to reactive or social learning paths (Hill et al., 2014). Individuals developing a purpose proactively or in reaction to adversity endorsed greater well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, frequent positive emotions, infrequent negative emotions, sense of belonging). In other work, people with a strong behavioral activation system (i.e., reward sensitivity) and low behavioral inhibition (i.e., punishment sensitivity, overreliance on avoidance) are more likely to pursue goals congruent with a purpose (e.g., George & Park, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2016).

A lifespan approach illustrates the importance of intact cognitive ability on how an individual derives or works toward a purpose. The average adult shows a systematic decline in inhibitory control, working memory capacity, and task switching from age 40 onward (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2021), and older adults aged 60–80 show a significant decline in attention to social information during social interactions (e.g., De Lillo et al., 2021). The greater a person's cognitive decline, the lower probability that a person works toward a purpose in an effective manner (Wilson et al., 2013). A person experiencing executive functioning deficits through conditions such as dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and brain injury often confronts difficulties in pursuit of purpose. It will be important to determine if aimlessness is associated with normative age-related decline (e.g., physical ability), disease progression (e.g., Alzheimer-related impairment), or factors unrelated to age (e.g., change in motivation or interest). Many older adults experience a large shift into time abundance following retirement, which provides a ripe area to study the initiation of new hobbies, activities, and purpose-related pursuits.

Since children are still developing cognitive and behavioral control (e.g., Ursache et al., 2012), there is interest in how children develop and pursue a purpose. Adolescents often hold a similar conceptual definition of purpose as adults (e.g., Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010; Moran, 2014), regardless of intellectual capacity, life experience, and well-being (e.g., Bronk et al., 2010; Burrow et al., 2018; Damon & Malin, 2020). Evidence suggests being a young adult is not an inhibitor, even if purpose development may be rarer. Empirical work can continue to document similarities and differences with adults, including youth who might be classified as "purpose prodigies"—who show evidence of pursuing strong life aims at early developmental stages.

While controversial, an argument can be made that a person must be above threshold in self-regulatory capacity to pursue and commit to a life purpose (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Higher order cognitive abilities, including planning and monitoring long-range future-oriented thinking, increase behavioral commitment to one's purpose (Brandstätter & Bernecker, 2022). Other higher order cognitive abilities relevant to action toward and commitment to a purpose in life include task switching (as there are distractions when pursuing a purpose) and contemplating decision-making trade-offs (there is a cost to cognitive and behavioral labor, including rejected alternative actions; Inzlicht et al., 2021). Qualitative research offers suggestive data that in some instances, cognitive "disability may disrupt the ability to conceptualize or commit to a sense of purpose" (Newman et al., 2019). Given the numerous health benefits of purpose, there is significant untapped potential for designing standalone or adjunctive interventions that clarify and strengthen purpose throughout the lifespan.

Concluding Thoughts

Our focus has been on a central factor that influences health: purpose in life. We reviewed the nature of purpose in

life and offered a generative guide of future directions with purpose as an antecedent of healthy results, outcome, mediator, and/or moderator. Purpose is, in itself, an intervention that enables a wide range of psychological and physical health outcomes. As an outcome, purpose can be the direct result of an intervention. Alternatively, the presence or concerted effort and progress toward a purpose might serve as a mediator, accounting for why interventions enhance well-being. Purpose also serves as a moderator, offering insight into who might acquire better life outcomes and conditions when desirable biopsychosocial outcomes arise. The next wave of research can provide insights on how to best target this important phenomenon.

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